



Writing About Art: Argument or Thesis

Getting Started

Most papers will require secondary research, but it's a good strategy to formulate a tentative thesis (or at least a research focus) early in the writing research process before you have become overly influenced by the views of others. If you're not sure where to start or how to find a focus for your paper, try the following strategies:

Examine the work yourself

Begin by doing your own analysis of the work before you look at what others have written about the work or the artist so that you have your own ideas about the work. Free write about your own impressions of the work and about what elements in the work elicit your response.

Consider your approach

Consider the analytical perspectives and themes that are foregrounded in your course outline, in your course readings and textbook, and in your course lectures and discussions. This will help you link your analysis back to themes from the course.

Ask questions

Formulate questions about the work or its relationship to other works, artistic movements, the historical context, or the artist's life. Note that "why" and "how" questions will typically lead you to a deeper analysis than "what" and "when" questions.

Beginning with good questions can be a particularly helpful strategy. Consider the following questions from Ann Thomas's essay (2002) on modernism in Canadian photography:

The question that this study raises is the relationship of Canadian photography of the 1920s and 30s to these other (i.e., European, American, Russian, and Mexican) modernist photographic practices. Was it closer to the American model of a direct movement out of Pictorialism or an example of the more experimental European model? Did Canadian Modernist photography exhibit any particular defining characteristics? And were there Canadian photographers whose work could be described as Modernist, and who were primarily interested in "refurbish[ing] the language of their art?"

Thomas's response to these questions serves as the organizing argument or thesis for her essay. Although her central argument does not appear neatly, in a sentence or two, here are key parts of it:

Although there were Canadian photographers in the twenties and thirties who sought to “refurbish the language of their art,” they were willing to do so only to a degree that allowed them to remain within the conceptual and formal tradition of Pictorialism...There are various reasons that could account for why a hybrid form of Pictorialism and straight photography prevailed in Canada over the purer form of Modernist photography. The canon of Pictorialism was validated by the National Gallery of Canada...Canada was not propelled into the Modernist movement in photography the way that Mexico or Russia were. With neither Russia nor Mexico’s post-revolutionary culture of experimentation, nor the presence of any indigenous or even temporarily resident Modernist photographers, Canadians drew from what had already been institutionalized through the camera club and international salon circuits.

Argument or Thesis

Every paper needs a central organizing argument or thesis that advances a claim (or set of claims) that are developed and supported in the paper. To formulate a central argument when writing about art, consider the following relationships:

Formal analysis

Explore the relationship of the formal elements of the work (media, composition, technique, colour, line, space, point of view, scale, etc.) to the subject matter, theme, meaning of the work, the artist’s intended effect, or the viewer’s response. When doing a formal analysis, consider the following organizational strategies: describe the work before focusing on the details; describe the composition before discussing the technique; and move from foreground to background or from obvious to less obvious aspects of the work.

Stylistic analysis

Explore the work’s relationship to the artistic context (e.g., how it fits into, does not quite fit into, challenges or resists stylistic categories/movements).

Comparative analysis

Explore the work’s relationship to one or more works with which it shares key similarities or differences (e.g., other works in the same style, produced in the same country and era, or earlier or later works by the same artist).

Iconography and iconology

Explore the symbolism in the work and its significance or the work’s relationship to literary or other texts.

Theoretical, sociological, historical or critical essay

Explore the work's relationship to the historical or cultural context (e.g., how it was shaped by or affected that context). Consider how the work was received, its significance now or at the time it was produced. Analyze the work's relationship with other works surrounding the same events or context.

Biographical Essay

Explore the work's relationship to the artist's life and body of work.

Of course, a single paper (particularly a long paper) may touch on more than one of these aspects or relationships, but every paper should have an organizing argument or thesis. Here's an example of an organizing argument (or thesis) from a paper entitled "Neglected Catalysts: The Function of Drawings and Paintings in Barbara Hepworth's Oeuvre":

... the drawings and paintings [of Barbara Hepworth] are important for three main reasons. They enabled her to achieve the spontaneity and drama she initially found difficult to attain through the slow process of carving. This in turn acted as a spur for her to find a medium in three dimensions which could evoke the same qualities. The drawings and paintings are also interesting because they act as a commentary on the sculptures and highlight qualities that Hepworth hoped her audience would perceive. Unfortunately, by the 1950s, Hepworth's public was complacent and supine in its response to her new works, believing that her place in the history of Modernism was secure and identifiable... In consequence, the drawings and paintings, which were actually of key importance, were suppressed rather than confronted.

This organizing principle reflects biographical, historical, and stylistic considerations.

Considering Your Audience and Your Writing Context

When writing about art it is often helpful to assume a general audience—even an audience who hasn't seen the works of art on which you are focusing. This means you will need to include detailed descriptions and formal analyses of the works you are considering and define key analytical terms (e.g., "pictorialist" in the above example). When writing a paper for a course, keep in mind that academic readers typically expect to see your organizing argument or thesis foregrounded in the introduction of your paper. Besides summing up your key claim(s), your thesis might also highlight the lines of reasoning or evidence you will develop in your paper to support your argument.

Works Cited

Roberts, E. (2003). Neglected catalysts: The function of drawings and paintings in Barbara Hepworth's oeuvre. *Apollo*. 158(500), p. 48.

Thomas, A. (2000). Between a hard edge and a soft curve: Modernism in Canadian photography. *Journal of Canadian Art History*, 21(1/2), 74-92.