

The Critical Analysis Process

The **Critical Analysis Process** is a central part of the Ontario arts curriculum. The process helps students develop and express an informed response to an image or work of art using critical thinking skills. In the curriculum, the process has five stages at the elementary level and four stages at the secondary level.

At the AGO, the critical analysis process we use with both elementary- and secondary-level students has three stages: **Description**, **Analysis & Interpretation**, and **Cultural Context**. Our process begins with a description of the concrete visual information found in the work (**what you see**), moves through a critical analysis based on contextual information provided as needed (**understanding what you see**) and encourages interpretation through personal meaning-making (**what you think about what you see**). Woven throughout these stages is cultural context: the personal, social and historical context of the creator and the work (**what was happening at the time**).

DESCRIPTION

- What is your first impression?
- What captures your attention?
- How does this sculpture make you feel?
- What does this sculpture remind you of?
- What puzzles you? What questions do you have?
- What is happening in this sculpture?
- What do you see that makes you say that?
- What clues tell you when this sculpture was carved?

ANALYSIS & INTERPRETATION

- How does this sculpture evoke feelings, ideas and images?
- What do you think the theme or subject of the carving is? Why?
- What message or meaning do you think the sculpture communicates?
- What do you think is the purpose of this sculpture?
- Has your point of view changed from your initial reaction? How and why?
- How effective are the artist's choices in communicating the intended message?

CULTURAL CONTEXT

- When and where was the work created? By whom?
- What was happening in society during that time? Socially? Historically? Politically?
- What was daily life like when the sculpture was created?
- Who was the intended audience for the sculpture? How has the audience changed?
- Whose voices do we hear? Whose voices do we not hear?

Starting a Conversation About Art

Find a work of art that interests you.

- ▶ If you could take it home, where would you put it and why?
- ▶ How would you describe it to someone you are talking to by cell phone?
- ▶ What song or music would go best with this artwork?
- ▶ What title would you give it?
- ▶ If you could give it as a gift to someone, to whom would you give it?
- ▶ List three adjectives that best describe it.
- ▶ Choose a shape in the artwork. Move your body into that shape.
- ▶ Fill in the blanks: This artwork tastes like...; looks like...; smells like...; sounds like....
- ▶ What does not make sense about it? Is there something that you don't understand?
- ▶ What company might use it for an advertising campaign?
- ▶ What question(s) might you want to ask the artist who made it?
- ▶ If you could change one thing about this artwork, what would it be?
- ▶ Respond to this question: This artwork reminds me of... .
- ▶ What do you wonder about it? What about this artwork surprises you?
- ▶ What place does this artwork remind you of?
- ▶ If the artwork appears to be telling a story, what will happen next?
- ▶ If you could walk into the picture, what would you see? What would you smell? What would you hear? What could you touch?
- ▶ Spend a minute looking closely at the artwork. Now turn around and try to name as many details about it as you can.

[Some questions adapted from the Columbus Museum of Art's "Conversations Cards"]

WHAT MAKES AN ARTWORK?

Form

Medium

The materials, methods, and processes through which artists communicate their ideas in artworks. Medium can also refer to actual substances and tools (e.g. charcoal, oil paint, clay, videotape, marble, computer & software).

Art Elements

The basic visual components or forms which make up all artworks. These elements are colour, line, shape, sound, space, texture, time, and value.

Principles

The strategies which artists use to organize the art elements. Modernist principles include balance, contrast (or variety), editing, emphasis, framing, movement, proportion, rhythm & pattern, and unity|continuity. Postmodern principles can include appropriation, juxtaposition, layering, and chance.

Content

Subject/Narrative

The subject refers to what artists make images or objects of (e.g. person, place or thing)—both what you observe and what the art is about. Artworks can tell a story as part of their content. Contemporary artists make use of the abject or uncanny, ambiguity, irony, metaphor, satire, simulations, and words.

Function

Some artworks or artifacts have a particular function that they perform within a culture, a purpose for which they were made. An artwork's function may change or evolve with a change in context (time or location).

Interpretation

This is the process of making meaning from or "reading" an artwork for understanding. Interpretations get at messages or themes—intended or not—as expressed by the artist, or recognized by spectators or critics.

Context

Artist

Individual or collaborative creators of an artwork. Artists communicate using images, objects or performances which are always influenced or shaped by their knowledge, feelings, beliefs, thoughts, experiences or memories.

