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WRITING ABOUT ART

> Art is culturally significant meaning, skillfully encoded in an affecting, sensuous medium.
>
> —Richard L. Anderson

> Art is the objectification of feeling.
>
> —Suzanne K. Langer

> If someone calls it art, it's art.
>
> —Donald Judd

> Isn't it a man's name?
>
> —Andy Warhol, responding to the question, "What is art?"

> Art for art's sake.
>
> —Anonymous translation of *L'art pour l'art*

> What is art that it should have a sake?
>
> —Samuel Butler

WHAT IS ART?

Perhaps most nonspecialists would say that art consists of "Beautiful pictures and statues. Things like *The Mona Lisa, The Thinker*, and Monet's paintings of his garden, and van Gogh's *The Starry Night*. And Greek statues of naked gods."

The first paragraph of a book on contemporary art, however, includes these sentences:

> Ordinary viewers of today, hoping for coherence and beauty in their imaginative experiences, confront instead works of art declared to exist in arrangements of bare texts and unremarkable photographs, in industrial fabrications revealing no evidence of the artist's hand, in mundane commercial products merely transferred from shopping mall to gallery,

or in ephemeral and confrontational performances in which mainstream moral values are deliberately travestied.

—Thomas Crow, *The Rise of the Sixties: American and European Art in the Era of Dissent 1955–1969* (1996), 7

Again, what is art? Perhaps we can say that art is anything that is said to be art by people who ought to know. Who are these people? They are the men and women who teach in art and art history departments, who write about art for newspapers and magazines and scholarly journals, who think of themselves as art collectors, who call themselves art dealers, and who run museums.

One of the most ardently discussed items at the Whitney Museum's 1997 Biennial was David Hammon's video of a can being kicked down the Bowery. At the Dia Center for the Arts in Chelsea, Tracey Moffatt's video of surfers in a parking lot changing into swimwear, shielded by towels, created excitement. At the New Museum, Mona Hatoum's videos of the inside of her body—she sends a microvideo through one bodily orifice or another to create a video self-portrait—still get lots of attention. The people who run art museums show these videos, and the people who visit the museums enjoy them, so presumably the videos are art. (On video art, see page 109–11.)

This idea that something—anything at all—is art if artists and the public (or a significant part of the public, the "artworld") say it is art, is called *the institutional theory* of art. Philosophically speaking, in this view artworks do not possess properties (let's say "beauty" or "truth") that are independent of their historical and cultural situations; they are artworks because people in certain institutions that are called the art world (museums, universities, art galleries, auction houses, publishing houses, government bureaus, etc.) interpret them as artworks. The fact that there is such a theory and that it has an impressive name should not deter you from asking, "Does this theory make sense?" and "Is it true that aesthetic judgment is just a matter of taste, whether of an individual or of a particular group or culture?"*

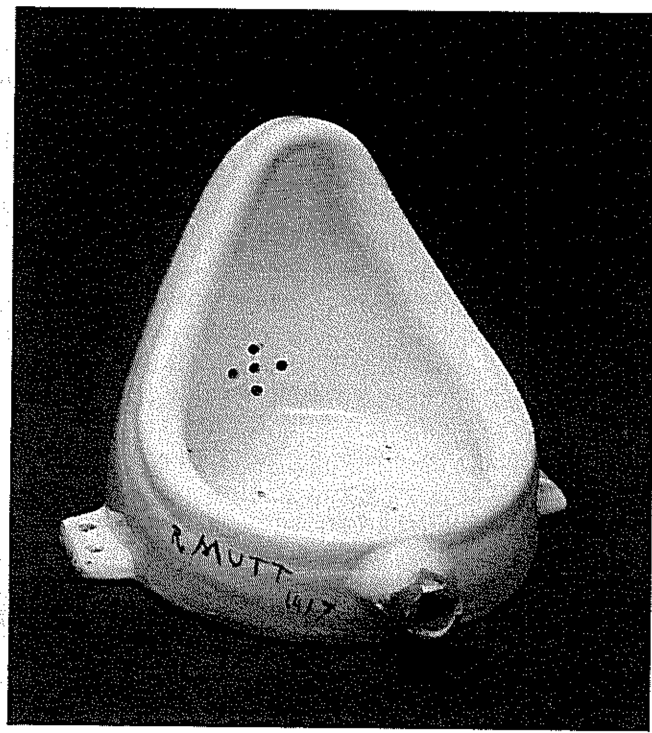
Of course, museum curators, museum-goers, art teachers, and all the rest change their ideas over time. Until fairly recently, say the latter part of the eighteenth century, the West did not sharply distinguish the *Fine Arts* (painting and sculpture) from what now are called the *decorative arts* (utilitarian objects such as dinnerware, furniture, and carpets). The painter and the sculptor, like the potter and the cabinetmaker and the weaver, were artisans. Furthermore, until two or three decades ago, such Native American objects as blankets, headdresses, beaded clothes, and horn spoons were regarded as artifacts, not art, and consequently they were found not in art museums but in ethnographic museums. Today curators of art museums are eager to acquire and display such Native American objects. Similarly, although sculptures from sub-Saharan Africa have been found in art museums since the early twentieth century, other African works—for instance, textiles, pottery, baskets, and jewelry—did not move from ethnographic museums to art museums until about 1970.

