



A Guide to Writing in  
Aesthetic & Interpretive Understanding 14:  
Putting Modernism Together

Harvard College Program  
in General Education  
*Faculty of Arts and Sciences*  
*Harvard University*



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# A Guide to Writing in Aesthetic & Interpretive Understanding 14: Putting Modernism Together

Professor Dan Albright

# I. Introduction

“Putting Modernism Together” will require you to write interpretive essays about the artworks we read, look at, and listen to over the semester. Below you’ll find some suggestions about the kinds of analytical approaches your essays might take, tips for engaging artworks as you begin the writing process, as well as some general advice about writing strong papers. Because we examine such a wide range of artistic media, the course presents a challenge even to those who already have some background in an area of the interpretive humanities. However, we hope that this challenge will prove an exciting one and that you will try your hand at writing about music or painting even if you’ve never done so before.

We encourage you to read through this guide as you begin the process of selecting a topic and developing your ideas, refer back to relevant parts if you feel lost or confused, and look over it again as you finish the final drafts of your work. Additionally, remember that your TF is always available to offer clarification and advice about your essays; don’t hesitate to meet with him or her as questions or difficulties arise.



Pablo Picasso, *Guitar, Sheet Music and Wine Glass*, 1912

introduction

## II. Choosing a Topic:

### Sample Analytical Approaches

This course allows you a great deal of freedom in your written work. There is no one topic we require you to write about, no one question we ask you to answer, and no one kind of approach we want you to take when you write an essay; what's most important is that you produce work that intellectually excites you. However, this freedom of choice can be daunting: if you can write any kind of paper, it can be difficult to settle on just one topic. Below you'll find descriptions of some common analytical approaches you might take in your papers. This is not a list of assignments from which you're expected to choose, nor is it a comprehensive list of the kinds of papers you might write. Rather, we hope that seeing some examples will help you in determining what kind of argumentative move you might make in your essay.

- **Contextualization:** A contextualizing analysis (sometimes referred to as a “text-in-context” essay) seeks to show how attention to some aspect of a work's historical or social context might illuminate that work. You might situate an author's depictions of machinery within contemporary debates about the effects of industrialization, or show how a composer's quotations of folk music relate to the rise of European nationalisms in the late nineteenth century. Remember that it's not enough just to *identify* a relevant context – you must show that attention to that context can help us understand the work in a new way.
- **Explain a Contradiction:** This approach identifies some apparent contradiction or tension in a work and aims either to explain why it is in fact not a contradiction, or why the contradiction is significant. Suppose that a critical treatise that is explicitly skeptical about religion nonetheless has frequent recourse to religious or spiritual imagery. You might argue that this religious imagery is in fact satirical or parodic and therefore is in keeping with the critic's explicit position. Alternatively, you might suggest that although the treatise is skeptical about religion, it cannot find another language in which to describe certain kinds of human experience, and so is forced to resort to a vocabulary in which it ostensibly has no faith. Note that the latter approach does not simply involve playing “gotcha!” with the text – the point of this argument would not be to show that the text's arguments are bad, but rather to show how this tension or failure reveals something about the possibilities and limitations of its strategies of representation.
- **Comparison:** This deceptively simple approach can produce very strong arguments: juxtaposing two works is an effective way of showing what's significant about the ideas they express or the aesthetic strategies they deploy. For example, you might take two works, a poem and an opera, that both deal with the legend of Parsifal, and show what their different approaches to the same story reveal about the limitations and capabilities of those two artistic forms. On the other hand, you might take two Impressionist paintings of different subjects – say, an urban scene and a rural one – and argue that something about this content affects the formal qualities of paintings that ostensibly use the ‘same’ style. However, when taking a comparative approach, be wary of producing a

laundry list of differences and similarities that doesn't add up to a single strong argument. What's at stake in a comparative analysis is not whether the works are the same or different; what's at stake are the intellectual, historical, or aesthetic qualities those differences and similarities reveal.

- **Deploy a Critical Theory:** This approach uses a critical theory to help us better understand something about a text; the theory provides an explanation for something that would otherwise remain perplexing or exposes as significant something that would otherwise appear to be a marginal detail. For example, at the end of *David Copperfield*, most of the working-class characters emigrate to a better life in Australia. A Marxian analysis might argue that the novel is torn between a desire to ameliorate the condition of the poor and its distaste for working-class demands for the overthrow of the English class system; by sending these characters off-stage to the colonies, the novel can avoid confronting this irresolvable ideological tension. Remember that the goal of such an essay is not simply to imagine what Marx or Freud might say about a text. Show how your use of the theory resolves a problematic aspect of the text that we otherwise couldn't understand, or explain how analyzing the text with this theoretical approach complicates or challenges a standard interpretation of it. At its best, this approach allows the text to “talk back” to the theory; your findings might lead you to conclude that the theory should be nuanced, revised, extended, or even critiqued.



