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EDITION



# A Short Guide to Writing about Art

ELEVENTH EDITION

Sylvan Barnet



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PEARSON

## A WRITER'S CHECKLIST: REVISING A DRAFT

- Is the title of the essay informative and interesting? Does it indicate the scope and focus of the essay? (pages 272, 275) Is it in the proper form? (pages 323–60)
- Is the opening paragraph interesting, and by its end does it focus on the topic? (pages 36, 172, 224–27)
- Is the work of art identified as precisely as possible (artist, material, location, date, and so on)? (pages 324–26) Are photocopies of works of art included?
- Is the point (thesis) stated soon enough—perhaps even in the title—and is it kept in view? (pages 35–36)
- Is the organization reasonable and clear? (pages 36–37, 270–71) Does each point lead into the next without irrelevancies?
- Is each paragraph unified by a topic sentence or topic idea? (pages 216–17)
- Are some paragraphs too long or too short to be read with pleasure? (pages 222–24)
- Do transitions connect the paragraphs? (pages 220–222)
- Are generalizations and assertions about personal responses supported by evidence—by references to concrete details in the work? (pages 50, 55–56)
- Are the sentences concise, clear, and emphatic? Are needless words and inflated language eliminated? (pages 208–10)
- Is the concluding paragraph conclusive without being repetitive? (pages 227–29)
- Are the dates and quotations accurate? Is credit given to sources? (pages 256–57, 343–49)
- Are quotations introduced adequately with signal phrases such as “Crow offers a surprising comparison,” so that the reader understands why the quotation is offered? (pages 233, 263–64, 340–41)
- Are the long quotations really necessary? Can some be shortened (using ellipses to indicate omissions) or summarized in my own words? (pages 344–46)
- Are the titles of works of art—other than architecture—underlined to indicate italics? (page 339)
- Are footnotes and bibliographic references in the proper form? (pages 350–60)
- Have I kept in mind the needs of my audience—for instance by defining unfamiliar terms? (pages 26–27, 59–60, 274–75)
- Is a likable human being speaking in this essay? (pages 205–06)
- Is the essay properly formatted? Does my last name and the page number appear at the top of each page? (pages 323–24)
- Has the essay been proofread? Are spelling and punctuation correct?

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- ✓ Basic Matters, p. 63
- ✓ Writing a Comparison, p. 159
- ✓ Writing a Catalog Entry, p. 169
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# *A Short Guide to Writing about Art*

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GLOBAL EDITION

**SYLVAN BARNET**  
*Tufts University*

**PEARSON**

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To the memory of my brother, Howard

I saw the things which have been brought to the King from the new golden land: a sun all of gold a whole fathom broad, and a moon all of silver of the same size, also two rooms full of the armour of the people there, and all manner of wondrous weapons of theirs, harness and darts, wonderful shields, strange clothing, bedspreads, and all kinds of wonderful objects of various uses, much more beautiful to behold than prodigies. These things were all so precious that they have been valued at one hundred thousand gold florins. All the days of my life I have seen nothing that has gladdened my heart so much as these things, for I saw amongst them wonderful works of art, and I marvelled at the subtle talents of men in foreign lands. Indeed, I cannot express all that I thought there.

—Albrecht Dürer, in a journal entry of 27 August 1520,  
writing about Aztec treasures sent by  
Motecuhzoma to Cortés in 1519, and  
forwarded by Cortés to Charles V

Painting cannot equal nature for the marvels of mountains and water, but nature cannot equal painting for the marvels of brush and ink.

—Dong Qichang (1555–1636)

What you see is what you see.

—Frank Stella, in an interview, 1964, published 1966

The surface bootlessness of talking about art seems matched by a depth necessity to talk about it endlessly.

—Clifford Geertz, 1976

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# Preface

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Another book for the student of art to read? Well, everyone knows that students today do not write as well as they used to. Probably they never did, but it is a truth universally acknowledged (by English teachers) that the cure is *not* harder work from instructors in composition courses; rather, the only cure is a demand, on the part of the entire faculty, that students in all classes write decently. But instructors outside of departments of English understandably say that they lack the time—and perhaps the skill—to teach writing in addition to, say, art.

This book may offer a remedy: Students who read it—and it is short enough to be read in addition to whatever texts the instructor regularly requires—should be able to improve their essays

- by getting ideas—both about works of art and about approaches to art, from the first five chapters (“Why Write about Art?,” “Where Do I Start?,” “Analysis: Form and Style,” “Critical Thinking,” and “The Comparison,”)—and from Chapter 13 (“Critical Approaches”)
- by studying the principles of writing—principles of effective description, narration, and especially persuasion—explained in Chapter 9 “The Basics of Writing” (e.g., on tone, paragraphing, and concreteness), and Chapters 10, 12, and 14 (“The Research Paper,” “Research and the History of Art,” and “The Basics of Manuscript Form.”)
- by studying the short models throughout the book, which give the student a sense of some of the ways in which people talk about art

As Robert Frost said, writing is a matter of having ideas. This book tries to help students to have ideas by suggesting questions they may ask themselves as they contemplate works of art. After all, instructors want papers that *say* something, papers with substance, not papers whose only virtue is that they are neatly typed and that the footnotes are in the proper form.