*See Arthur C. Danto, *The Transfiguration of the Commonplace* (1981), and George Dickie, *The Art Circle* (1984).

Even today, however, the African objects most sought by art museums are ones that show no foreign influence. Objects showing European influence or objects made for the tourist trade are rarely considered art by those who run art museums. The museums (and the museum-goers) of tomorrow, however, may have a different idea about such objects. Maybe only our present cultural prejudice keeps most museum curators from regarding airport art or tourist art (contemporary objects made for tourists) as worth serious consideration. These curators argue that such objects do not embody indigenous values and are only responses to a foreign market. But are these curators merely perpetuating a colonialist (exploitive) relationship by refusing to recognize that colonized people can respond creatively to colonialization?*

In listening to people who talk about art, let's not forget the opinions of the people who consider themselves artists. If someone with an established reputation as a painter says of a postcard she has just written, "This is a work of art," well, we probably have to be very careful before we reply, "No, it isn't." In 1917, when the Society for Independent Artists gave an exhibition in New York, Marcel Duchamp submitted for display a porcelain urinal, upended, titled *Fountain*, and signed "R. Mutt" (the urinal had been manufactured by Mott Works). The exhibition was

*On tourist art, see Ruth B. Phillips and Christopher B. Steiner, eds., *Unpacking Culture: Art and Commodity in Colonial and Postcolonial Worlds* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1998). For an especially vigorous presentation of the idea that indifference to (i.e., contempt for) airport art reveals "a continuing exploitative power relation," see Larry Shiner in the *Journal of Aethestics and Art Criticism* 52 (1994): 225–234. For a discussion of the criteria that governed the selection of non-Western pieces for display in museums, see Shelly Errington, "What Became of Authentic Primitive Art?," in Errington's *The Death of Authentic Primitive Art and Other Tales of Progress* (1998).



Marcel Duchamp (American, b. France 1887–1968). "Fountain (Second Version)". 1950. 12" × 15" × 18". Readymade: Glazed Sanitary China with Black Paint. Philadelphia Museum of Art: The Louise and Walter Arensberg Collection, 1950. 1998–74–1. Photographer: Graydon Wood, 1998. (c) 2006 Artists Rights Society (ARS), New York/ADAGP, Paris/ Succession Marcel Duchamp.

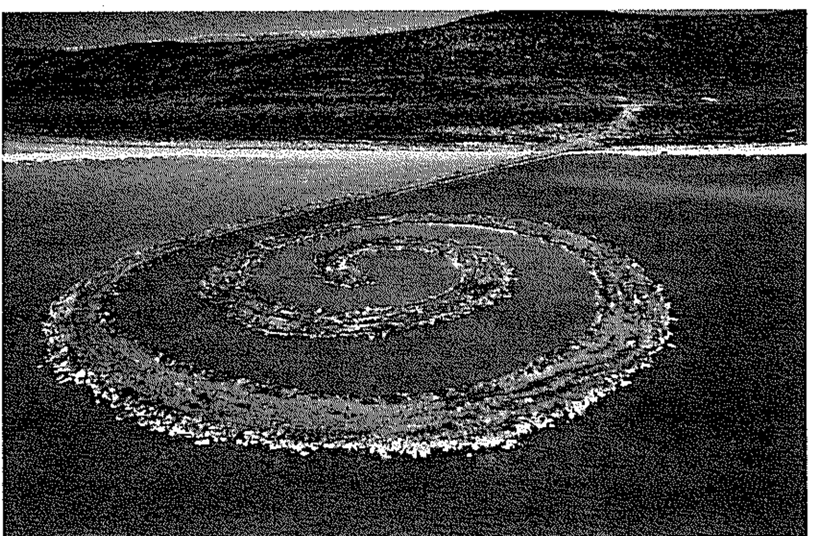
supposed to be open to anyone who wished to exhibit in it, but the organizers rejected Duchamp's entry, saying in a press release that it was "a very useful object, but its place is not in an art exhibition." The press release went on to say, "It is by no definition a work of art." Today, however, it is illustrated in almost every history of art on the grounds that an artist of undoubted talent took an object and forced its viewers to consider it as an aesthetic object rather than as a functional one.

