Analysing Works

Analysing artwork is fairly straightforward and virtually the same process whether the work is a painting, a photograph, a print, a sculpture, etcetera. The simplest approach is to use a three-step process in gathering information about that artwork and developing conclusions. Each step can be as detailed and in-depth as required.

1. **Observation / details**
   This section relates to what you can see in the work. The things that are relatively obvious and don’t have to be searched too hard for.

   What is it called (title)?
   Who made it (artist)?
   When was it made?
   What is it size?
   What is made of (medium)?
   What is it (style/ type)?
   What is represented?
   What are the details in the work/ what do you see?

2. **Composition / elements / construction**
   In this section, you have to start analysing why the artwork is the way it is. What makes it this way and what techniques and concepts have been employed to achieve this?

   How is the artwork composed?
   What elements of design are used?
   What principles of composition are used?
   How is colour used?
   How is shape and form used?
   How is tone used?
   Is there a focal point, what is it?
   Is the image a natural image or has it been constructed, how?

If you interview an artist. The important thing is to ask the right questions.

To interview an artist, it’s best to do some research to learn about the background of their art and what influences they may have had. As with any interview, you should have a list of questions crafted beforehand including specific questions and open-ended discussion starters. To get artists talking, it’s best to open a discussion about the aesthetics and style choices that interest them and what they want to do in the future. [http://www.ask.com/question/how-to-interview-an-artist](http://www.ask.com/question/how-to-interview-an-artist)

**EXAMPLE QUESTIONS:**
What are your plans for the future? What are you working on for the time being? What are their favourite mediums/techniques? Why is work based on a particular theme? How they got started? Work techniques or habits?

3. **Judgement / opinion**
   You now use what you have learnt in the previous two sections and made some judgements about the artwork and offer your opinion on it. Both your judgement and opinion have to be explained.

   It is a great piece. Why?
   It isn’t very good. Why?
   I really like it. Why?
   I don’t like it. Why?

Write your analysis in the style of a journal article.
Discussing aesthetic qualities.

The aesthetic qualities of an artwork refer to the look, style and appearance of the work; in particular, the composition and the way the artist has used the design elements and principles to enhance the artwork.

Your approach to analysing the aesthetics of a work will depend very much on the artform you have selected. Words and phrases specific to particular media should be used wherever possible, e.g. depth of field in photography, and positive and negative space when discussing a sculpture.

Here is an example of an analysis of the aesthetic qualities found within an artwork:

The style that ___________________________ [artist’s name] has chosen for this work reflects elements of ________________________ [art style, e.g. realism, impressionism, post-impressionism, expressionism, surrealism, modernism or post-modernism. It could be naturalistic, narrative and/or documentary], in that ____________________________________________

[an explanation of how the image reflects the style you have mentioned]

The artwork contains a/an ___________________________ [open, closed, tight, vertical, horizontal, traditional, unusual] compositional format.

The most significant design elements that ___________________________ [artist’s name] has chosen for this work include ____________________________________________

[Analyse how each has been used. Use descriptive works to aid your analysis.]

Descriptive Words

**Colour:** primary, secondary, tertiary, soft, subdued, bright, dull, dramatic, high key, strong, contrasting, warm, cool, dark, neutral, monochromatic complementary, contrasting, harmonious, polychromatic, complementary, analogous, tertiary, tint, tone

**Line:** parallel, bent, vertical, subtle, curved, thick, straight, thin, cross-hatched, complex, horizontal, diagonal, curved, angular, spiralling, undulating, complex

**Shape:** organic, naturalistic, realistic, idealised, suspended, non-representational, abstract, geometric, ambiguous

**Tone:** value, neutral, dramatic, shade, tint, contrast, graduation, highlight

**Texture:** glazed, silken, velvety, dramatic, matt, smooth, slick, fine, sandy, cracked, rough, bumpy, sharp, subtle, raise
Principles of Composition

Focal Point
An artist will often consider one area of a picture to be more important than the other parts, and will try to develop this as a focal point to lead the eye into the composition.

Balance
There are two types of balance that may by used as guidelines;

- **Formal or symmetrical Balance** – All shapes are equally spaced on either side of the centre line.

- **Informal or asymmetrical Balance** – All shapes are arranged off-centre and are balanced by using a range of sizes, dark or light tones, warm or cool colours.

Movement
People crossing the street, light sparkling on water, grass swaying in the wind – these are some of the many types of movement seen in our surroundings. Movement creates vitality and interest, and there are many ways of suggesting this in composition.

Space
When we draw or paint we start with a flat sheet of paper or canvas. This is an area of picture space. Within this area we arrange shape of texture, colour or tone, and it is important to use the space properly, sometimes leaving area open to help balance a composition.

Pattern
When shapes are grouped together they form a pattern. We sometimes have difficulty seeing a shape in isolation; if we notice a pile of bricks, it isn’t usually one brick that attracts our attention, but the pattern of bricks. Artists work to create patterns, whether the problem is sculpture, drawing, painting, fabric design or posters. Patterns are usually decorative, but can also be functional, e.g. grip marks on a handle.
Contrast
When different objects are placed alongside each other, their differences become more apparent. We call this contrast. Contrast is useful in picture making; it provides information about proportion, colour or texture, it can emphasize the focal point, and it can create drama or tension by exploiting the differences between the visual elements.

Harmony
When people have similar interest or preferences they are in agreement or in harmony. The same occurs in art and design. When lines, colours, tones, forms, or textures are similar in appearance, they are harmonious and create a pleasing effect.
Elements of Design

**Point**
Point is one single spot in space.

**Line**
Line is made when one point moves to another.

**Shape**
Shape occurs when lines join at certain points and is two dimensional.

**Form**
Form has a three dimensional appearance composed of shapes joined together.

**Colour**
Colour conveys more information about form (e.g. the eyes).
**Tone**

Tone is the degree of light and dark in colour and gives a feeling of solidity to objects.

**Texture**

Texture is the surface quality of objects, i.e. how they feel (or look as though they feel).