Umberto Boccioni, *Unique Forms of Continuity in Space*, 1913

### III. Close Reading: Strategies for Active Reading, Looking, and Listening

Writing a good paper starts with the collection of good ‘data’ from the artworks under consideration – a process we often term “close reading.” While we read prose, look at pictures, and hear music constantly in our daily lives, we generally don’t do so very closely. To some extent, gathering useful data about an artwork just requires that we pay unusually close attention to its details; however, it also requires that we train ourselves to listen or look for significant details and phenomena. Whatever analytical approach you deploy in your essay, close reading techniques will help you delve deeper into the source(s) you are examining and begin developing ideas. Here are some strategies for reading, looking, and listening actively and effectively as you prepare to write an essay in this course. While this list is by no means exhaustive, we hope it will provide you with some starting points for approaching the works you’re analyzing.

#### Spend time with the work

While you should be reading, looking, and listening carefully to the assigned texts as part of your preparation for lecture and section, writing about a given artwork will require you to spend even more time with it. Reread a literary text several times and note any patterns, repeated elements, unexpected moves, puzzling sections, and particularly jarring disjunctions. In the case of visual art, spend time describing everything you see, both to familiarize yourself with the artwork and to practice translating its visual elements into verbal descriptions. Such descriptions will be particularly important in the case of nonrepresentational art, since there aren’t obvious real-world referents (and thus no obvious verbal shorthand) for the marks on the canvas, but it’s also important for representational art, since you’ll want to write about formal elements and the content of the work in as much detail as possible.

Working with music, too, will require repeated study and the translation of phenomena from one medium into another. Because music includes so few identifiable referents (for example, music about the sea doesn’t usually look or sound like the sea), writers have developed an array of metaphors and technical language to communicate about musical experience. We can describe musical “events” in terms of technical categories: *the trumpets play a loud, fast melody several octaves higher than the rest of the orchestra, which plays a slow, soft accompaniment*. We might translate this technical vocabulary into spatial metaphors: *playing above the orchestra, the trumpets offer their loud, fast melody in stark contrast to the slow, soft accompaniment deep below*. Going a step further, we can integrate more figurative language (notice how the additions begin to articulate an interpretation of what’s happening in the piece): *soaring over the orchestra, the trumpets chatter like happy birds. Their loud, fast melody is subtly challenged by the ominous rumblings of the orchestra, playing a slow, soft accompaniment several octaves below*.

## Consider formal elements

In addition to spending time familiarizing yourself with the artwork, you'll want to ask questions about its formal elements: how do the details that you've noted fit together and relate to one another? How is the work's content affected by the way it's presented or expressed? Below you'll find a list of some of the formal characteristics we look for when we examine different kinds of artwork. Using questions about these formal elements to direct your examination of the work will help you to produce useful raw material for your arguments.

### *Literature*

- **Narration** – How is this story told? Is it narrated in the first or the third person? To whose thoughts and perspectives does the narration give us access? How reliable does the narrator seem to be? Is the story told “in order,” or is there a difference between the order in which events take place and the order in which they're narrated?
- **Speakers** – We conventionally refer to the “I” in a poem as a “speaker,” since we cannot assume that a poem in the first person actually expresses the thoughts and feelings of the poet. Who, then, is this speaker? What can we infer about his or her environment? Does his or her mood or ideas remain constant throughout the poem, or do they change?
- **Lacunae** – Does the text contain some significant gap or absence, something hinted at or suggested that it refuses to name or depict explicitly?
- **Style** – What kind of language does the author deploy, and in what situations? Does the text use elaborate figurative language, or is the prose restrained and simple? Are its sentences short and simple or long and complex?
- **Metaphor** – Are there particular metaphors or figures that seem important to the text? What ideas are expressed by the symbols or figures the text uses? Does a metaphor tell us something that we didn't already know about an event or character?

### *Painting*

- **Subject and Narrative** – Does the painting have a clear subject – is it of something? Does it tell a story? Does it suggest a story even if it lacks a clear subject?
- **Medium and Fabrication** – What materials is the artwork made of? Can you tell how it was made? Why might the artist have chosen this particular medium rather than others?
- **Lines** – Are the lines thick or thin? Vertical or horizontal? Straight or curved? Smooth or rough? Consistent or broken?
- **Color** – Try to observe all the different colors used. Is the color realistic or expressive? Warm or cool? Bright or muted?
- **Light** – Where are the lightest and darkest areas of the painting? Does the painting use light and shadow? Is there an implied light source?

- **Space** – What is the sense of space in the work you've chosen? Does it imply three-dimensional space? Negative space? Does it create an illusion of depth, or is the visual plane flattened out? How are the elements of the work configured in that space?