Consider a story that Giambologna (1529–1608) in his old age told about himself. The young Flemish sculptor (his original name was Jean de Boulogne), having moved to Rome, went to visit the aged Michelangelo. To show what he could do, Giambologna brought with him a carefully finished, highly polished wax model of a sculpture. The master took the

model, crushed it, shaped it into something very different from Giambologna's original, and handed it back, saying, "Now learn the art of modeling before you learn the art of finishing." This story about Michelangelo as a teacher is harrowing, but it is also edifying (and it is pleasant to be able to say that Giambologna reportedly told it with delight). The point of telling it here is not to recommend a way of teaching; the point is that a highly finished surface is all very well, but we need substance first of all. A good essay, to repeat, *says* something, and it says it persuasively.

*A Short Guide to Writing about Art* contains notes and sample essays by students and numerous model paragraphs by students and by published scholars such as Albert Elsen, Mary D. Garrard, Anne Hollander, and Leo Steinberg. These examples, as well as the numerous questions that are suggested, should help students to understand the sorts of things people say, and the ways they say them effectively, when writing about art. After all, people *do* write about art, not only to satisfy a college requirement but also to communicate ideas in learned journals, catalogs, and even in newspapers and magazines.

## A NOTE ON THE ELEVENTH EDITION

I have been in love with painting ever since I became conscious of it at the age of six. I drew some pictures which I thought fairly good when I was fifty, but really nothing I did before the age of seventy was of any value at all. At seventy-three I have at last caught every aspect of nature—birds, fish, animals, insects, trees, grasses, all. When I am eighty I shall have developed still further, and will really master the secrets of art at ninety. When I reach one hundred my art will be truly sublime, and my final goal will be attained around the age of one hundred and ten, when every line and dot I draw will be imbued with life.

—Hokusai (1760–1849)

Probably all artists share Hokusai's self-assessment. And so do all writers of textbooks. Each edition of this book seemed satisfactory to me when I sent the manuscript to the publisher, but with the passing not of decades but of only a few months I detected inadequacies, and I wanted to say new things. This eleventh edition, therefore, not only includes eleventh thoughts about many topics discussed in the preceding editions but it also introduces new topics. (All writers—professors as well as undergraduates—should post

at their desks the words from *Westward Ho* that Samuel Beckett posted at his: “Try again. Fail again. Fail better.”)

The emphasis is still twofold—on seeing and saying, or on getting ideas about art (Chapters 1–8) and presenting those ideas effectively in writing (Chapters 9–15)—but this edition includes new thoughts about these familiar topics, as well as thoughts about new topics. Small, but I think important, revisions—here a sentence or two, there a paragraph or two—have been made throughout the book, as well as some extensive additions. Topics that are either treated at greater length or are entirely new include

- additional checklists
- seeing writing as a social act, notably by taking into account the likely responses of readers, and by being aware that most good writing about art seeks to be *persuasive*, not merely descriptive or analytic
- writing about virtual exhibitions
- thinking about non-Western art
- synthesizing material and duly acknowledging all sources
- using, in research, library catalog and discovery and delivery services. The local library online catalog is giving way to “one-stop” search and retrieval systems that look for books, journal articles, and digitized materials from both local and remote sources. Some of the new matters discussed here are:

1. **Library on your iPad**

Access to the library’s online catalog and resources can be from any electronic device with an internet connection. (It should be noted that copyright issues regarding illustrations in books are retarding the publication of art books in electronic format. Most books on art are still in print only and require going to the physical library. This, of course, will change with time.)

2. **Online reference collections**

Art dictionaries and encyclopedias are now available online in collections such as Oxford Reference Online, which has 18 titles of previously published reference works that can be searched individually or collectively.

3. **Print indexes to periodicals are gone**

Very few libraries retain print indexes—they take up precious shelf space and are tedious to search. Online databases with links to available full text have replaced them. Art and architecture databases, both indexes and reference works, can be searched as a group with cross-searching programs such as MetaLib.

## ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

I am fortunate in my many debts: James Cahill, Sarah Blick, Madeline Harrison Caviness, Robert Herbert, Naomi Miller, and Elizabeth de Sabato Swinton generously showed me some of their examinations, topics for essays, and guidelines for writing papers. Amy Ingrid Schlegel provided advice about writing labels. I have received invaluable help also from those who read part or all of the manuscript of the first edition, and to those who made suggestions while I was preparing the revised editions.

