PROFESSOR FLANIGAN'S TIPS FOR WRITING ABOUT ART AND ARCHITECTURE

What is art history? It is important to understand the answer to this question in order to understand how to approach a written assignment in this field. Art history is very much a visual discipline, one that requires you to spend at least as much time looking at an object and studying its formal properties (i.e., use of line, color, space, composition, etc.) as reading about it. Art history is also the study of *history* using art objects as primary sources of information (just like a historian uses archival documents). Works of art can tell us quite a bit about the culture and tastes of the people who commissioned the objects (the patrons) and the people who made the objects (the artists). It is important, therefore, to have an understanding of the original historical and physical context in which a work of art was made in order to better understand the work, its function, and its meaning(s). Art history has its own technical language just like math or the sciences. There are terms and techniques that are specific to the field. Part of studying art history is building this technical vocabulary so that you can describe and discuss a work to others in the field.

Writing about art:

<u>Step 1:</u> READ THE ASSIGNMENT. Be sure to read the assignment carefully to identify what exactly is being asked by the professor.

Step 2: LOOK. This is the most important and often most neglected step. Spend some time looking at the work you wish to write about. You may wish to sketch some diagrammatic images of what you see. This will help you to slow down and really concentrate on the object. If possible, look at the object in person. Photographic images often distort aspects such as color, perspective, and viewpoint (try comparing two different photographs to see what I mean). If the object is three-dimensional (i.e., architecture or sculpture in the round), you should try to find as many images from different viewpoints as possible. You may search for additional images online on sites such as the Web Gallery of Art -- http://www.wga.hu/ or on ArtStor (a database subscribed to by St. Rose that can be accessed through the Library Homepage).

Don't forget to read the caption under the photograph if there is one. The caption may provide a wealth of information including: the name of the work, the name of the artist, the date of the work's execution, and its current location. Captions may also include: medium/media, format, size, original location, and patronage information. The caption might also alert you to look at a particular area or detail of the work that is significant.

The following are a few of the tasks I most often assign (but others are possible). Keep in mind that more than one of these tasks may be required to complete an assignment. For example, a good research paper might begin with a thorough formal analysis.

1. <u>Formal or Visual Analysis</u> – the instructor might ask you to describe a work of art and analyze its formal properties.

GETTING STARTED:

Be sure to allow yourself plenty of time for this type of assignment. It usually takes much longer than it appears to. This is typically a LOOKING assignment and NOT a research assignment, so it should not require you to read any outside information on the work. In fact, looking up what others have written about the work might prejudice you and/or impede your ability to write about what you see in your own words. The instructor is looking for a description in your words, not in the words of others (see **plagiarism**). You only cheat yourself if you don't do the exercise in your own words.

ORGANIZATION:

Before writing, look closely at the image and take copious notes on what you see. Try to use a logical progression to organize your essay. For example, you may start with the more general features and work your way logically to the details. If writing about a building, you may want to move from the outside in. If writing about painting, you may want to start with the overall format and theme of the work, then discuss its composition starting in the foreground, moving to the middle ground and then to the background. Group information together into categories such as: composition, form, materials and technique, function, content and meaning, and context (historical and physical).

USING DESCRIPTIVE LANGUAGE:

Your instructor most likely intends for you to write a very thorough and detailed description. Imagine that you are describing this work a blind person. You must be very precise and very detailed so that the reader can visualize exactly what you are describing without having to look at an image. Be sure to use proper art historical vocabulary and indicate where features are in relation to other features in the work. For example, "Christ appears centrally in the foreground between Saint Peter, who can be identified by the keys he is carrying, and Saint Paul, who can be identified by his attribute, a knife. These holy figures stand each in a contrapposto pose before a crumbling triumphal arch with three round-headed arches that appears in the middle ground before a vast landscape....." You may want to try reading your paper over the phone to a friend who has never seen the work. Have your friend stop you and ask questions when confused.

USING TERMINOLOGY:

Be sure to use proper terminology. Define all the art historical terms that you use and explain where they can be found in the work. This will demonstrate to the instructor that you know what these terms mean and that you are not just using terms in an attempt to sound impressive. If you are uncertain about the meaning of a term look it up in a dictionary or the glossary of your textbook. Another great source for a more detailed encyclopedia definition is the *Grove Dictionary of Art* which can be accessed through the library's website.