### *Music*

- **Rhythm** – Is the music fast or slow, smooth or jagged-sounding? What impression does its speed or articulation give? Does the speed change at any point?
- **Dynamics** – When is the music loud, and when is it soft? What is the relation between its loud and soft elements – do they challenge each other? Give way to each other?
- **Instrumentation** – Are there many instruments playing, or few? Which instruments play? What symbolic significance might the choice of instruments have?
- **Repetition** – What about the music is repetitive? What does the repetition “teach” you to recognize in the music? What elements of the music are surprising or unexpected?
- **Style** – Does the music allude to a recognizable style (folk, popular, classical)?
- **Text-Music Relationship** – How does the music reinforce or contradict the message of the text? Does the music “illustrate” any of the text’s images or sounds?

### Note your personal response

Your personal response to a work can often serve as a useful guide or clue to an interpretation. While your immediate reaction to a work isn’t itself an argument or a reading, asking questions about the responses the work produces can give you something to explain and can lead you to meditate on the way a work functions. You might note what emotions the work evokes, or whether it sparks a memory or association. Is there something you find shocking or provocative? Unsatisfactory or incomplete? Confusing or unsettling? Try to give particular attention to the formal strategies the work uses to produce these effects. Egon Schiele’s nudes, for example, are often quite unsettling. But since the nude has been painted for centuries without raising an eyebrow, it’s worth thinking about the formal means Schiele uses to make this familiar content so strange and shocking.

We hope that following these suggestions will help you to slow down and look deep into these artworks for relevant details. The next step is analysis: looking at how the elements of the work you’ve identified work together, generating useful questions about them, and beginning to develop an argument.

## IV. Tips for Writing Strong Papers

1. Your paper should be driven by a single strong argument, which should be stated clearly and concisely early in your paper (generally the first or second paragraph). If a friend asks, “So, what does your essay argue?” you should be able to tell her in one or two sentences. If you can’t do this, your paper doesn’t yet have a strong central claim.
2. Remember that a good argument should be debatable, manageable (given the scope of the essay), and interesting. Don’t argue something that nearly any educated person who read the text would agree with; instead, aim to expand our understanding of the sources in some way, making an argument that is surprising, counter-intuitive, or at least non-obvious. If you can support your idea with the available evidence, don’t be afraid to be daring and controversial!
3. Develop your argument through a logical progression of ideas, and make readers aware of each step in your argument as you take it by including “signpost” sentences. Often the best places for “signposts” that tie together the parts of your argument are in the transition or topic sentences of your paragraphs. Remember that your reader doesn’t already have your whole argument in mind: what might seem to you like hand-holding and over-explanation is probably just the right amount of guidance to keep your reader oriented.
4. Support each of your claims with concrete examples and evidence from the work in question. In addition to providing cited quotations, summaries, or descriptions as appropriate, be sure to comment on your evidence, explaining how the quotation you’ve provided or the detail to which you’ve pointed functions as evidence for the claim you’re making.
5. Acknowledge and refute obvious counter-arguments (alternate interpretations, objections, and counter-examples) that a skeptical reader might raise. Addressing counter-arguments adds authority and complexity to your writing, showing that you have considered the issue from multiple vantage points and are doing your best to present an informed, reasonable, and persuasive interpretation.
6. Be sure to discuss the stakes or implications of your argument. Why should your reader care about whether you’re right or not? You shouldn’t try to make cheap connections between Expressionist painting and global warming or propose any grand unified theories of existence, but you should have sense of a larger intellectual context in which your argument would be important.

tips for writing

## V. Additional Writing Resources

### Course Research Guides

You are not required to conduct additional research for the essays in this course; however, you might find that questions you're interested in asking or the topic you've chosen would be well served by looking at additional primary or secondary sources. To that end the library has developed the following two guides to point you towards the resources that will prove most useful to students taking this course.

#### **Research Guide to Accompany the AI 14 Writing Guide**

<http://guides.hcl.harvard.edu/AI14>

#### **AI 14 Course Research Guide**

<http://isites.harvard.edu/icb/icb.do?keyword=k83725&pageid=icb.page265905>

### Harvard Guide to Using Sources

<http://usingsources.fas.harvard.edu>

*The Harvard Guide to Using Sources*, an online publication of the Harvard College Writing Program, provides information on evaluating sources and avoiding plagiarism, tips on integrating sources, and guidelines on different citation styles.

### Harvard Writing Center

Barker Center 019

617-495-1655

<http://www.fas.harvard.edu/~wricntr/>

At the Harvard Writing Center, Writing tutors are available for individual conferences about essays in all disciplines and at all stages of the writing process. Trained undergraduate tutors can meet with you to brainstorm topics or to discuss an essay's argument, use of evidence, structure, or other elements of academic essays. To schedule an appointment, visit the Writing Center's website.

### House Writing Tutors

Several undergraduate houses have resident and non-resident writing tutors available for consultation. Contact your House Tutor for further information.

Program in General Education

Holyoke Center 470

1350 Massachusetts Ave.

Cambridge, MA 02138

[gened@fas.harvard.edu](mailto:gened@fas.harvard.edu)

Phone: 617-495-2563

Fax: 617-496-4448

Harvard College Program  
in General Education  
*Faculty of Arts and Sciences*  
*Harvard University*