Several students—they are named in the text—allowed me to reprint essays they wrote in various introductory courses. I chose these essays because of their excellence—they are thoughtful and clear—but I want to say, emphatically, that almost all students can produce comparable work if they spend adequate time preparing *and then revising* their material. Some of these essays benefited, I think, from small suggestions that I made after the essays had been submitted, but these suggestions—here the correction of a spelling error, there a small change in the title or the addition of a transitional word or phrase—were all of the sort that any peer reviewer might have suggested, or the authors themselves might have thought of the changes had they reread their final draft once more.

The following people called my attention to omissions, excesses, infelicities, and obscurities, and out-and-out errors: Jane Aaron, Mary Clare Altenhofen, Howard Barnet, Peter Barnet, Mark H. Beers, Pat Bellanca, Katherine Bentz, Morton Berman, Sarah Blick, Peggy Blood, Sarah E. Bremser, Lisa Buboltz, William Burto, Ruth Butler, Rebecca Butterfield, James Cahill, William E. Cain, Richard Carp, Janet Carpenter, Perry Chapman, Charles Christensen, Fumiko Cranston, Whitney Davis, Margaret Fields Denton, Eugene Dwyer, Karl Fugelso, Glenn Goldman, Gail Geiger, Diane Goode, Carma R. Gorman, Louise K. Greiff, Elizabeth ten Grotenhuis, Anna Hammond, Maxwell Hearn, Julius Held, Leslie Hennessey, Heidi J. Hornik, Anna Indyche-Lopez, Joseph M. Hutchinson, Eugene J. Johnson, Deborah Martin Kao, Laura Kaufman, Samantha Kavky, Leila Kinney, Jane Kromm, Jason Kuo, Susan Kuretsky, Thomas Larose, Jennifer Lerclerc, Annette LeZotte (and her students), Arturo Lindsay, Yukio Lippit, Sara J. MacDonald, Charles Mack, Janice Mann, Jody Maxmin, Elizabeth Anne McCauley, Andrew McClellan, Melissa McCormick, Sarah E. McCormick, Robert D. Mowry, Robert Munman, Julie Nicoletta, Willow Partington, Jennifer Purtle, Sheryl Reiss, Patricia Rogers, John M. Rosenfield, Leland Roth, James M. Saslow, Allison Sauls, Amy Schlegel, John M. Schnorrenberg, Diana Scott, Annie Shaver-Crandell, Jack J. Spector, Virginia Spivey, Connie Stewart, Marcia Stubbs, Anne Swartz, Helen Taschian, Ruth Thomas, Gary Tinterow, Stephen K. Urice, Stephen Wagner, Jonathan Weinberg, Cole H. Welter, Tim Whalen, and Paul J. Zelanski. I have adopted many of their suggestions verbatim.



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The extremely generous contributions of Noah Daniels, Glenn Goldman, Anne McCauley, James Saslow, Anne Stameshkin, and Ruth Thomas must be further specified. Noah Daniels provided information concerned with computer programs. Goldman significantly improved the discussion of architecture (I have adopted his suggestions verbatim); McCauley wrote the material on photography, Saslow wrote the material on gay and lesbian criticism, Stameshkin on citing electronic sources, and Thomas on library resources. In each instance the job turned out to be more time-consuming than they or I had anticipated, and I am deeply grateful to them for staying with it. I am also indebted to Erika Doss, who kindly read and improved my comments on writing about a public monument, and to Pat Bellanca, William E. Cain, and Marcia Stubbs, who let me use some material that had appeared in books we collaborated on.

The library staff of the Harvard Art Museum has been unfailingly helpful, but I must especially thank Mary Clare Altenhof, Amanda Bowen, Abigail Smith, and Emily Weinrich, who have put up with my pestering.

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# 1

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## WHY WRITE ABOUT ART?

Art for art's sake.

—Anonymous translation of *L'art pour l'art*

What is art that it should have a sake?

—Samuel Butler

Isn't it a man's name?

—Andy Warhol, responding to the question, "What is art?"

Art is culturally significant meaning, skillfully encoded in an affecting, sensuous medium.

—Richard L. Anderson

Art is the objectification of feeling.

—Suzanne K. Langer

Every so often a painter has to destroy painting. Cézanne did it and then Picasso did it again with Cubism. Then Pollock did it—he busted our idea of a picture all to hell. Then there could be a new pictures again.

—Willem de Kooning

If someone calls it art, it's art.

—Donald Judd

### WHAT IS ART?

Perhaps most nonspecialists would say that art consists of "Beautiful pictures and statues. Things like the *Mona Lisa*, *The Thinker*, and Monet's paintings of his garden, and van Gogh's *The Starry Night*. And Greek statues of naked gods." Presumably "beautiful" things evoke some sort of special response, an "aesthetic response," and we call these things—if they are not works of nature such as sunsets and daffodils—works of "art."