Relate the features you are describing to the general characteristics of the style of the work. Explain how these features indicate the work's style.

2. <u>Comparison</u> – the instructor might ask you to compare and contrast at least two different works by explaining what is similar and what is dissimilar between them. The objective of this assignment is for you to use this analysis to arrive at a

conclusion that reveals something about the relationship between the two objects being compared. This is often the format that appears in art history exams, so the more practice you gain in this type of assignment the better prepared you will be for most exams and for trying to figure out what types of comparisons a professor might ask on an exam.

GETTING STARTED:

An alternate format for this type of assignment might require you to choose an appropriate work to compare with a given work, instead of providing both works for you. If this is the case, be sure to choose wisely. Look for a work made for a similar function, date and/or location. Also, try to choose a work with several points of similarity. Just because two buildings are round is not enough to make them a good comparison.

ORGANIZING YOUR IDEAS:

This assignment requires many of the same skills described in the section above on **formal analysis**. However, in this type of assignment your instructor wants you to integrate your description of multiple works into a single comparative essay and NOT to write a paragraph that separately describes work number one and a second paragraph that separately describes work number two. This is NOT a comparison and does not fulfill the requirements of the assignment.

DESCRIBING THE ARTWORK:

Before writing, look closely at both works, side-by-side if possible. Try to get similar viewpoints if possible. Make a list of similarities and a list of differences. Try to organize these into a logical essay. For example, you may move from outside in, from right to left, from top to bottom, or from foreground to background. For EVERY feature you mention in one work be sure to compare or contrast it with the same feature in the other work. Don't forget to define all the terms you use and to precisely locate that feature within the work (i.e. in the clerestory above the third lancet window from the entrance...).

Your first sentence should be something like this: "These two works are being compared because....."

3. Attribution of an Unknown Work— you may be asked to use what you have learned in class to attribute a work that you have never seen before. This assignment might ask you to come up with an educated guess as to the artist, date, location, context, patron, or any combination of these. Read the assignment carefully to see if the instructor intends for this to be purely a looking assignment or if you are also required to discuss the work's possible historical context. This would require some outside information, most likely found in your textbook and notes.

GETTING STARTED:

The best way to approach this assignment is to first write a description of what you see (and in some cases what you don't see) as in **formal analysis** above. Second, look for works that you have seen in class which are similar. Be sure to choose wisely. Look for works that may have been made for a similar function, date and/or location. Be sure to always provide a full identification for works you choose to use for comparison (i.e. title, location, artist, date) this will help you to narrow down the date, artist and location of the unknown work. Try to choose

works with several points of similarity. Follow the instructions above under **comparison**. This type of assignment typically requires you to make an argument and defend it. Make as many comparisons as necessary to support your point. Your last sentence should tie your comparative analysis to your conclusion.

4. <u>Critically Evaluate the Arguments Expressed in One or More Scholarly Source</u> – This type of assignment may come in a number of formats, such as a book or article review, a comparison of two or more books or articles, or as part of a research paper (see **Art History Research Paper** below). It will require you to carefully read works written by others and identify their argument(s), evidence, and conclusion(s). You may then be asked to compare these aspects of each work and, perhaps, come up with your own conclusion.

GETTING STARTED:

First, identify the author's main point, thesis statement or argument and conclusion. What is the point of this text? This is often stated in the introduction and restated again in the conclusion.

ANALYZING THE ARGUMENT:

Next, determine the rationale behind the author's argument and the evidence used to support the argument. Consider what types of evidence (i.e., archival documents, physical evidence, eyewitness accounts, previous scholarship, etc.) are cited as proof for the author's argument. You may want to make a list of the various types of evidence cited. Now, you need to evaluate the evidence. Does this evidence support the author's argument? How does this evidence support the author's claims? How does it contradict the author's claims? Is this evidence credible or tenuous? What is the logic of the argument? Are there gaps in this logic?

