

Formal Analysis Questions: Painting

Medium, Technique, Materials

Is the painting oil, acrylic, tempera, or another material? What is the texture like?

Are there visible brushstrokes? Are the layers of paint thin or thick?

Is there any difference in techniques used across the work?

Consider the scale of the painting and its effect.

Composition and Subject Matter

Is the painting representational (with recognizable figures and objects), abstract, or a combination of both?

Does the work suggest a narrative (a story)?

If the painting is representational, is it a historical scene, a portrait, a biblical narrative, a still life, a genre scene, or something else?

How do the different parts of the composition relate to each other and to the whole scene? Does the composition have unity?

Is the scene symmetrical or asymmetrical? Is there significant use of cropping?

What forms the background, and what is the focus of the scene? Is there anything that draws your eye into or across the work?

What framing devices are used (aside from the actual frame, if there is one)?

If your work is figural

What is the relationship of your gaze to the figure's gaze or figures' gazes (for example, is the figure looking at you)? Is the view of the figure frontal, three-quarters, or profile? If the view is three-quarters, does it suggest motion? If there is more than one figure, do they look at each other?

Is the figure (or are the figures) placed in a setting? If so, what is their relationship to that setting? Do the objects or figures share the space evenly, or is more emphasis placed on one figure?

If your work is a landscape

Do the landscape features share the space evenly, or does one overpower the other? What is the focus of the composition? Is there a suggestion of motion in the landscape?

Are there animals or figures in the landscape? What is their relationship to the landscape?

Light, Color, Perspective

How many light sources are present in the work? What is the effect of light and shadow (*chiaroscuro*) in the picture—is it even, or sharply contrasting? Natural or theatrical?

Are the colors warm, cool, or monochrome? Saturated or muted? How are they placed across the work?

Does the artist convey a sense of perspective? How? Is the space intentionally distorted?

Consider four different ways of creating depth in a painting: overlapping figures; aerial or atmospheric perspective (the scene becomes increasingly out of focus and fades to a blue in the painted distance); relative scale; linear perspective (a mathematical system of creating the illusion of depth on a flat surface in which parallel lines converge at a single vanishing point on the horizon).

Function and Context

What might be significant about the time period in which the work was created?

If the artist is known, what do we know about his or her training and career?

If the artist is unknown, what kind of person might have created it?

Was the work a commission, or did the artist create the work independently?

What was the original context for the work? How was it used?

Was it a singular object or a multiple?

Was the work well received? How has the public's opinion of the work changed?

Collecting History and Museology

What is the present state or condition of this painting? What has led to this state?

What is the museum's title or description of the work? How does it affect your interpretation of the work?

When did the work come into the collection? What is its provenance?

With which area of the collection is it associated?

How is it displayed, and in relation to which other objects? How is it lit?

How are visitors expected to read this object in a museum setting?