The first paragraph of a book on contemporary art, however, includes these sentences:

Ordinary viewers of today, hoping for coherence and beauty in their imaginative experiences, confront instead works of art declared to exist in

arrangements of bare texts and unremarkable photographs, in industrial fabrications revealing no evidence of the artist's hand, in mundane commercial products merely transferred from shopping mall to gallery, or in ephemeral and confrontational performances in which mainstream moral values are deliberately travestied.

—Thomas Crow, *The Rise of the Sixties: American and European Art in the Era of Dissent 1955–1969* (1996), 7\*

Again, what is art? Perhaps we can say that art is anything that is said to be art by people who ought to know. Who are these people? They are the men and women who teach in art and art history departments, who write about art for newspapers and magazines and scholarly journals, who think of themselves as art collectors, who call themselves art dealers, and who run museums.

At the Dia Center for the Arts in Chelsea, Tracey Moffatt's video of surfers in a parking lot changing into swimwear, shielded by towels, created excitement. At the New Museum, Mona Hatoum's videos of the inside of her body—she sends a microvideo through one bodily orifice or another to create a video self-portrait—still get lots of attention. The people who run art museums show these videos, and the people who visit the museums enjoy them, so presumably the videos are art. (For more on video art, see pages 145–146.) In 2007 Damien Hirst exhibited some thirty dead sheep, a dead shark, hundreds of sausages, and thousands of empty boxes with labels of medicines. According to the *New York Times* (December 23, 2007, Arts 39) Hirst said it was his “most mature work.” Cai Guo-Qiang, who uses gunpowder explosions to produce burns on panels of paper, in 2008 was given a retrospective exhibition at the Guggenheim Museum. And also in 2008 the comic-book artist R. Crumb was given an exhibition at the Institute of Contemporary Art in Philadelphia.

This idea that something—anything at all and not only objects that are said to be “beautiful”—is art if artists and the public (or a significant part of the public, the “art world”) say it is art is called the **Institutional Theory** of art. Philosophically speaking, in this view artworks do not possess properties (let's say “beauty” or “truth”) that are independent of their historical and cultural situations; they are artworks because people in certain institutions that are called the art world (museums, universities, art galleries, auction houses, publishing houses, government bureaus, etc.) interpret them as artworks. Thus, Picasso's ownership of (and presumably serious interest in) a northwest African mask designed for use in agricultural fertility ceremonies removes the object from its original context and makes it a work of “art” rather than a ritual object. The fact that there is such a theory and that it has an impressive name should not deter you from asking “Does this theory

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make sense?” and “Even if this theory helps us to see that X and Y are works of art, does the theory help us to know if X and Y are good or bad?”\*

Of course, museum curators, museum-goers, art teachers, and all the rest change their ideas over time. Until fairly recently, say the latter part of the eighteenth century, the West did not sharply distinguish the *Fine Arts* (painting and sculpture) from now what are called the *decorative arts* (utilitarian objects such as dinnerware, furniture, and carpets). The painter and the sculptor, like the potter and the cabinetmaker and the weaver, were artisans. Furthermore, until two or three decades ago, such Native American objects as blankets, headdresses, beaded clothes, and horn spoons were regarded as artifacts, not art, and consequently they were found not in art museums but in ethnographic museums, and they were said to be “interesting” and “informative.” Today curators of art museums are eager to acquire and display such Native American objects, and these objects are said to be “beautiful” and “imaginative.” Similarly, although sculptures from sub-Saharan Africa have been found in art museums since the early twentieth century, other African works—for instance, textiles, pottery, baskets, and jewelry—did not move from ethnographic museums to art museums until about 1970.

Even today, however, the African objects most sought by art museums are ones that show no foreign influence. Objects showing European influence or objects made for the tourist trade are rarely considered art by those who run art museums. The museums (and the museum-goers) of tomorrow, however, may have a different idea about such objects. Maybe only our present cultural prejudice keeps most museum curators from regarding airport art or tourist art (contemporary objects made for tourists) as worth serious consideration. These curators argue that such objects do not embody indigenous values and are only responses to a foreign market. But are these curators merely perpetuating a colonialist (exploitive) relationship by refusing to recognize that colonized people can respond creatively to colonialization?\*\*\* After all, nobody dismisses

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\*See George Dickie, *Art and the Aesthetic* (1974) and Arthur C. Danto, *The Transfiguration of the Commonplace* (1981).