EVALUATING BIASES:

Be sure to differentiate between objective fact and subjective opinion. Be wary of emotional claims or statements made that play to the reader's emotion. You may be required to do some outside research into the historical, political, or theoretical context in which these works were written in order to evaluate the possible biases of the author. For example, a book on Renaissance architecture written during the height of the Modern movement may try to find affinities between these two stylistic periods that may or may not exist (be sure to look at when the text was first written). If the author is affiliated with a particular religion, political party, patron, or theoretical movement, or is a salesperson (i.e. works in a gallery or auction house), his/her views might be biased in an attempt to influence the reader. For example, the patron of the second edition of Giorgio Vasari's Lives of the Artists (1568), was the Florentine Duke Cosimo I de'Medici, and it has been suggested that he inflated biographies of artists who worked for the Medici family in order to flatter his patron. Giorgio Vasari was also attempting to place the history of Renaissance art into a particular evolutionary formula divided into three stages and he had a prejudice against gothic and toward the revival of classicism. These factors had an effect on which artists he chose to highlight and which ones he chose to marginalize.

YOUR OPINION:

You may be asked whether you agree with the author's argument and conclusion. Don't just state that you agree or disagree. Be sure to indicate WHY you agree or disagree.

5. Art History Research Paper – This type of assignment may ask you to research and discuss the history of a work of art, it might ask you to read other people's interpretations of a work of art and discuss them or perhaps analyze them, or it might ask you to come up with your own argument about a work after reading primary and/or secondary sources about the work. Some professors may require that you use a certain number of primary sources (i.e. treatises from the period, literary sources, artist biographies from the period) in addition to secondary sources (sources that were written later about the work). Be sure you know the difference between a primary source and a secondary source.

RESEARCH:

This type of assignment requires an additional step called research. You will most likely have to put together a bibliography and go to the library to read books. If a significant book is not available at your library this doesn't mean that you should skip over it or are exempt from reading it. You may have to go to another nearby library or use your library's interlibrary loan service to obtain the book from another library (see library's website for the request form). If a book is checked out you may have to ask the librarian to recall it for you (see library's website for the request form). These services may take a while, so do your bibliography well in advance of the paper's deadline.

THE BIBLIOGRAPHY:

The books required for a bibliography are usually IN ADDITION TO your textbook and may or may not be on reserve for your class, so you will have to familiarize yourself with the library's catalog system (Lucky for you, sources can be searched for on-line. I remember the days of the card catalogue.) You might also look in databases such as the *Bibliography of the History of Art* (see **references** below) to see if you can find some relevant articles and *World Cat* (see **references** below) to find books on your topic. Be aware that some of these articles and books may not be available at your library. This DOES NOT mean that you ignore them. Almost everything is available through the library's interlibrary loan service, which is usually fast and reliable. Be sure to allow enough time to obtain books/articles through this service and to recall important books that have been checked out of your library. This means DO NOT start researching in the days or weeks just before an assignment is due. You should start as soon as you receive the assignment.

Be sure to read carefully the professor's requirements for the bibliography's format and choose your sources wisely. Don't just stop when you have the minimum required number of sources. You should try to find everything written in English on the topic and narrow it down from there by selecting the best sources from this list. For example, if the professor requires you to use a minimum of five sources, you will probably have to start with at least ten (twice as many) and choose the best of these sources. Some professors will limit the

number of websites you may cite, and some may not permit the use of any websites as sources. This is because there is no way to know the scholarly credentials of the person who posts a website. They often contain very general, erroneous, and even plagiarized information. If a website seems questionable, you should check its data with a reliable printed source.

A NOTE ABOUT SOURCES:

The best sources are those that are the most specific to your topic (i.e. not your textbook). For example, if you are asked to write a paper on Fra Angelico's *San Marco Altarpiece*, an article that is specifically about this altarpiece would be the best source. RECENT books and articles on Fra Angelico would also be excellent sources. Look for books and articles that make an argument about the work. General books on Italian Renaissance art would be much weaker sources because they won't be as specific and may contain outdated information. The least trustworthy sources are websites because you have no way of verifying the expertise of the author or whether the information is original to the author. Books and articles published by major scholarly presses and associations put the author's arguments through a series of tough editorial reviews by experts that most websites lack.

COMPOSING A BIBLIOGRAPHY AND EVALUATING SOURCES:

When composing a bibliography, include only the most relevant sources. Don't just list sources to pad your bibliography. Only cite in your bibliography the sources that you consulted during your research. Read the sources critically (see **critical thinking** above) and take lots of notes. Do you agree with what the author says? Do other authors agree? Does it jive with what you see? Don't skip the introduction and conclusion of a book or article. These parts typically give the most information about the author's sources, approach, point of view, and argument. Reading these sections first will help you to pinpoint useful information as you read the body of the text.