A common definition today is "Art is what artists do," and they do a great many things that do not at all resemble Impressionist paintings. Listen to Claes Oldenburg, sculptor and designer of an environmental

work, *The Store,* that exhibited works constructed from such untraditional materials as burlap and cardboard: "I am for an art that is political-erotic-mystical, that does something other than sits on its ass in a museum" (quoted in Charles Harrison and Paul Wood, eds., *Art in Theory: 1900–2000* [Malden, Mass.: Blackwell, 2003], 744).

But artists too may be uncertain about what is art. An exhibition catalog, *Jackson Pollock: Black and White* (1969), reports an interesting episode. Pollock's wife, Lee Krasner, a painter herself, is quoted as saying, "In front of a very good painting . . . he asked me, 'Is this a painting?' Not is this a good painting, or a bad one, but a *painting!* The degree of doubt was unbelievable at times" (page 8). (For a photograph of Pollock at work, see page 363.)

Sculptors, too, have produced highly innovative work, work that may seem not to qualify as art. Take, for instance, *earthworks* or *Earth Art* or *land art,* large sculptural forms made of earth and rocks. An example is Robert Smithson's *Spiral Jetty,* created in 1970 (below and on the back cover). Smithson supervised the construction of a jetty—if a spiral can be regarded as a jetty—some 15 feet wide and 1,500 feet long, in Great Salt



Robert Smithson, *Spiral Jetty*. April 1970. Great Salt Lake, Utah. Black rock, salt crystals, earth, red water (algae). 3 ½' × 15' × 1500'. Robert Smithson created *Spiral Jetty*, a 460-meter spiral of rock and dirt reaching into the Great Salt Lake, using earth-moving equipment. Photograph by Gianfranco Gorgoni. © Estate of Robert Smithson/Licensed by VAGA, New York, N.Y.

Lake, Utah. Because the water level rose, *Spiral Jetty* became submerged, though the work still survived—under water, in a film Smithson made during the construction of the jetty, and in photographs taken before the water level rose. Beginning in 1999 drought lowered the water level, and by the middle of 2003 *Spiral Jetty* again became visible. Is this combination of mud, salt-encrusted rocks, and water art? Smithson said it was art, and the writers of books on recent art agree, since they all include photographs of *Spiral Jetty*. And if it is art, should we tamper with it? The black basalt rocks that once made a strong contrast with the pinkish surrounding water (the color of the water is due to bacteria and algae) now are white with the encrusted salt, so that the whole looks rather like a snowfield, very different from the work that Smithson created.