\*\*On tourist art, see Ruth B. Phillips and Christopher B. Steiner, eds., *Unpacking Culture: Art and Commodity in Colonial and Postcolonial Worlds* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1998), and also “Marketing Culture” in Howard Morphy and Morgan Perkins, eds., *The Anthropology of Art: A Reader* (Oxford: Blackwell, 2006). For an especially vigorous presentation of the idea that indifference to (i.e., contempt for) airport art reveals “a continuing exploitative power relation,” see Larry Shiner in the *Journal of Aesthetics and Art Criticism* 52 (1994): 225–234. For a discussion of the criteria that governed the selection of non-Western pieces for display in museums, see Shelly Errington, “What Became of Authentic Primitive Art?,” in Errington’s *The Death of Authentic Primitive Art and Other Tales of Progress* (1998), 70–101.

a Western artist who borrows from another culture: Van Gogh derived ideas from Japanese prints, and Picasso from African sculpture. Why then do some Westerners dismiss as “degenerate” those African or Aboriginal Australian artists who show an awareness of European and American culture?

In listening to people who talk about art, let’s not forget the opinions of the people who consider themselves artists. If someone with an established reputation as a painter says of a postcard she has just written, “This is a work of art,” well, we probably have to be very careful before we reply, “No, it isn’t.” In 1917, when the Society for Independent Artists gave an exhibition in New York, Marcel Duchamp submitted for display a porcelain urinal, standing on its back, titled *Fountain*, and signed “R. Mutt” (the urinal had been manufactured by Mutt Works). The



Marcel Duchamp (American, b. France 1887–1968). “Fountain (Second Version)”. 1950. 12" × 15" × 18". Readymade: Glazed Sanitary China with Black Paint. Philadelphia Museum of Art/Art Resource, NY. Photograph by Graydon Wood, 1998. © 2013 Artists Rights Society (ARS), New York/ADAGP, Paris/SucceSSION Marcel Duchamp.

exhibition was supposed to be open to anyone who wished to exhibit in it, but the organizers rejected Duchamp's entry, saying in a press release that it was "a very useful object, but its place is not in an art exhibition." The press release went on to say, "It is by no definition a work of art." Today, however, it is illustrated in almost every history of art on the grounds that an artist of undoubted talent took an object and forced its viewers to consider it as an aesthetic object (something to be contemplated in an art museum) rather than as a functional one (something to be used for the disposal of men's urine). In Duchamp's words, "Whether Mr. Mutt with his own hands made the fountain or not has no importance. He chose it. He took an ordinary article of life, placed it so that its useful significance disappeared under the new title and point of view—created a new thought for that object." And in 1991, noticing that *Fountain* resembles the hood-like niche that sometimes surrounds a sacred image, the artist Sherrie Levine created two polished bronze versions, *Fountain (Madonna)* and *Fountain (Buddha)*. These, too, have found their way into exhibitions and into books about art—and into the art marketplace, where one sold at auction in 2008 for \$ 440,000. (Duchamp's *Fountain* nicely illustrates the Institutional Theory (summarized on page 18), which claims that an object is a work of art if the art world (for instance someone who is widely regarded as an artist) says it is.

A common definition today is "Art is what artists do," and they do a great many things that do not at all resemble Impressionist paintings. Listen to Claes Oldenburg, sculptor and designer of an environmental work, *The Store*, that exhibited works constructed from such untraditional materials as burlap and cardboard: "I am for an art that is political-erotic-mystical, that does something other than sits on its ass in a museum" (quoted in Charles Harrison and Paul Wood, eds., *Art in Theory: 1900–2000* [Malden, Mass.: Blackwell, 2003], 744).

But artists also may be uncertain about what is art. An exhibition catalog, *Jackson Pollock: Black and White* (1969), reports an interesting episode. Pollock's wife, Lee Krasner, a painter herself, is quoted as saying, "In front of a very good painting . . . he asked me, 'Is this a painting?' Not is this a good painting, or a bad one, but a *painting!* The degree of doubt was unbelievable at times" (page 8).

Sculptors, too, have produced highly innovative work, work that may seem not to qualify as art. Take, for instance, **earthworks** or *Earth Art* or *land art* (or more recently, *green art*), large sculptural forms made of earth and rocks. An example is Robert Smithson's *Spiral Jetty*, created in 1970. Smithson supervised the construction of a jetty—if a spiral can be regarded as a jetty—some 15 feet wide and 1,500 feet long, in Great Salt

Lake, Utah. Because the water level rose, *Spiral Jetty* became submerged, though the work still survived—under water, in a film Smithson made during the construction of the jetty, and in photographs taken before the water level rose. Beginning in 1999 drought lowered the water level, and by the middle of 2003 *Spiral Jetty* again became visible. Is a combination of mud, salt-encrusted rocks, and water art? Smithson said it was art, and the writers of books on recent art agree, since they all include photographs of *Spiral Jetty*. And if it is art, should we tamper with it? The black basalt rocks that once made a strong contrast with the pinkish surrounding water (the color of the water is due to bacteria and algae) now are white with the encrusted salt, so that the whole looks rather like a snowfield, very different from the work that Smithson created.