WRITING THE PAPER:

The best approach to this type of assignment is to begin with an introduction. In the next paragraph you should describe the work you are discussing (as in **formal analysis** above). Next, apply what you have read to the work. Be sure to distinguish your ideas from the ideas of others by crediting the person who first made the observation. When in doubt, it is better to use more citations than less. The best way to avoid plagiarism is to take notes in your own words when you read and then write your essay from your notes (see plagiarism below). When referring to the observations of others, you may use phrases within your essay such as "according to ...," IN ADDITION TO an endnote or footnote that provides the full reference for the source (see guidelines for citations). If you decide to include a quote exactly as written in one of your sources, be sure to put quotation marks around the quote and properly credit the person that you are quoting (see guidelines for citations). Your essay should limit the number of direct quotations so as not to consist of a string of quotations (i.e. no more than 1 quotation per page). For every quotation you include be sure to analyze it in your own words and tie it to your discussion. Ask yourself, "Why is this quotation relevant to my argument?"

FORMULATING AN ARGUMENT:

This type of assignment may ask you to come up with an argument and defend it using the sources in your bibliography. If you are asked to formulate an argument, be sure to conclude by summarizing how your argument is supported by your research.

INTRODUCTION AND CONCLUSION:

Your introduction and conclusion should be the strongest parts of your essay. Your introduction should start with a topic sentence that introduces the work and/or your argument. Often an introduction contains some indication of your approach and the types of sources you will use. It may also briefly outline where you intend to go. For this reason introductions, although they appear as the first paragraph of you paper, are often written last after you've written the body and have some idea of what you will conclude and how you arrived at that conclusion. Before writing an introduction or conclusion ask yourself these questions:

- *What did I intend to do in this paper?
- *What did I actually do (what was my conclusion)? Was it the same or different from what I intended?
- *How did I arrive at my conclusion?
- *What do I want others to take away from what I have written?

Step 3: WRITE. (Cont'd from page 1)

The following are some things to consider when writing:

Organization

The old three-part format consisting of an introduction, body and conclusion is still a very handy way to organize most essays. Your introduction should establish what you intend to do in the essay and a brief explanation of why. The body should contain the meat of the essay. The concluding paragraph or sentence should summarize how your conclusion, observation, or argument is supported by the facts or observations discussed in the body of the essay.

Grammar and Spelling

The quickest way to discredit yourself is to hand in a sloppy or unreadable paper with numerous mistakes. Proofread!! Be sure to spellcheck and use proper formal grammar (no symbols or contractions).

Edit your work!

You should NEVER turn in your first draft. Make sure to save enough time to review and revise what you have written. Sometimes you find your main point or conclusion while reading an early draft of your paper. If possible, have a trustworthy friend read your paper before you hand it in. Take pride in your work and how it represents you.

Books with Tips for Writing (Grammar, Punctuation, Bibliographic Citation, etc.) Sylvan Barnet, *A Short Guide to Writing About Art* Ann Raimes, *Keys for Writers*

See also the *Keys* website at http://college.hmco.com/keys.html

Plagiarism

Most universities have strict policies against plagiarism. If you are caught plagiarizing you may fail an assignment, fail an entire course, or even be expelled from a university. Therefore, it is important to know what plagiarism is and how to avoid doing it. Plagiarism is the use of other people's work (including the textbook) without proper citation that credits the original source (see **citations** above). You should familiarize yourself with your school's plagiarism or academic integrity policy.

If you are unsure about what constitutes plagiarism see:

"Plagiarism," Writing Center, University of North Carolina Chapel Hill, 1998-2005 website: http://www.unc.edu/depts/wcweb/handouts/plagiarism.html.