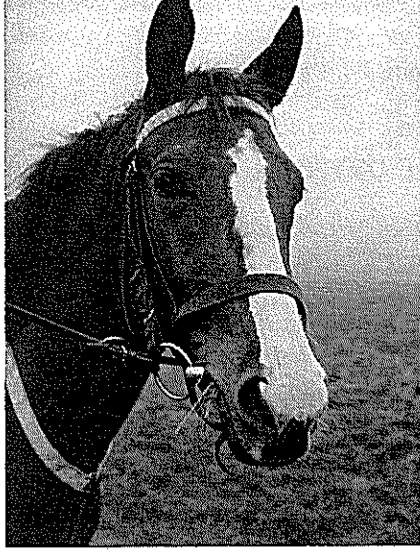
Let's look briefly at a work produced in 1972 by a student in the Feminist Art Program at the California Institute of the Arts and exhibited again at the Bronx Museum of the Arts in 1995. Two instructors and some twenty students in the class decided to take an abandoned house and turn it into a work of art, *Womanhouse*. Each participant took some part of the house—a room, a hallway, a closet—and transformed it in accord with her dreams and fantasies. The students were encouraged to make use of materials considered trivial and associated with women, such as dolls, cosmetics, sanitary napkins, and crocheted material. One student, Faith Wilding, constructed a rope web to which crochet was attached, thereby creating what she called (in 1972) *Web Room* or *Crocheted Environment* and (in the 1995 version) *Womb Room* (see page 7). Traditionally, a work of art (say, a picture hanging on the wall or a statue standing on a pedestal) is set apart from the spectator and is an object to be looked at from a relatively detached point of view. But *Womb Room* is a different sort of thing. It is an *installation*—a construction or assemblage that takes over or transforms a space, indoors or outdoors, and that usually gives the viewer a sense of being not only a spectator but also a participant in the work. With its nontraditional material—who ever heard of making a work of art out of rope and pieces of crochet?—its unusual form, and its suggestions of the womb, a nest, and rudimentary architecture, Wilding's installation would hardly have been regarded as art before, say, the mid-twentieth century.

We have been talking about the idea that something is a work of art if its creator—whether a person or a culture—says it is art. But some cultures do not want some of their objects to be thought of as art. For example, although curators of American art museums have exhibited Zuni war god figures (or *Ahayu:da*), the Zuni consider such figures to be

Faith Wilding crocheting the *Womb Room* installation (1995) at the Bronx Museum of the Arts. Photographer: CM Hardt/CM Pictures.

embodiments of sacred forces, not aesthetic objects, and therefore *un*suitable for exhibition. The proper place for these figures, the Zuni say, is in open-air hillside shrines.* (A question: Can we call something *art* if its creator did not think of it as art?)

*See Steven Talbot, "Desecration and American Indian Religious Freedom," *Journal of Ethnic Studies* 12:4 (1985): 1–8; T. J. Ferguson and B. Martza, "The Repatriation of Zuni *Ahayu:da*," *Museum Anthropology* 14:2 (1990): 7–15. For additional discussions of the social, political, and ethical questions that face curators, see Moira Simpson, *Making Representations: Museums in the Post-Colonial Era* (1996); *Exhibiting Dilemmas: Issues of Representation at the Smithsonian*, ed. Amy Henderson and Adrienne L. Kaeppler (1997). Some authors of books go so far as not to reproduce certain images in deference to the wishes of the community. Example: Janet C. Berlo and Ruth B. Phillips, in *Native North American Art* (1998), inform readers that a certain kind of Iroquois mask, representing forest spirits, is not illustrated because these masks "are intended only to be seen by knowledgeable people able to control these powers" (page 11). The heart of the issue perhaps may be put thus: Is it appropriate for one culture to take the sacred materials of another culture out of their context and to exhibit them as aesthetic objects to be enjoyed?



Mark Wallinger, *A Real Work of Art*. Private collection.

What sorts of things you will write about will depend partly on your instructor, partly on the assignment, partly on what the museums in your area call art, and partly on what you call art.

We can end these introductory remarks with a look at Mark Wallinger's photograph of a racehorse whose name is A Real Work of Art. Wallinger has produced paintings and videos as well as photographs, so we can agree that he is an artist. Is this photograph of A Real Work of Art—a real horse—a work of art? This thoroughbred named A Real Work of Art is doubtless the product not only of nature but also of a good deal of human effort in breeding and training, but is he a work of art? A real work of art?

WHY WRITE ABOUT ART?

We write about art in order to clarify and to account for our responses to works that interest or excite or frustrate us. In putting words on paper we have to take a second and a third look at what is in front of us and at what is within us. Picasso said, "To know what you want to draw, you have to begin drawing"; similarly, writing is a way of finding what you want to write, a way of learning.