Spectator

This term refers to all those who look at visual artworks. As spectators, our purposeful looking and understanding are always influenced by personal knowledge, feelings, beliefs, thoughts, experiences or memories.

Culture

Artworks are created at specific times (era, year, day), in particular places (country, culture, site). In trying to understand art, we need to recall when and where it was produced and under what circumstances. As well, where the artwork is currently displayed or performed may also influence meaning.

Looking/Critical Analysis Activities

30 Facts About...

Students are shown an image and asked to record thirty (30) pieces of factual information that they observe. Have them give only facts that they can see; opinions are not required for this exercise. The evidence must be present in visual form. After a sufficient amount of time, go around the room and ask for "only the facts, ma'am." (*HINT: Good opportunity to discuss the relationship between fact and opinion.*)

Observation Game

Show an image to a small group of 3 or 4 students. They must, in turn, accurately describe the image to the remainder of the class. Questions may be asked and answered to clarify and refine perceptions about the image. Students can also respond in writing or by drawing what they "see" in their heads. When the description is complete, the image is revealed. Follow-up discussion should involve the accuracy of descriptions, reactions to verbal impressions, additional details that could help to clarify comprehension, the exactness of communication, and so on. Repeat the exercise with new observers. Try this game with images that are familiar to the class to compare the quality of descriptions.

In the Mood

Prepare recipe cards with words that represent various feelings and emotions, e.g. thrilling, sad, angry, jealous, joyful. Make sure the students understand these. Allow students to select postcards or large reproductions and ask them to attach an emotion card to it. Ask the following questions as you and the class examine people's choices:

- Why does this image/object suggest that particular emotion or feeling?
- Why do different people see different emotions in the same image?
- How do these emotions contribute to the meaning of the image?

In a Word...

Ask students to write down the first word that comes into their mind after viewing an art work. This reaction should be as spontaneous as possible. Have them write their word on a "Post-It" note and attach to the reproduction. In small groups and have students discuss a particular image. Write down another word that comes to mind after some contemplation. Use a different coloured "Post-It." Has their initial reaction changed? Why? What more can they discover? Does this work recall a personal experience?

Match-Makers

In pairs, students are given a card with a word printed on it. The word can be an adjective, noun, verb or adverb. Ask each pair to find a work of art that they believe somehow matches their word. Discuss their choices. Alter this by having them select a work of art that is opposite to their word. This could become a library research strategy.

How Good is Your Memory?

Working in pairs, have each person choose two images that they like from a larger pile. Once selected, give everyone three minutes to closely study their two images. Examine details and the larger composition. Times up! The partner chooses one of the other's images. Now, while hiding the postcard from the partner's eyes, they must try to stump their partner by asking a question about this image that they might not be able to answer. Switch and try again. After, discuss why certain things were easy to recall and others more difficult.

What three things do I enjoy about this artwork that I will communicate to others? What would I like to ask the artist about the work? Why would I try to convince people to view this artwork? Why should people remember this artwork?

(Have students make up their own questions based on real interviews with these gallery personnel.)

Something from Nothing

Have students take a conceptual and synaesthetic leap by asking them to dramatize an abstract or non-objective painting or sculpture. They will apply synaesthetic thinking as they physicalize and vocalize design elements (line, shape, colour, texture, value) and methods of composition (contrast, balance, rhythm). Begin by having them create a tableaux of a realistic work, then a more abstract example.

Soundscape | Soundtracking

As a small group, select a painting and use realistic or stylized sounds to accompany the depicted actions or extend the visible scene. Try this with realistic or abstract works. Devise dialogue to fit the circumstances. If available, instruments could be used to underscore mood and setting. Perform the score.

Role-on-the-Wall

Have An important role or signifiant character is re-presented from a painting or other visual artwork. Information is read aloud or added as the drama is improvised and a more “three-dimensional” portrait is developed. Other group members can take-over the role, making it a collaborative portrayal, rather than a personal interpretation..

