

How to Write Art History

Second Edition

Anne D'Alleva

TIPS / 1

Tips for taking notes on a work of art

When you are standing in front of a work of art, it is easy to think that you will remember all the details when you get back to your desk. This is rarely true, so you need to incorporate a note-taking practice into the process of looking.

- Sit down in front of the work of art and spend some time looking at it (at least fifteen minutes).
- Try to absorb the different aspects of it without writing anything down.
- Pay attention to the visual aspects of the piece that jump out at you immediately, as well as those that take time to engage your attention.
- If working with sculpture or an installation, you should move around it and look at it from different angles.
- Write a detailed, systematic description of the work of art, noting its really striking features. When you've done this, go off and do something else – look at other works of art, browse the bookshop, have a drink.
- Return to the piece and spend some more time looking at it without writing anything down (about fifteen minutes).
- Try to be aware of features that you didn't see before.
- Take a whole new set of notes. A set of issues or themes, or a perspective, should now be taking shape.
- Go over both sets of notes and clarify these ideas into a thesis statement. Be sure to have all the visual evidence you need to support that thesis.
- Draw the work of art even if you have photographed it or purchased a postcard.

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Tips for effective note-taking in lectures

One of the most important things you can do to help yourself do well in art history exams is to take good notes during lectures.

- Try to spell out artists' names, place names and specialized terms as fully as you can the first time you hear them. Try to get as close as possible to the correct spelling, but it is fine to go back later and insert the exact spelling.
- Write each new name/term in the margin of your notebook or put a star or arrow in the margin to signal a new name/term.
- Write down in your notebook as much as you can of the title and the artist or culture of the work of art under discussion.
- To help you identify the work under discussion later, jot down any distinctive visual features of the work.
- Make a simple sketch of the image in your notebook.
- Use abbreviations and symbols to help you write quickly and accurately.
- Keep a note of all abbreviations and symbols at the front of your notebook for quick reference and to remind you of their meaning. Some standard ones you might use are:
 - 'c' for circa
 - 'bcs' for because
 - 'usu' for usually
 - 'prob' for probablyYou might also develop your own shorthand for proper nouns e.g. 'mich' for Michelangelo.
- If a point is emphasized in the lecture, then highlight this with stars or arrows in the margin.
- After the lecture, go back and fill in the full title of the work using information provided by your lecturer or by referring to your textbooks. Write the figure number from your textbook in the margin for quick reference.
- Go over your lecture notes as soon as possible after a lecture while your memory is still fresh, preferably on the same day but at least in the same week.
- For clarity and future reference, you might want to type up your notes on a computer.

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Tips to help take notes on readings

- Use a highlighter or underlining to mark key points on a reading.
- While highlighting/underlining also make notes in the margins of the reading with cross-references to other readings, images or observations you find surprising, interesting, convincing or unconvincing.
- For important readings, write out a simple summary on a single sheet of paper.
 - Put the author at the top of the sheet and then in one sentence state the author's thesis or main point.
 - Summarize the key points of the argument in three to five sentences.
 - Note any images that are discussed at length.
 - Staple this sheet to the front of the reading or gather together the summaries in your notebook.
 - You could create a template on your computer for the summary sheet and print out copies to fill in during the term.

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Tips for writing an art history essay or paper

- Write down an initial list of questions to guide your research.
- Accumulate your body of research and then read through your notes to help crystallize themes or issues you want to address in the essay.
- One of the questions which prompted your initial research will probably emerge as the basis of your thesis.
- Make sure that your thesis is original – that your idea not a rehash or summary of someone else's ideas on the subject.
- Develop an outline to guide you in the writing of the body of the essay.
- Consider writing the introductory paragraph only after you have finished your first draft, or write just a rough version. Writing the body of the essay first will help you know more accurately what the essay is about.
- The introduction must state clearly what your thesis is. This can be done in several ways:
 - Simply introduce the artworks or issues you are studying and then state your thesis, your point of view on them.
 - Reflect on a quote, dictionary definition or an excerpt from a poem or favourite novel.
 - Use the first paragraph to recount your personal experience in pursuing a topic. (Check with your tutor that this approach is acceptable. Remember that you must still make the transition to the body of your essay by introducing your research topic and stating your thesis.)
- Make sure that each paragraph in your essay makes a point and that each point contributes to supporting and developing the idea presented in the thesis.
- Make sure your ideas are supported by detailed visual and contextual analysis.
- Develop your argument in a way that makes sense, putting the paragraphs in order so that they flow logically.
- Don't supply endless, irrelevant contextual background information – keep to the point. Be specific in what you say about the image, the culture, its context and the historical period. Avoid generalizations.
- You must bring your work to a proper end. There are several ways to handle the conclusion:
 - Summarize the key points of the argument.
 - Extend your argument by pointing to other issues and ideas that don't belong in the essay but that you might deal with in another essay or at another time.
 - Do something creative that expands your work in a new way.
- Once complete, leave your essay for a few days and then go back and edit it.