The last word is never said about complex thoughts and feelings—and works of art, as well as our responses to them, embody complex and even contradictory thoughts and feelings. Still, when we write about art we hope to make at least a little progress in the difficult but rewarding job of talking about and clarifying our responses. As Arthur C. Danto says in the introduction to *Embodied Meanings* (1994), a collection of essays about art:

> Until one tries to write about it, the work of art remains a sort of aesthetic blur. . . . After seeing the work, write about it. You cannot be satisfied for very long in simply putting down what you felt. You have to go further. (14)

When we write, first of all we teach ourselves; by putting down words and by thinking about what we are writing we get to learn what our multiple responses—our likes, our dislikes, our uncertainties—add up to. When we write and review what we have written, each of us is something like a committee of one, trying to work out a statement that is acceptable to all of our selves. Second, we hope to interest our readers by communicating our mulled-over responses to material that is worth talking about.

But to respond sensitively to anything and then to communicate responses, we must possess (1) some understanding of the thing, and (2) some skill at converting responses into words. This book tries to help you deepen your understanding of art—what art does and the ways in which it does it—and the book also tries to help you convert your responses into words that will let your reader share your perceptions, your enthusiasms, and even your doubts. This sharing is, in effect, teaching. An essay on art is an attempt to help your reader to see the work as you see it.

A RULE FOR WRITERS:

You may think you are writing for the instructor, but this view is a misconception; when you write, *you* are the teacher.

THE WRITER'S AUDIENCE AS A COLLABORATOR

If you are not writing for the instructor, for whom are you writing? For yourself, of course—you are trying to clarify your ideas—but also for an audience that you must imagine. All writers need to imagine some sort of audience: Writers of self-help books keep novices in mind, writers of articles for *Time* keep the general public in mind, writers of papers for legal journals keep lawyers in mind, and writers of papers for *The Art Bulletin* keep art historians in mind. An imagined audience in some degree determines what the writer will say—for instance, it determines the degree of technical language that may be used and the amount of background material that must be given. No principle of writing is more important than this one: When you are revising, keep your audience in mind.

Who is *your* audience? In general (unless your instructor suggests otherwise) think of your audience as your classmates. If you keep your

classmates in mind as your audience, you will not write, "Leonardo da Vinci, a famous Italian painter," because such a remark offensively implies that the reader does not know Leonardo's nationality or trade. You might, however, write, "Leonardo da Vinci, a Florentine by birth," because it's your hunch that your classmates do *not* know that Leonardo was born in Florence, as opposed to Rome or Venice. And you *will* write, "John Butler Yeats, the expatriate Irish painter who lived in New York," because you are pretty sure that only specialists know about Yeats. Similarly, you will *not* explain that the Virgin Mary was the mother of Jesus, but you probably *will* explain that St. Anne was the mother of Mary.

Further, assume that your reader may tend not to agree with you—that is, assume a somewhat skeptical reader. With such an audience in mind, you will be prompted to support your assertions with evidence.

In short, if you imagine that your reader is looking over your shoulder when you are revising, your imagined audience becomes your collaborator, helping you to decide what you need to say—in particular helping you to decide

- how much background you need to give
- which terms you need to define
- what kinds of evidence you need to offer in order to convince the reader
- what degree of detail you need to go into

If, for instance, you are offering a psychoanalytic interpretation, you can assume that your audience is familiar with the name Freud and with the Oedipus complex, but you probably cannot assume (unless you are addressing psychoanalysts) that your audience is familiar with the contemporary psychoanalyst D. W. Winnicott and his concept of the pre-Oedipal mother–infant dyad as a source of creativity. If you are going to make use of Winnicott, you will have to identify him and briefly explain his ideas.

A RULE FOR WRITERS:

When you draft, and especially when you revise, keep your audience in mind. (Your imagined audience for a course paper probably will be your classmates.) Tell these imagined readers what they need to know, in an orderly way, and in language that they will understand.

A successful essay, whether a one-page review of an art exhibition in *Time* or a twenty-page essay in *The Art Bulletin*, begins with where the readers are and then goes on to take the readers further. (See also "A Note on Technical Language," pages 191–94.)

THE FUNCTIONS OF CRITICAL WRITING

In everyday language the most common meaning of criticism is "finding fault" and to be critical is to be censorious. But a critic can see excellences as well as faults. Because we turn to criticism with the hope that the critic has seen something we have missed, the most valuable criticism is not that which shakes its finger at faults but that which calls our attention to interesting matters going on in the work of art. In the following statement W. H. Auden suggests that criticism is most useful when it calls our attention to things worth attending to. He is talking about works of literature, but we can easily adapt his words to the visual arts.