Houghton Mifflin's "Internet Research Guide," website: http://college.hmco.com/english/resources/research_guide/2e/resources.html

Bibliographies & Citations

There are a variety of acceptable methods for bibliographic citation. The following two formats are used most often by art historians - the *Chicago Manual of Style* and the *Art Bulletin Style*. These are not the only styles that can be used, so you should find out what your professor expects. The *Chicago Manual of Style* format can be accessed online at: http://www.press.uchicago.edu/Misc/Chicago/cmosfaq/cmosfaq.html

You might also look at how works are cited in the *Art Bulletin* or the *Journal of Architectural Historians*. These are the major scholarly journals for art historians. The articles in these journals may also be used as models for your own writing.

Useful Art Historical References and On-Line Full-Text Sources

- Bibliography of the History of Art (BHA) –This is a catalogue of works written on art. It includes citations for articles. Some reviews of books and articles are also included. It is accessible through the library's website.
- JSTOR This is an online database of scanned articles. It contains full articles from a number of top periodicals in the field. These articles can be downloaded in PDF form and printed out for free, so you don't have to go to the library to find the hardbound journal and photocopy it. This database can be accessed through the library's website.
- Pierce, James, *From Abacus to Zeus: A Handbook of Art History*, Englewood Cliffs, 1977. This book contains a brief dictionary of symbols in art and a section that lists the websites of all major museums. Most of these museum websites allow you to browse their collections and read their catalogue entries for each work.
- University of Pennsylvania's online library of books at http://onlinebooks.library.upenn.edu/subjects.html. This website contains scanned copies of entire books that you may print out. It is not very large (the majority of art historical texts cover Islamic art), but I'm sure their catalogue will continue to

- grow. Right now, some books accessed through this site that might be useful include: Vitruvius' *Ten Books on Architecture*, Leonardo da Vinci's notebooks, and a *Dictionary of Islamic Architecture*.
- Web Gallery of Art This contains images by many of the artists we will study that you can access on line. http://www.wga.hu
- World Cat This is an online database containing all the books catalogued in the U.S. Library of Congress. Be aware that some of these books may not be available at your library so you may have to use interlibrary loan to obtain them, so allow enough time. This can be accessed through the library's website.

Art History Dictionaries and Encyclopedias

- Grove Dictionary of Art This is an encyclopedia about art. It is accessible through the library's website.
- Gwilt, Joseph, *Dictionary of Islamic Architecture*. This can be accessed on-line at http://onlinebooks.library.upenn.edu/subjects.html.
- Hall, James, *Dictionary of Subjects and Symbols in Art*, 1974 (or later ed.). This dictionary can be used to find the iconographic meaning of a work of art or a symbol contained within it. [Ref. N7560 H34]
- *Illustrated Dictionary of Historic Architecture*, ed. by Cyril M. Harris, New York, 1977 (or any edition).
- Pierce, James, *From Abacus to Zeus: A Handbook of Art History*, Englewood Cliffs, 1977. This book contains a brief dictionary of gods and goddesses, saints, Christian events, and symbols in art.

Books with Advice for Writing About Art

Sylvan Barnet, *A Short Guide to Writing About Art*, Boston, 1981. Stein Eiler Rasmussen, *Experiencing Architecture*, Cambridge, 1959. Joshua Taylor, *Learning to Look: A Handbook for the Visual Arts*, Chicago, 1981. *Many universities have online writing centers. Try Googling "writing about art" for more tips.

QUESTIONS TO ASK YOURSELF WHEN WRITING ABOUT ART

Questions to ask yourself when writing about drawings & paintings:

