

Janice Mason Art Museum  
**Four Steps in Art Criticism**

Being able to critique art by utilizing the art elements, principles of design, and correct terminology is very important for students. To assist students in being successful in this endeavor, we are including a four step process for art criticism. These are valuable questions that can be used to critique any piece of art. If you use these four steps and answer questions listed under each, you will have a comprehensive method to critique any piece of art. This process will take some time for students to learn and be comfortable using. Results will be better if you display a piece of art and then work one section at a time, such as “describe”.

**Describe:** Tell what you see (the visual facts).

1. What is the name of the artist who created the artwork?
2. What kind of an artwork is it?
3. What is the name of the artwork?
4. When was the artwork created?
5. Name some other major events in history that occurred at the same time this artwork was created.
6. List the literal objects in the painting (trees, people, animals, mountains, rivers, etc.).
7. What do you notice first when you look at the work(s)? Why?
8. What kinds of colors do you see? How would you describe them?
9. What shapes can we see? What kind of edges do the shapes have?
10. Are there lines in the work(s)? If so, what kinds of lines are they?
11. What sort of textures do you see? How would you describe them/
12. What time of day/night is it? How can we tell?
13. What is the overall visual effect or mood of the work(s)?

**Analyze:** Mentally separate the parts or elements, thinking in terms of textures, shapes/forms, light/dark or bright/dull colors, types of lines, and sensory qualities. In this step consider the most significant art principles that were used in the artwork. Describe how the artist used them to organize the elements. Suggested questions to help with analysis:

1. How has the artist used colors in the work(s)?
2. What sort of effect do the colors have on the artwork?
3. How has the artist used shapes within the work of art?
4. How have lines been used in the work(s)? Has the artist used them as an important or dominant part of the work, or do they play a different roll?
5. What role does texture play in the work(s)? Has the artist used the illusion of texture or has the artist used actual texture? How has texture been used within the work(s).
6. How has the artist used light in the work(s)? Is there the illusion of a scene with lights and shadows, or does the artist use light and dark values in a more abstracted way?

7. How has the overall visual effect or mood of the work(s)? been achieved by the use of elements of art and principles of design.
8. How were the artists design tools used to achieve a particular look or focus?

**Interpretation:** An interpretation seeks to explain the meaning of the work based on what you have learned so far about the artwork, what do you think the artist was trying to say?

1. What was the artist's statement in this work?
2. What do you think it means?
3. What does it mean to you?
4. How does this relate to you and your life?
5. What feelings do you have when looking at this artwork?
6. Do you think there are things in the artwork that represent other things-symbols?
7. Why do you think that the artist chose to work in this manner and made these kinds of artistic decisions?
8. Why did the artist create this artwork?

**Judgment:** After careful observation, analysis, and interpretation of an artwork, you are ready to make your own judgment. This is your personal evaluation based on the understandings of the work(s). Here are questions you might consider:

1. Why do you think that this work has intrinsic value or worth? What is the value that you find in the work(s)? (For example, it is a beautiful work of art, conveys an important social message, affects the way that I see the world, makes insightful connections, reaffirms a religious belief, etc.)
2. Do you think that the work(s) has a benefit for others? Do you find that the work communicates an idea, feeling or principle that would have value for others?
3. What kind of an effect do you think the work could have for others?
4. Does the work lack value or worth? Why do you think this is so? Could the reason you find the work lacking come from a poor use of the elements of art? Could the subject matter be unappealing, unimaginative, or repulsive?
5. Rather than seeing the work as being very effective or without total value, does the work fall somewhere in-between? Do you think that the work is just o.k.? What do you base this opinion on? The use of elements of art? Lack of personal expression? The work lacks a major focus? Explore your criticism of the work (s) as much as you would any positive perceptions. Realize that your own tastes and prejudices may enter into your criticism. Give your positive and negative perceptions.