> What is the function of a critic? So far as I am concerned, he can do me one or more of the following services:
> 1. Introduce me to authors or works of which I was hitherto unaware.
> 2. Convince me that I have undervalued an author or a work because I had not read them carefully enough.
> 3. Show me relations between works of different ages and cultures which I could never have seen for myself because I do not know enough and never shall.
> 4. Give a "reading" of a work which increases my understanding of it.
> 5. Throw light upon the process of artistic "Making."
> 6. Throw light upon the relation of art to life, to science, economics, ethics, religion, etc.
>
> —W. H. Auden, *The Dyer's Hand* (1963), 8–9

The emphasis on observing, showing, illuminating suggests that the chief function of critical writing is not very different from the common view of the function of literature or art. The novelist Joseph Conrad said that his aim was "before all, to make you *see*," and the painter Ben Shahn said that in his paintings he wanted to get right the difference between the way a cheap coat and an expensive coat hung.

Rembrandt Harmensz van Rijn (1606–1669). Rembrandt *Self-Portrait with Saskia* in the parable of the Prodigal Son. 1635–39. Oil on canvas, 131 × 161 cm. Photographer: Erich Lessing. Art Resource, N.Y.

Take Auden's second point, that a good critic can convince us—can gain our agreement by calling attention to evidence supporting a thesis—that we have undervalued a work. Although you probably can draw on your own experience for confirmation, an example may be useful. Rembrandt's self-portrait with his wife (see above), now in Dresden, strikes many viewers as one of his least attractive pictures: The gaiety seems forced, the presentation a bit coarse and silly. Paul Zucker, for example, in *Styles in Painting*, finds it "over-hearty," and John Berger, in *Ways of Seeing*, says that "the painting as a whole remains an advertisement for the sitter's good fortune, prestige, and wealth. (In this case Rembrandt's own.) And like all such advertisements it is heartless." But some scholars have pointed out, first, that this picture may be a representation of the Prodigal Son, in Jesus' parable, behaving riotously, and, second, that it may be a profound representation

of one aspect of Rembrandt's marriage. Here is Kenneth Clark on the subject:

> The part of jolly toper was not in his nature, and I agree with the theory that this is not intended as a portrait group at all, but as a representation of the Prodigal Son wasting his inheritance. A tally-board, faintly discernible on the left, shows that the scene is taking place in an inn. Nowhere else has Rembrandt made himself look so deboshed, and Saskia is enduring her ordeal with complete detachment—even a certain hauteur. But beyond the ostensible subject, the picture may express some psychological need in Rembrandt to reveal his discovery that he and his wife were two very different characters, and if she was going to insist on her higher social status, he would discover within himself a certain convivial coarseness.
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> —Kenneth Clark, *An Introduction to Rembrandt* (1978), 73

After reading these words, we may find that the appeal of the picture grows—and any analysis that increases our enjoyment in a work surely serves a useful purpose. Clark's argument, of course, is not airtight—one rarely can present an airtight argument when writing about art—but notice that Clark does more than merely express an opinion or report a feeling. In his effort to persuade us, he offers evidence (the tally-board and the observation that no other picture shows Rembrandt so "deboshed"), and the evidence is strong enough to make us take another look at the picture. After looking again, we may come to feel that we have undervalued the picture.

SOME WORDS ABOUT CRITICAL THINKING

The word *critical* commonly implies a negative, fault-finding spirit, and *thinking* can include mere daydreaming ("During Art History 101 I kept thinking about lunch"), but the term *critical thinking* suggests careful analysis. *Critical* comes from a Greek word, *krinein*, meaning "to separate," "to choose"; it implies conscious, deliberate inquiry, and especially it implies a skeptical state of mind, but a skeptical state of mind is *not* a negative, self-satisfied, fault-finding state of mind. Quite the reverse; because critical thinkers wish to draw sound conclusions, they apply their skepticism to *their own* assumptions, to *their own* evidence, and indeed toward all aspects of *their own* thinking as well as toward that of others. When they read a draft, they read it with a skeptical mind, seeking to improve the thinking that has gone into it.

A SAMPLE CRITICAL ESSAY

Let's look at a student's short essay on a famous picture by James McNeill Whistler (1834–1903).