- * What is the medium used (tempera, oil, watercolor, etc.)?
- *What is the format of the work (painting on canvas or panel or wall or parchment)? How many panels or scenes make up the work (is it a diptych, triptych, polyptych)? Do the panels open and close? Is it painted on only one side or is there a front and a back? Is/ was the work surrounded by a frame? Is there a predella?
- *What technique was used to produce this work? What are the steps required in this technique?
- *How big is it?
- *Is the image realistic, naturalistic, stylized, abstract, etc.?
- *Is the work in its original context? What was the work's original context? Was it in a public or a private setting? Is it part of a cycle?
- *What was the intended function of the work?
- *Who was the artist?
- *Who was the patron?
- *What was the intended meaning of the work? Is the meaning obvious or indicated through symbols?
- *What is the subject of the work? What is the literary source of this subject? Is subject a narrative subject? If so is it depicted in a continuous narrative?
- *Is there a previous work of art that influenced this work?
- *What is the intended viewpoint when looking at this work? Is it meant to be seen from above, below or straight on? How did the artist take this viewpoint into account?
- *Did the artist use linear perspective to depict depth in this work? If so, identify the location of the vanishing point? What does its location do to the scene?
- * Did the artist use atmospheric perspective?
- *Did the artist use foreshortening?
- *What is the setting? Is there an architectural or landscape setting?
- *What happens in the foreground, middle ground, background? Where does the main action take place?
- *Are the figures arranged according to a geometric form (i.e. in a pyramid)?
- *Is there a hierarchy of figures? How is this expressed? Is one figure larger than the others?
- *How do the figures relate to one another? To their setting?
- *Do the figures engage the viewer? Do they look out at the viewer? Do they bring forth emotion?
- *What are the poses and gestures of the figures? What do the poses or gestures say about the personality of the figure depicted? Are the gestures symbolic?
- *What colors are used? Is there a color that dominates? Do the colors seem to stand out individually or do they seem to blend together? Are the colors realistic or symbolic?
- *How is line used? Can you determine a strong outline around the figures?
- *How is light used? What is the light source?
- *Is portraiture used?
- *Does the artist suggest movement by leading your eye around the composition?
- *Why is this work significant/important?

Questions to ask yourself when writing about sculpture (note: relief sculpture shares many qualities with both painting and sculpture):

- * What is the medium used (stone, metal, clay, etc.)? If bronze, is it gilt?
- *What is the format of the work (relief, in the round, niche figure)? Is it carved on only one side or is there a front and a back? Is the figure solid or hollow?
- *What technique was used to produce this work? What are the steps required in this technique?
- *How big is it?
- *Is the work realistic, naturalistic, stylized, abstract, etc.?
- *Is the work in its original context? What was the work's original context? Was it in a public or a private setting? How does the figure relate to its setting?
- *What was the intended function of the work?
- *Who was the artist?
- *Who was the patron?
- *What was the intended meaning of the work? Is the meaning obvious or indicated through symbols?
- *What is the subject of the work? What is the literary source of this subject? Is subject a narrative subject? If so is it depicted in a continuous narrative?
- *Is there a previous work of art that influenced this work?
- *What is the intended viewpoint when looking at this work? Is it meant to be seen from above, below or straight on? How did the artist take this viewpoint into account? Is one meant to move around the figure? How does the figure encourage this movement?
- *Did the artist use foreshortening?
- *Is there one figure or more than one figure? If more than one, how do the figures relate?
- *For composition in a relief panel see above under painting and also consider varying degrees of relief.
- * Consider the negative space around the figure.
- *Does the figure engage the viewer? Does it look out at the viewer? Does it bring forth emotion? Does it communicate an inner psychology?
- *What are the poses and gestures of the figures? What do the poses or gestures say about the personality of the figure depicted? Are the gestures symbolic?
- *Is color used?
- *How are light and shadow used?
- *Is portraiture used?
- *Why is this work significant/important?

Questions to ask yourself when writing about architecture:

- * What are the materials used (timber, stone, iron, steel, concrete, etc.)?
- *How big is it?
- *What type of building is it? Is it public or private? Is it secular or religious?
- *What style is it?
- *What features make it part of its period style?
- *What technique was used to build this work? What are the steps required in this technique?
- *If the building uses columns, what order are they? What are the parts of this order?

- *What is the work's context (urban, suburban, rural, at the end of a long avenue, along a pilgrimage route, etc.)? Is this different from the work's original context? How does one approach the building (on axis, from the side, etc.)? How doe sthe building relate to nature?
- *What was the intended function of the building? Does it still perform this function?
- *Who was the patron?
- *Who was the architect? The builder? Was the architect directly involved in the building's construction process?
- *What is its plan like? Is it arranged symmetrically? What are its parts? For example, if it is a church does it have a nave, side aisles (how many), a transept, an apse, etc.?
- *What does its exterior façade look like?
- *What do its interior elevations look like?
- *Can you read its main spaces in the volumes of its exterior massing?
- *How does one move through the building?
- *How is the interior space lit?
- *Are there public and private spaces within? How are they distinguished?
- *What was the intended meaning of the work? Is the meaning obvious or indicated through symbolic features?
- *How is the building decorated?
- *Why is this building important?

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