Let's look briefly at a work produced in 1972 by a student in the Feminist Art Program at the California Institute of the Arts and exhibited again at the Bronx Museum of the Arts in 1995. Two instructors and some twenty students in the class decided to take an abandoned house and turn it into a work of art, *Womanhouse*. Each participant took some part of the house—a room, a hallway, a closet—and transformed it in accord with her dreams and fantasies. The students were encouraged to make use of materials considered trivial and associated with women, such as dolls, cosmetics, sanitary napkins, and crocheted material. One student, Faith Wilding, constructed a crocheted rope web, thereby creating what she called (in 1972) *Web Room* or *Crocheted Environment* and (in the 1995 version) *Womb Room* (see page 23). Traditionally, a work of art (say, a picture hanging on the wall or a statue standing on a pedestal) is set apart from the spectator and is an object to be looked at from a relatively detached point of view. But *Womb Room* is a different sort of thing. It is an *installation*—a construction or assemblage that takes over or transforms a space, indoors or outdoors, and that usually gives the viewer a sense of being not only a spectator but also a participant in the work. With its nontraditional material—who ever heard of making a work of art out of rope and pieces of crochet?—its unusual form, and its suggestions of the womb, a nest, and rudimentary architecture, Wilding's installation would hardly have been regarded as art before, say, the mid-twentieth century.

We have been talking about the idea that something is a work of art if its creator—whether a person or a culture—says it is art. But some cultures do not want some of their objects to be thought of as art. For example, although curators of American art museums have exhibited Zuni war god figures (or *Ahayu:da*), the Zuni consider such figures to be embodiments of sacred forces, not aesthetic objects, and therefore *unsuitable* for exhibition.





Faith Wilding crocheting the *Womb Room* installation (1995) at the Bronx Museum of the Arts. Photographer: CM Hardt/CM Pictures.

The proper place for these figures, the Zuni say, is in open-air hillside shrines.\* (A question: Can we call something *art* if its creator did not think of it as art?)

What sorts of things you will write about will depend partly on your instructor, partly on the assignment, partly on what the museums in your area call art, and partly on what you call art.

Here is a definition that, as you look at works of art, may help you get ideas for writing.

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\*See Steven Talbot, "Desecration and American Indian Religious Freedom," *Journal of Ethnic Studies* 12:4 (1985): 1-8; T. J. Ferguson and B. Martza, "The Repatriation of Zuni *Ahayu:da*," *Museum Anthropology* 14:2 (1990): 7-15. For additional discussions of the social, political, and ethical questions that face curators, see Moira Simpson, *Making Representations: Museums in the Post-Colonial Era* (1996); *Exhibiting Dilemmas: Issues of Representation at the Smithsonian*, ed. Amy Henderson and Adrienne L. Kaeppler (1997). Some authors of books go so far as not to reproduce certain images in deference to the wishes of the community. Example: Janet C. Berlo and Ruth B. Phillips, in *Native North American Art* (1998), inform readers that a certain kind of Iroquois mask, representing forest spirits, is not illustrated because these masks "are intended only to be seen by knowledgeable people able to control these powers" (page 11). The heart of the issue perhaps may be put thus: Is it appropriate for one culture to take the sacred materials of another culture out of their context and to exhibit them as aesthetic objects to be enjoyed?

[We use] the term “art” to refer to an object whose form is elaborated (in its etymological sense of “worked”) to provide visual and tactile pleasure and to enhance its rhetorical power as a visual representation.

Janet C. Berlo and Ruth B. Phillips, *Native North American Art*  
(New York: Oxford UP, 1998), p. 7

## WHY WRITE ABOUT ART?

We write about art in order to clarify and to account for our responses to works that interest or excite or frustrate us. In putting words on paper we have to take a second and a third look at what is in front of us and at what is within us. Picasso said, “To know what you want to draw, you have to begin drawing”; similarly, writing is a way of finding what you want to write, a way of learning.

The last word is never said about complex thoughts and feelings—and works of art, as well as our responses to them, embody complex and even contradictory thoughts and feelings. Still, when we write about art we hope to make at least a little progress in the difficult but rewarding job of talking about and clarifying our responses. As Arthur C. Danto says in the introduction to *Embodied Meanings* (1994), a collection of essays about art:

Until one tries to write about it, the work of art remains a sort of aesthetic blur. . . . After seeing the work, write about it. You cannot be satisfied for very long in simply putting down what you felt. You have to go further. (14)

When we write, *first of all we teach ourselves*; by putting down words and by thinking about what we are writing (for instance by looking for evidence to support a response) we get to learn what our multiple responses—our likes, our dislikes, our uncertainties—add up to. When we write and review what we have written, each of us is something like a committee of one, trying to work out a statement that is acceptable to all of our selves. Writing is thus a way of learning. *Second, we hope to interest our readers* by communicating our mulled-over responses to material that is worth talking about.

