

Intro Art History Paper Tips

1. The best way to start the paper is to describe in detail what you see. If the piece is a sculpture, describe in detail from the tip of the head to its toes. If it is a vase, describe the shape with proper words such as foot, belly, shoulders, neck, lip, and mouth. If it is a painting, describe exactly what you see – the characters, the foliage, the buildings, and space. Being forced to look at every aspect of the work may reveal something that you were not aware of. Write these observations down so you can describe the piece in your paper.
2. Ask questions about the piece: When and where was the work made? What is the subject matter? Where was the work originally seen? What purpose or function did the work serve? In what condition has the work survived? Does the title help to illuminate the work? If there are two subjects within the work, how can you characterize their interaction? Are the humans represented as anatomically accurate?
3. The thesis has to be about the work and the support of the thesis has to come from within the work. Because of this, the thesis can NOT be about an historical event that relates to the piece. You should not write about the role of women as a housewife if the piece shows Greek women sewing on a Greek vase. Your thesis should never compare the piece with the period it is dated from. (For instance, writing that the statue is “characteristic” of the Hellenistic period). You can not compare your work with another piece of art.
4. Certain vocabulary words to use throughout the paper:
 - a. Contour lines- outline of shapes for works on paper/wood, etc. (oils, tempera, water color, and etching...). Words to describe contour line include; strong, hard, thick, thin, curvilinear, and linear. In a sculpture, this is called the silhouette.
 - b. Medium- the substance the work is made with.
 - c. Color- pigments used. Value refers to the relative lightness or darkness of a hue. Saturation or hue intensity is the strength of a hue. Is it applied thinly or thickly?
 - d. Line- these are the overall vertical, horizontal, and/or curvilinear lines within the piece. Imagine if you made the work into a “color in the line” children’s page. What does it reveal about the design of the work?
 - e. Function- the purpose of the piece. Was it originally in a church or temple? Was the vase used to hold water? Or was it for personal adoration?
5. The format of the paper
 - a. Introduction- This is a place to briefly give an overview of the piece’s historical context. Talk about the conventions of other pieces during the time period. If you are writing about a vase from the Classical period, write about what was typically displayed on Greek vases during the classical period. If you have a sculpture of Aphrodite from the Hellenistic period, focus on the typical representation of female Greek gods or even Aphrodite during the Hellenistic period.

- b. Thesis statement has to include “The author of this paper will.” It is best to include the main topic and then outline what the support will be by using the word(s) “due to/ because.” Three supports are suggested.
 - c. Description- Within the paper there should be a 1 ½ to 2 page thorough description of piece (see Step 1 above).
 - d. Start developing the thesis statement by writing about each point within the thesis statement in a paragraph or two each.
 - e. Closing- It should focus on tying up the thesis statement.
6. Use Turabian citation style. (Lower level classes can get away with using MLA if they are more comfortable, but if the student is an art history or history major, Turabian should be used.)