

Art History is Not Like Bowling: Alexis' Tips for Writing an Art History Paper

1. Italicize art titles. For example: *Virgin of the Rocks*, *Homer and his Guide*.
2. Discuss art in the present tense, because in most cases, the work still exists!
 - a. Present tense: "He holds a torch in his left hand."
 - b. Past tense: "He held a torch in his left hand."
3. Avoid using the passive voice- use the active voice to make your paper more interesting to read:
 - a. Passive voice: "He is holding a torch."
 - b. Active voice: "He holds a torch."
 - c. Passive voice: "She is sitting in the foreground, is weaving a wreath of flowers, and is wearing a pink dress."
 - d. Active voice: "She sits in the foreground wearing a pink dress, and weaves a wreath of flowers."
4. Avoid short paragraphs with better paper organization. One paragraph = a minimum of five sentences. If you have a paragraph with only two or three sentences, then you need to re-organize your paper.
5. Be sure to differentiate between describing and analyzing.
 - a. Description: "*The Arnolfini Wedding Portrait* shows a man and woman holding hands in a bedroom chamber. The man stands next to the window on the left, and the woman stands closer to the bed on the right."
 - b. Analysis: "By placing the man closer to the window and the woman closer to the bed, Jan Van Eyck refers to their roles in society. The woman is in control of the domestic household, while the man is expected to be the link to the larger external environment."
6. Your observations are NOT your opinions; your observations should support main points about the work(s), which in turn support your thesis statement.
7. DO NOT USE THE FIRST PERSON VOICE. This includes "The use of bright colors really catches your eye," or any sentence using "you," "I," or "us."
8. Avoid "catchy" introductory sentences and/or paragraphs. It makes your paper less professional; this is not a personal essay nor is it creative writing.
9. Avoid using sentences that include a conclusion that is not supported by your observation:
 - a. Example: "The figures wear blue robes but one is larger than the other."
 - b. Example: "The background is an influence from the Byzantine era, shown with the traditional gold with nothing else adorning it."
10. Using adjectives does not mean you are using a specific example!
 - a. "The large figures are in a beautiful landscape."
 - i. Better: "The over-lifesize figures are in a country landscape with lush green foliage and blooming flowers."
 - b. "The artist uses strong contours to show intense emotion."
11. When comparing two images, be specific in your comparisons:
 - a. "Raphael's *Madonna of the Meadow* and Leonardo's *Virgin of the Rocks* both take place outside, but Leonardo's landscape is darker."
 - b. "Leonardo and Raphael both place their figures in landscapes, but Leonardo's palette uses darker hues of brown and red while Raphael's palette uses lighter hues of yellow, green and blue."
12. Don't be overly verbose:
 - a. "Leonardo's usage of shadow in *Virgin of the Rocks* places the background in shadow and the figures in light."
 - b. "Leonardo's use of shadow"
13. If you cite something, regardless of your citation style (MLA, Chicago-Turabian, etc.), you need to include a "Works Cited" page.
14. Avoid unnecessary phrases:
 - a. Example: "in such a way"
 - i. "Monet uses light **in such a way** to capture the specific light of sunrise."
 - ii. Better: Monet uses light to capture the specific light of sunrise."
 - b. Example: "gives the feel of"
 - i. "Monet **gives the feel of** a sunrise with orange and yellow paint."
 - ii. Better: "Monet captures the moment of a sunrise when the sun rises above the ocean horizon and the fills the atmosphere with orange and yellow."

- c. Example: “appears to be”
 - i. “The man **appears to be** in a dark room with only one window.”
 - ii. Better: “The man is in a dark room with only one window.”
 - d. Example “itself”
 - i. “The painting **itself** uses scientific perspective to create depth.”
 - ii. Better: “The painting uses scientific perspective to create the illusion of recessive space.”
15. Avoid opinion-like sentences:
- a. “*Waterloo Bridge, Sunlight Effect* is one of Monet’s greatest works.”
 - b. “This is a wonderful depiction of a country landscape.”
16. Avoid using the phrase “in which”; usually, if you can use “in which” you should replace it with “where.”
- a. “Another place in which Monet uses bright colors is in the sky.”
 - b. “Another place where Monet uses bright colors is the sky.”
17. Avoid using the phrase “to give” when describing how an artist achieves a certain effect. The artist doesn’t actually “give” anything, and “to give” doesn’t give any further insight into what the image looks like.
- a. “Monet gives the look of fog with his quick, sketch-like brushstrokes.”
 - b. “Monet achieves the look of fog with his quick, sketch-like brushstrokes.”

IN GENERAL:

Your notes are not merely to be typed in paragraph form in order to pass for a paper. Rather, your observations become supporting details for your main points, which in turn support your thesis statement. Your paper should be organized as such; your paragraphs should not be a rambling, unfocused list of details but tightly organized so that as your paper progresses, you are supporting your overall thesis statement about the work(s).

Please remember that when describing an image that you are trying to also give insight to WHAT IT LOOKS LIKE, and your analysis gives insight to WHY IT LOOKS LIKE THAT. (See Tip #5 for the difference between description and analysis.)

Please proofread. Your ideas become less significant when they are communicated using poor sentence structure, grammar, and spelling.

The art history paper is not about your opinions about the work, i.e., your experience interacting with the work, or why you do or do not like the work. Art history is NOT art appreciation.