But to respond sensitively to anything and then to communicate responses, we must possess

- some understanding of the thing and
- some skill at converting responses into words.

This book tries to help you deepen your understanding of art—what art does and the ways in which it does it—and the book also tries to help you convert your responses into words that will let your reader share your perceptions, your enthusiasms, and even your doubts. This sharing is, in effect, teaching. An essay on art is an attempt to help your reader to see the work as you see it.

 **A RULE FOR WRITERS:**

You may think you are writing for the teacher, but this view is a misconception; when you write, *you* are the teacher.

## THE IMAGINED READER AS THE WRITER'S COLLABORATOR

If you are not writing for the instructor, for whom are you writing? To repeat,

- At first, when you take notes and even when you write your first draft, you are writing *for yourself*—you are trying to clarify your ideas, trying to know what you think—but
- when you begin to revise a draft you are also writing *for an imagined reader*, an imagined audience. All writers need to imagine some sort of audience: Writers of self-help books keep novices in mind, writers of articles for *Time* keep the general public in mind, writers of papers for legal journals keep lawyers in mind, and writers of papers for *The Art Bulletin* keep art historians in mind.

An imagined audience in some degree determines what the writer will say—for instance, it determines the degree of technical language that may be used and the amount of background material that must be given. No principle of writing is more important than this one:

When you are revising, keep your audience in mind.

Who is *your* audience, your actual or implied reader? In general (unless your instructor suggests otherwise) think of your audience as your classmates. If you keep your classmates in mind as your audience,

- you will not write, “Leonardo da Vinci, a famous Italian painter,” because such a remark offensively implies that the reader does not know Leonardo’s nationality or trade.
- You might, however, write, “Leonardo da Vinci, a Florentine by birth,” because it’s your hunch that your classmates do *not* know that Leonardo was born in Florence, as opposed to Rome or Venice.
- And you will write, “John Butler Yeats, the expatriate Irish painter who lived in New York,” because you are pretty sure that only specialists know about Yeats.

Similarly, you will not explain that the Virgin Mary was the mother of Jesus—you can probably assume that your reader has at least this much knowledge of Christianity—but if you mention St. Anne, you probably will explain that St. Anne was the mother of Mary.

Further, assume that your reader may tend not to agree with you—that is, assume a somewhat skeptical reader. Why? Because with such an audience in mind, you will be prompted to support your assertions with evidence.

In short, if you imagine that your reader is looking over your shoulder when you are revising, your imagined audience becomes your collaborator, helping you to decide what you need to say—in particular, helping you to decide

- how much background you need to give
- which terms you need to define
- what kinds of evidence you need to offer in order to convince the reader
- what degree of detail you need to go into.

If, for instance, you are offering a psychoanalytic interpretation, you can assume that your audience is familiar with the name Freud and with the Oedipus complex, but you probably cannot assume (unless you are addressing psychoanalysts) that your audience is familiar with the contemporary psychoanalyst D. W. Winnicott and his concept of the pre-Oedipal mother–infant dyad as a source of creativity. If you are going to make use of Winnicott, you will have to identify him and briefly explain his ideas.



### **A RULE FOR WRITERS:**

When you draft, and especially when you revise, keep your audience in mind. (Your imagined audience for a course paper probably will be your classmates.) Tell these imagined readers (a) what they need to know, (b) in an orderly way, and (c) in language that they will understand.

A successful essay, whether a brief review of an art exhibition in a newspaper or a twenty-page essay in *Art History*, begins with where the readers are and then goes on to take the readers further. (See also “A Note on Technical Language,” pages 202–205.)

### ✓ A Checklist: Imagining a Reader

- Do I have a sense of what the reader probably *knows* about the issue?
- Do I have a sense of what the reader probably *thinks* about the issue?
- Have I stated my thesis clearly and sufficiently early in the essay?
- How much common ground do we probably share?
- Have I, in the paper, tried to establish common ground and then moved on to advance my position?
- Have I supported my arguments with sufficient details?
- Have I used the appropriate language (for instance, defined terms that are likely to be unfamiliar)?
- Have I indicated *why* my readers should care about the issue and should accept or at least take seriously my views?
- Is the organization clear?
- Have I used transitions (“furthermore,” “on the other hand”) where they are needed?
- Have I presented myself as a person who is (a) fair, (b) informed, and (c) worth listening to?

## THE FUNCTIONS OF CRITICAL WRITING

In everyday language the most common meaning of *criticism* is “finding fault,” and to be critical is to be censorious. But a critic can see excellences as well as faults. Because we turn to criticism with the hope that the critic has seen something we have missed, the most valuable criticism is not that which shakes its finger at faults but that which calls our attention to interesting matters going on in the work of art. Critical writing, in short, educates the reader, chiefly by offering *evidence* in support of opinions.