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- If possible, it is a good idea to exchange at least one round of editing with another student on your course.
- You could edit your essay as follows:
 - Work on a printout of the essay – it is hard to get a sense of the paper as a whole from a computer screen.
 - Go through the essay and try to edit for ideas, the basic structure and argument – i.e. check you have a clear thesis, that each paragraph develops that thesis and follows from the next, that each paragraph is coherent, develops one idea and has a strong topic sentence.
 - Check that you are providing all the evidence to support your argument.
 - Mark text edits, such as awkward phrases, poor word choices, grammar and spelling. Don't rely on computer grammar and spell-check tools as they do not pick up all incorrect usages.
 - Before inputting your edits on screen, make a copy of your essay in case you need to start again.
 - Make another printout and go through the essay again.
 - Read it aloud to make sure that it makes sense and flows freely.
- Make sure that all your citations are correctly formatted. Use the *Modern Language Association Style Guide* or the *Chicago Manual of Style* to format your citations correctly (see pages 108–111 of *How to Write Art History*). Or check if your university has a website providing guidelines to citation styles.
- Compile a bibliography for your essay. Organize the works cited alphabetically by author's last name and use full stops to separate items. Single space the entries and double-space between them. See the *Modern Language Association Style Guide* or the *Chicago Manual of Style* for formatting a bibliography (see page 112 of *How to Write Art History*) or check if your university provides guidelines.

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Tips for developing and using memory aids

The following memory aids may help you to remember artists, images, dates and cultures. Try them out to see which ones work best for you.

Flashcards

- If your art history textbook is accompanied by a CD-Rom of images you can use these as a set of electronic flashcards by arranging the images to appear without identification.
- Make a set of flashcards to carry with you.
- On one side of an index card, paste or tape a photocopy of the required image (don't cut up your textbook).
- On the other side write the elements of identification your lecturer wants you to know – i.e. artist, title, date, medium and period/culture. Include the figure number from your textbook and a sentence or two on the work's significance.

Maps

- Use the maps in your art history textbook to learn historical context.

Cluster dating and timelines

- Cluster works of art around the same date, such as circa 2000 BCE or circa 1510. This reduces the number of dates you have to memorize. (You will need to check what date parameters are acceptable for slide identification on your course. Usually five or ten years either side is ok.)
- Make a simple timeline (artist, title, textbook figure number) plotting the major works of art you are studying (see example on page 125 of *How to Write Art History*).
- Study the timelines provided in your textbook.

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Tips for taking art history exams

- Give yourself time to think and be sure of your answer before you write.
- Read the question carefully and be sure you understand what the question asks.
 - Underline and number the key parts of the question so that you're prepared to cover all the important points.
- Outline your answer to the question before you begin writing.
 - For a thirty minute essay spend ten minutes outlining your answer. This helps organize your thoughts and answer the question as completely as possible.
 - Consult your outline as you write to make sure you don't forget any important points.
- Keep looking at the slides.
 - For slide identification/short answer or essay questions, keep pausing to look at the visual images to make sure you are on the right track.
- Be specific.
 - Discuss key visual elements of the images in detail to support your interpretation.
 - Be specific in your references to cultural events and readings.
 - Identify the author and title of the work.
- Be clear and concise.
 - Focus on answering the question and don't provide extraneous background material.
 - Use a five paragraph essay format – introduction, three body paragraphs presenting the three main supporting points, conclusion.
 - State your basic idea, or thesis, in your introductory paragraph.
 - Have a clear topic sentence for each paragraph.
 - Use your conclusion to summarize or extend your arguments.
 - Write straightforward sentences.
- Answer as much of the question as possible.
 - For slide identification, write down as much as you know even if you don't know all the elements of the identification.
 - For essay questions, if you can't answer the whole question do the parts that you can do as thoroughly as possible.
- Manage your time.
 - Allot a certain amount of time for each question.
 - When that time is up move on to the next question.
 - Leave extra space in your exam booklet at the end of each question.
 - If you have extra time at the end go back and expand your answers.
- Stay calm
 - Take deep breaths or stretch and take a minute's break between questions.
 - Focus on the question you are answering, not the one you've just finished or the one coming up next.