Guide to Writing the Art History Paper
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Purpose:
The most important thing to keep in mind about writing an Art History paper is that your argument is formed by what you see. Ultimately, you need to translate the visual into the verbal. Here are a few key starting points to accomplish this:

- Be familiar with the terms and concepts necessary to describe a work of art (i.e. formal elements of art).
- Consider what you want to say about a particular work of art. It can be anything from how the artist’s style correlates to the desires of the patron, or how society influenced the making of the work. But any description used must make that point.

Pre-Writing Strategies:
The prompt may or may not want you to analyze a specific work or works. Regardless, here are some things to focus on:

- Find an artwork that engages with you emotionally and intellectually.
- Consider your response to the work.
- Consider how the work is displayed (i.e. is it in a gallery, museum, outdoors).
- Consider the formal elements of work.
- Consider the context of the work (i.e. social, cultural background).
- Look at the formal elements vs your personal response, and see what the similarities are.

**Formal Elements of Art:**
These are the basic units and means artists use to create and design works of art. Using Claude Monet’s famed *Impression, Sunrise* (1872), ask yourself questions about how the formal elements are used:

![Impression, Sunrise](image)

**Line** - Are the lines short? Jagged? How do the lines emphasize or de-emphasize the subject?
Medium: How is the medium used?

Color: How do the colors relay a mood or emotion?

Tone: How do the values (i.e. light and dark) create a sense of depth?

Space: How are the subjects arranged? Does it create a greater sense of scale or size?

Style: How does the artist depict the subject? Is it a loose, gestural style? A tight, naturalistic style? How does the style contribute to the overall work?

Final Tips:

- Analyze as you describe! It’s easy to fall into the trap of just describing a work, but make sure to include your analysis for whatever part you are looking at.
- When discussing a work, make sure to include the artist’s name, the full title of the work, and the date it was completed.
- I.E. Claude Monet’s famed *Impression, Sunrise* (1872)...
- If you do not have the opportunity to see the work firsthand, ARTstor provides a comprehensive gallery for various works.
- Most Art History papers use the standard MLA format or Chicago Style. I highly encourage investing in *A Writer’s Reference* by Diana Hacker.
- Other useful resources: JStor ([www.jstor.org](http://www.jstor.org)) and Dictionary.com (dictionary.reference.com).