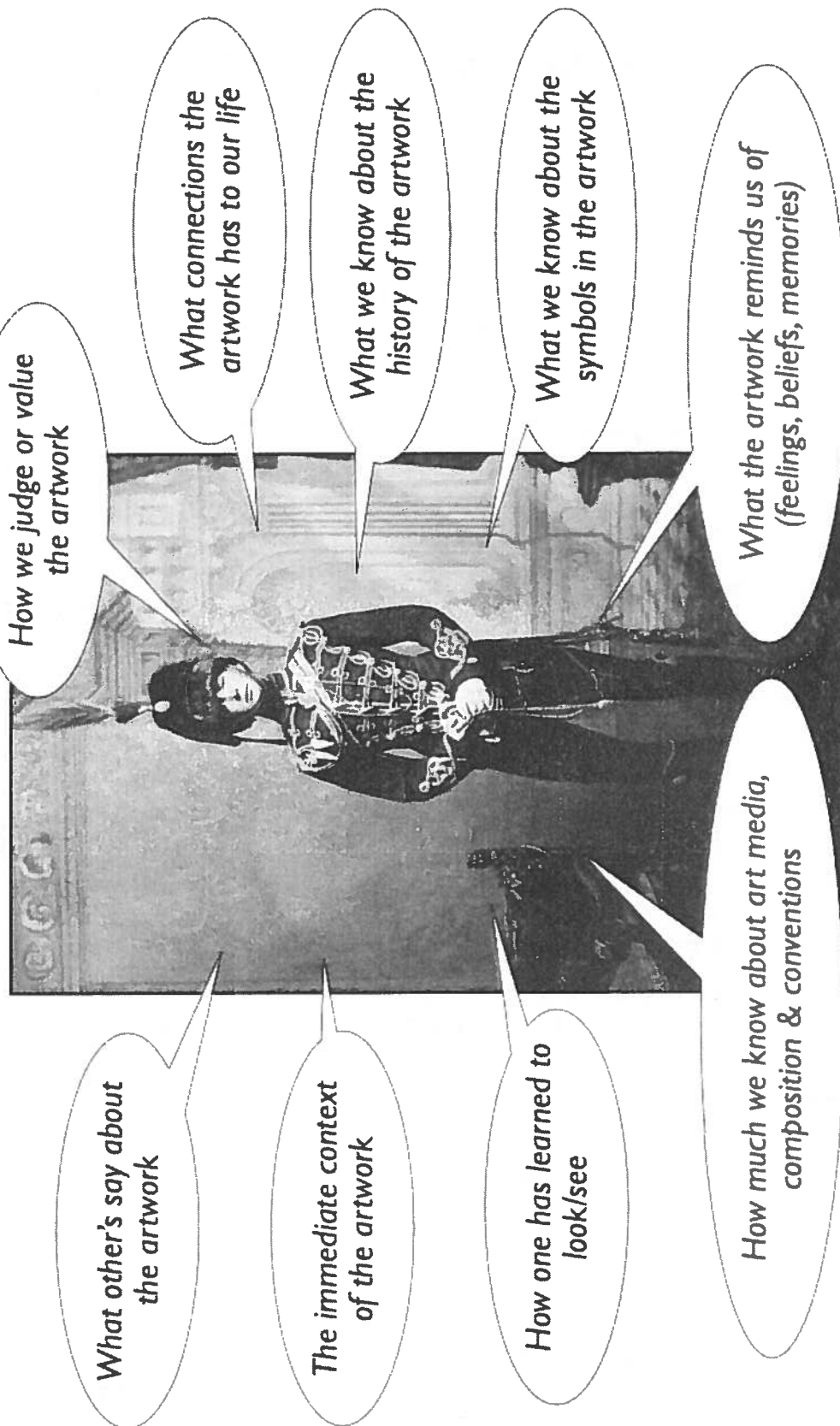
Strategies and Structures for **Writing About Art**

Student writers can choose from a number of different strategies or structures when responding to art. Knowledge and understanding doesn't have to be demonstrated through an essay or a detached, objective voice. Put their "subjectivity" into the subject.

- ▶ Describe the scene; recount your imaginary walk into the artwork
- ▶ Compare an image in the artwork to something else
- ▶ Express an awareness of yourself as spectator while looking at the artwork
- ▶ Describe how the subject or narrative is presented by the artist
- ▶ Communicate an interpretation of the artwork, in poetic form
- ▶ Explore a relationship between the artist and the subject of the artwork
- ▶ Assume that the reader is familiar with the artwork
- ▶ Discuss the history of the artwork
- ▶ Imagine a story behind a scene depicted in the artwork
- ▶ Speak to the artist
- ▶ Imagine what occurred while the subject posed for a portrait
- ▶ Speak to the subject(s)
- ▶ Speak in the voice of a character or multiple characters from the artwork
- ▶ Speculate about what the artist created this work
- ▶ Give voice to an inanimate object in the artwork (anthropomorphism)
- ▶ Allow the art elements or design principles to speak
- ▶ Create a dialogue between or conversation among a number of adjacent artworks, in the same gallery space
- ▶ Write about the gallery environment—atmosphere, structure, dynamics
- ▶ Relate the unseen life or personal history of a portrait
- ▶ Superimpose an aspect of your life or history on the artwork

What Influences our Looking?