In the following statement W. H. Auden suggests that criticism is most useful when it calls our attention to things worth attending to. He is talking about works of literature, but we can easily adapt his words to the visual arts.

What is the function of a critic? So far as I am concerned, he can do me one or more of the following services:

1. Introduce me to authors or works of which I was hitherto unaware.
2. Convince me that I have undervalued an author or a work because I had not read them carefully enough.
3. Show me relations between works of different ages and cultures which I could never have seen for myself because I do not know enough and never shall.

—W. H. Auden, *The Dyer's Hand* (1963), 8–9

The emphasis on introducing and showing suggests that the chief function of critical writing is not very different from the common view of the function of literature or art. The novelist Joseph Conrad said that his aim was “before all, to make you *see*,” and the painter Ben Shahn said that in his paintings he wanted to get right the difference between the way a cheap coat and an expensive coat hung.

Take Auden’s second point, that a good critic can convince us—can gain our agreement by calling attention to evidence supporting a thesis—that we have undervalued a work. Although you probably can draw on your own experience for confirmation, an example may be useful. Rembrandt’s self-portrait with his wife (see below), now in Dresden, strikes many viewers as one of his least attractive pictures: The gaiety seems forced, the presentation a bit coarse and silly. Paul Zucker, for example, in *Styles in Painting*, finds



Rembrandt Harmensz van Rijn (1606–1669). Rembrandt *Self-Portrait with Saskia in the parable of the Prodigal Son*. 1635–39. Oil on canvas, 131 × 161 cm. Photographer: Erich Lessing, Art Resource, N.Y.



it “over-heartly,” and John Berger, in *Ways of Seeing*, says that “the painting as a whole remains an advertisement for the sitter’s good fortune, prestige, and wealth. (In this case Rembrandt’s own.) And like all such advertisements it is heartless.” But some scholars have pointed out, first, that this picture may be a representation of the Prodigal Son, in Jesus’ parable, behaving riotously, and, second, that it may be a profound representation of one aspect of Rembrandt’s marriage. Here is Kenneth Clark on the subject:

The part of jolly toper was not in his nature, and I agree with the theory that this is not intended as a portrait group at all, but as a representation of the Prodigal Son wasting his inheritance. A tally-board, faintly discernible on the left, shows that the scene is taking place in an inn. Nowhere else has Rembrandt made himself look so deboshed, and Saskia is enduring her ordeal with complete detachment—even a certain hauteur. But beyond the ostensible subject, the picture may express some psychological need in Rembrandt to reveal his discovery that he and his wife were two very different characters, and if she was going to insist on her higher social status, he would discover within himself a certain convivial coarseness.

—Kenneth Clark, *An Introduction to Rembrandt* (1978), 73

After reading these words, we may find that the appeal of the picture grows—and any analysis that increases our enjoyment in a work surely serves a useful purpose. Clark’s argument, of course, is not airtight—one rarely can present an airtight argument when writing about art—but notice that Clark does more than merely express an opinion or report a feeling. In his effort to persuade us, he offers evidence (the tally-board and the observation that no other picture shows Rembrandt so “deboshed”), and the evidence is strong enough to make us take another look at the picture. After looking again, we may come to feel that we have undervalued the picture.

## SOME WORDS ABOUT CRITICAL THINKING

Again, the word *critical* commonly implies a negative, fault-finding spirit, and *thinking* can include mere daydreaming (“During Art History 101 I kept thinking about lunch”), but the term *critical thinking* suggests careful analysis. *Critical* comes from a Greek word, *krinein*, meaning “to separate,” “to choose”; it implies conscious, deliberate inquiry, and especially it implies a skeptical state of mind, but a skeptical state of mind is *not* a negative, self-satisfied, fault-finding state of mind. Quite the reverse; because critical thinkers wish to draw sound conclusions, they apply their skepticism to *their own* assumptions, to *their own* evidence, and indeed toward all aspects of *their own* thinking as well as toward that of others. When they read a draft, they read it with a skeptical mind, seeking to improve the thinking that has gone into it.

## A SAMPLE CRITICAL ESSAY

Let's look at a student's short essay on a famous picture by James McNeill Whistler (1834–1903).

Douglas Lee

Fine Arts 101

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### Whistler's Japanese Mother

The painting commonly known as *Whistler's Mother* (Figure 1) is full of surprises. First of all, its title—the title that Whistler gave it—is *Arrangement in Grey and Black No. 1: The Artist's Mother*. Once we are aware of the title, we look at it in a way different from the way we look at it under the popular title, *Whistler's Mother*. The word



Figure 1. James Abbott McNeill Whistler, American (1834–1903). *Arrangement in Black and Gray: The Artist's Mother*. 1871, oil on canvas, 57" × 64 ½". Louvre. RMN-Grand Palais/Art Resource, NY.