



## Formal Analysis

It is an analysis of the material qualities of an object that are controlled by the artist, including elements such as line, space, shape/form, color, value, texture, scale, composition.

A formal analysis assumes a work of art is:

1. a constructed object
2. with stable meaning
3. that can be determined by studying the relationships between the elements

This is not a just description of the work but an exploration of why the form supports the content and context of a work, whereas a description would only state what appears on the surface. A formal analysis is meant to be pursued from an objective perspective and should not include opinions on the piece itself, or any outside information about the artwork, artist, or time period. Even if you ultimately use a formal analysis as part of a larger writing that expresses personal opinion and/or a reading into the meaning of an artwork, the portion of your writing that is devoted to a formal analysis should stay focused only on the material qualities of the work itself.

The following vocabulary list is meant as a guide to help you begin to engage formally with an artwork. Keep in mind that you may not find all of the following elements mentioned in any given formal analysis. The goal of a formal analysis is not to try to use as many terms as possible as you engage with an artwork, but to choose the most appropriate terminology in order to get your point across to the reader. Furthermore, you may find that there are other elements that could be used in a formal analysis but are not listed here -- remember that the following is not an exhaustive list of every single term ever used in a formal analysis, but again, is just a guide to help you along.

## Artspeak Vocabulary: Some Basics

**Line:** Lines within an artwork give forms to various shapes, and adds definition.

**Shape:** An enclosed two dimensional object within an artwork.

**Form:** An enclosed three dimensional object within an artwork.

**Colour:** The pigmentation of a surface.

**Value:** The light and dark tones of an artwork.

**Space:** As an element of art, space refers to distances or areas around, between or within components of a piece. Space can be positive (a solid object) or negative (the space around an object), open or closed, shallow or deep and two-dimensional or three-dimensional. Sometimes space isn't actually within a piece, but the illusion of it is.

**Texture:** The perceived dimensional and material surface of an artwork.

**Scale:** The physical size of an art object, or the size relationship of objects depicted within it.

**Medium:** The physical materials that comprise an artwork (ie. oil paint, wood, steel, video, performance etc.)

**Style:** The distinctive ways an artist uses a form, or artistic rendering of a scene. Style ranges depending on the voice or perspective of the artists and can be influenced by history, culture, time, etc. The term is also used when describing movements such as Classical, Realism, Impressionism, etc.

**Chiaroscuro:** A Renaissance-period technique for depicting a strong contrast of dark and light values in paintings, which creates a dramatic sense of dimensionality.

**Atmospheric perspective:** The method of creating the illusion of depth, or recession, in a painting or drawing by modulating colour or clarity of objects to simulate changes effected by the atmosphere on the colours of things seen at a distance.

**Linear perspective:** The method of creating the illusion of depth using mathematical calculations and line-work.

**Vanishing point:** The imaginary point where linear perspective guides your vision, using lines.

**Horizon line:** (1) Where the viewer's eye-level is supposed to be in linear perspective, or (2) where the sky meets the ground in a landscape.

**Foreground:** The ground—or parts—situated, or represented as situated, in the front of the image; the portion of a scene nearest to the viewer.

**Background:** The part of a scene or picture that is farthest from the viewer.

**Middle ground:** Middle of a painting or the area between the foreground and the background. This is often, but not always, where the main action takes place.

**Color Relationships:** The way colors complement or contrast, or the way they work together.

**Color Intensity:** Saturation or strength of a color.

**Cool Hues:** The blues and greens of the color spectrum, associated with water, sky, ice, and cooler temperatures; also called cold colors.

**Warm Hues:** The yellows and reds of the color spectrum, associated with fire, heat, sun, and warmer temperatures; also called hot colors.

**Flat:** (1) An area of color painted in a uniform or identical tone and hue. Any color created by printing only one ink, as compared to a color created by printing four-color process. Also called block color and spot color. (2) A color that seems weak or lifeless.

**Shape Relationships:** The way shapes interact with each other according to their size and color. The spaces between them create more shapes, and these interact with the colored shapes, creating a composition.

**Tension:** A balance maintained in an artistic work between opposing forces or elements; a controlled dramatic or dynamic quality.

**Oppositions:** Opposition in the artwork results from using a visual contrast of some type. Opposition forms when using opposing colors on the color wheel or when adding both horizontal and vertical elements to oppose one another. Using large and small elements or areas that include varying degrees of light and dark colors provides contrast and opposition. The contrast also gives it a feeling of depth.

**Harmony:** Achieve harmony or unity by ensuring that all the parts work together to form one satisfying effect. A feeling of continuity on some level in each element of the piece.

**Rhythm:** A combination of repeating elements, often with some variations.

**Closed Space:** Self-contained. Spatial boundaries or borders within the image often marked by architecture that restricts where eye can go.

**Absolute Clarity:** High definition. The representation of things as they are, taken singly and accessible to plastic feeling.

**Planar Space:** Artwork usually reduces the parts of a total volumetric form to a sequence of planes. Subjects are aligned with foreground, middle ground, or background. Action generally happens in foreground.

**Linear:** It allows for a rigorous closed definition of form, Actual, implied, edges. Emphasis on contour and form shape, clean outlines and clear figure-ground contrasts. Perception of object by its tangible character.

**Multiplicity:** Single parts maintain independence, parts are conditioned by the whole but has its own life.

**Open Space:** The image is not self contained, or not closed within borders.

**Relative Clarity:** Representation of things as they look, seen as a whole, and by their non-plastic qualities. Not a lot of definition.

**Recessional Space:** Space organized in diagonals, relates objects essentially in the direction of forwards and backwards.

**Painterly:** Artist's brushwork comes into forefront, so that you can see paint strokes.

**Impasto:** Really thick brushwork that makes the surface look three-dimensional.

**Unity:** There can be unity of time, place, and/or action. There is one main element that ties the piece together. The sense, in a work of art that all the parts are working together to make a cohesive statement.

**Diagonally Ascending Line:** Forward Motion.

**Diagonally Descending line:** Downward motion.

**Horizontal line:** Balance.