

# ART HISTORY ANALYSIS

Art History Analysis papers use formal analysis, stylistic analysis, or comparison and contrast to analyze artwork and write a cohesive paper. These papers are completed in Art History courses.

Art History Analysis papers can focus on a variety of topics, including form, style, or comparison.

**Note:** All information in this handout is from [Purdue OWL](#) unless indicated otherwise.

## FORM

**Instructor guidelines** – Follow your professor’s guidelines.

- a. Art courses follow [MLA format](#).
- b. This type of paper may require you to [include pictures](#) of the artwork you are analyzing.
- c. Be sure to [properly cite](#) any pictures of artwork you use.

## CONTENT

You could potentially use three different types of analysis in an Art History analysis paper. Consult your professor, the assignment’s instructions, or the syllabus to determine which one to use.

1. **Formal Analysis** – Talks about the formal elements of art.
  - a. Color, Line, Contrast, Scale, Texture, etc.
  - b. Discusses how the story or idea is portrayed through these elements

### SAMPLE FORMAL ANALYSIS

---

This formal analysis was written by Maeve Gately in [Writing an Art History Paper](#).

“In Raphael’s *Marriage of the Virgin*, the artist uses one point perspective, balanced composition, and vibrant primary colors to convey a sense of stability and order, thus representing the Christian narrative in the idealized, harmonious aesthetics of the Renaissance. In the foreground, a man and woman stand on either side of a central figure, their adjoining hands creating a focal point which extends back to the doorway on the horizon line. The orthogonal lines created by the tiled pavement move the viewer’s eye along the same central path and emphasize the perfect perspective of the scene. The deep hues of yellow and green in the central man’s clothing complement the red and blue in the woman’s, and form the palette for the rest of the onlookers, a simple, pure combination of colors that contributes to the sense of order. The almost perfect symmetry of the scene, as well as the

relatively empty middle ground, underscore both the spiritual theme and the aesthetic values of the time.”

**Note:** [Swarthmore](#) explains that only elements relevant to your analysis should be discussed. For example, for a formal analysis, only discuss the formal artistic elements that most impacted your perception of the story or idea’s portrayal.

2. **Stylistic Analysis** – Discusses the art’s style.
  - a. Expressionism, Naturalism, Postmodernism, etc.
  - b. Talks about what artistic elements (like color or brush strokes) create the artist’s style.
  - c. Compares the artist’s style to other artists in his medium and time.

**Note:** [Swarthmore](#) clarifies that you should avoid assuming the artist’s intent and discuss the overall effect the art has. For example, instead of saying, “The artist intended to show the dire predicament of the moral dilemma,” say, “The artist’s use of heavy, broad strokes demonstrates the dire predicament of the moral dilemma.”

3. **Comparison/Contrast** – This type of analysis compares and contrasts two pieces of art.
  - a. Looks at how the formal elements are different in each.
  - b. Discusses how their periods affect the artworks’ form and style.
  - c. Shows how and why the artists’ approaches to representing a similar subject varied.

#### [SAMPLE COMPARISON/CONTRAST ANALYSIS](#)

---

This comparison/contrast analysis was written by Maeve Gately in [Writing an Art History Paper](#).

“Donatello’s and Michelangelo’s Davids share the same biblical subject, historical period, and sculptural form, yet differ in a number of significant ways that reflect their respective embodiments of the early and high Renaissance styles. The most apparent difference between the two is the moment in the battle that each artist chooses to depict. Donatello’s David stands victoriously above the head of his vanquished foe, his own head bowed in an almost feminine gesture of reflection, a picture of the idealized male... Michelangelo, on the other hand, has caught his David in the moments before the battle itself. He stands proudly in a position of perfect contrapposto, his hand holding the sling, the only iconographic reference in the entire piece, over one shoulder, looking into the distance with a pensive, almost fearful gaze. This David is no longer a shy, pretty vision of youth, but a man on the verge of adulthood, an embodiment of the Florentine identity and the full realization of the artistic ability of the high Renaissance that Michelangelo came to represent.”

**Note:** [The Nesbitt-Johnston Writing Center](#) at Hamilton College reminds readers that Art History Analysis papers still need a thesis. As with most papers, your thesis statement should be the last sentence of your introduction, which introduces the work(s) you are analyzing (Nesbitt). For more information on thesis statements, click [here](#).

**PRACTICE NOW**