(Prior Knowledge)














Young Winston Churchill by unknown photographer (c.1895)

Tips for Teaching with Works of Art

1. Start with students' initial reactions
2. Ask open-ended, inquiry-based questions
3. Listen for a range of responses
4. Scaffold learning by introducing contextual information
5. Encourage connections using hands-on activities | strategies
6. Allow for sharing and reflection time

Principles of Interpretation

(MAKING MEANING FROM ARTWORKS)

-  *Artworks are always about something.*
-  *Form + Content + Context = Meaning(s)*
-  *To interpret an artwork is to understand it in language.*
-  *Everything in an artwork counts towards its meaning.*
-  *Feelings are guides to interpretations.*
-  *Artworks attract multiple interpretations, and it is not the goal of interpretation to arrive at a single, grand, unified, composite meaning.*
-  *There is a limited range of interpretations an artwork will allow.*
-  *Interpretations of an artwork are not limited to what the artist meant them to be about.*
-  *Interpretations are not so much right as they are more or less reasonable, convincing, informative, and enlightening.*
-  *Some interpretations are better than others.*
-  *Convincing interpretations are coherent (reasoned and logical), correspond to the work, and complete (include artist and contextual information).*

Adapted from Terry Barrett's *Making Art: Form and Meaning* (McGraw Hill, 2011)
& *Interpreting Art: Reflecting, Wondering and Responding* (McGraw Hill, 2003)

Once Upon a Time...

Working in small groups, each person must select an image that appeals to them. Arrange these into a narrative or story with a specific beginning, middle, and ending. The story must begin with the phrase “Once upon a time...” and conclude with “the end.” Share this narrative with the class. *Extension:* translate the visual narrative into written form or paint/draw an episode from the story.

Interrogation

A student must orally describe various aspects of an artwork which is hidden from the view of the class. Then, three or four different reproductions, including the one that was described, are displayed. Students must try to determine which work was described. **Variation:** Devise a monologue for a portrait or give the weather report for a landscape. Students have to respond to the descriptions or cues by drawing what they are visualizing, much like a police artist does based on an eye-witness’s account.

Take a Walk Into a Painting

Have students imagine that they can walk into a painting (or some other two dimensional image). Look around at alternate points of view and from various perspectives. Draw or paint the resulting scene. Dramatize this experience. Draw a map of your wanderings. Great exercise to develop abilities of visualization!

Frozen in Time

Recreate an artwork as a tableau or frozen picture. Sustain the poses long enough so that observers can determine the art source of this three dimensional performance. Photograph these scenes.

Telephone or Network

Use an artwork to instigate a phone dialogue or computer network conversation between partners, to illustrate the selected image or object. As a variation, do this exercise as a one-way conversation, using a character from the artwork as the hidden caller. The group should listen carefully to the ensuing conversation to determine who is being spoken to.

Who’s Who in the Artworld

Have students role play the various people who are an integral part of an art gallery or museum. The role of artist, spectator, curator, patron, and art critic can all contribute different meanings to the same or various works of art. The following are examples of questions that could be printed on prompt cards:

- ARTIST

Why did I make this work? Would I like to exhibit, sell, donate or keep this work? Why or why not? How do I want it displayed in the gallery? Is it important that everyone understands my artwork?

- SPECTATOR

What is this work about? Do I like it? Why or why not? Would I like to place this work in my home? Which room and why? What other things does this work remind me of? Does it support my personal values, beliefs or feelings?

- CURATOR

Why do I want to display this work? Do I have to ask or consult with anyone else? Why would people be interested in coming to the gallery to see this? What important information about the work should be communicated? Which other artworks should surround it, in the gallery? Why?

- PATRON

Why would this artwork make an appropriate addition to the museum’s collection? Where will it be displayed? How will it be kept safe and secure? How will it be cared for? Why am I willing to allow others to see this artwork?

- CRITIC

A R T S P E A K

Imagine that this artwork has a voice and can talk with you about itself.

What would it say to attract your attention? Would it introduce itself? It might say what it's about—what you see. It might also talk about how it was made and describe the materials that were used. It could even explain how it feels or what it thinks about its relationship with the artist. Maybe you could ask this work some questions, like an interview. Switch on your imagination to create an actual conversation!