Douglas Lee
Fine Arts 101
February 7, 2005

Whistler's Japanese Mother

The painting commonly known as *Whistler's Mother* (Figure 1) is full of surprises. First of all, its title—the title that Whistler gave it—is *Arrangement in Grey and Black No. 1: The Artist's Mother.* Once we are aware of the title, we look at it in a way different from the way we look at it under the popular title, *Whistler's Mother*. The word "Arrangement" in Whistler's title forces us to think about the work (at least for a while) as a composition, not as a picture of a particular mother, and certainly not as a picture of the idea of motherhood.

Whistler has done a good deal to prevent us from seeing the picture as an image of motherhood. The subject, of course, is a Caucasian woman (in fact, Whistler's mother), but we do not see her with a child or with grandchildren, and we do not even see her engaged in some sort of action that might suggest motherhood, let's say setting the table or hanging out the clothes to dry. Rather, she is alone, and motionless. She does not even look in our direction. Because we see her in profile, she seems somewhat aloof, taking no notice of others, hardly a quality we associate with motherliness. Further, her black dress, appropriate enough for an older woman in this period, does not help to establish her as an individual with a warm or tender personality. If it says anything about her, it may say only that she is a widow. When we let our mind stray a bit, and we think of the brightly colored vibrant women depicted by some of Whistler's contemporaries such as Renoir (1841–1919),

James Abbott McNeill Whistler, American (1834–1903). *Arrangement in Black and Gray: The Artist's Mother.* 1871, oil on canvas, 57" × 64 ½". Louvre. Art Resource/Musee du Louvre, Paris.

van Gogh (1853–90), and Gauguin (1848–1903), we realize that we should take his title seriously, *Arrangement in Grey and Black*, and should look for a pattern rather than for an engaging personality.

By the time he painted *Arrangement in Grey and Black* Whistler had become deeply interested in Japanese prints. True, Japanese prints are colorful and their subject matter is often a beautiful young woman wearing an elaborately decorated kimono, whereas Whistler's rather drab picture shows a plainly dressed older woman. One of the qualities, however, of Japanese prints that interested Whistler was the flatness of the colors; most early Japanese prints did not use shading, so the colors are flat within any given

Kitagawa Utamaro I, Japanese, ?-1806. Takashima Ohisa (Takashima Ohisa) Japanese, Edo Period, about 1795 (Kansei 7). Woodblock print (nishiki-e); ink and color on paper. Vertical oban; 36.3 × 25 cm (14 5⁄16 × 9 13⁄16 in.) Publisher: Matsumura Tatsuemon, Japanese. Museum of Fine Arts, Boston. William S. and John T. Spaulding Collection, 21.6410. Photograph © 2008 Museum of Fine Arts, Boston.

area bounded by lines. Further, Japanese prints often did not use perspective, and they often did not include a background, so the figures are not set within a recognizable space; they exist in empty space. If there is in these prints a background, it usually is indicated with relatively few details, such as a picture on a wall or a bamboo blind (Figure 2). Whistler's background here is not

Commemorative U.S. postage stamp, 1934. Library of Congress. Courtesy of the Library of Congress.

empty—clearly the woman is in a room, with two pictures hanging on the wall behind her, and a curtain hanging at the left—but the wall and the floor are relatively blank, as they are in the Japanese print, and because the seated woman is close to the wall and we are close to her, Whistler does not convey a sense of depth or of a person who moves within a clearly defined setting. Rather than directing us to think about a particular mother, Whistler invites us to enjoy the pattern, for instance to contrast the curved lines that define the woman with the rectangles that constitute the pictures, (again compare Whistler's painting with Figure 2) the drapery, and the footstool where the drapery touches the ground. In short, we are invited to see the picture as a design, an "arrangement." Speaking of the first part of the title, *Arrangement in Grey and Black*, Whistler said, "Now, that is what it is. To me it is interesting as a picture of my mother; but what can or ought the public to care about the identity of the picture?"[1]

If we want to confirm the fact that the picture is a picture, a design rather than an evocation of motherliness, we can contrast it with an ugly postage stamp that the United States issued in 1934 (Figure 3). Whistler's handsome painting is severely cropped at

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1. Quoted in Anne Koval, *Whistler in His Time* (London: Tate Gallery, 1994), 6.

the bottom, the pictures on the wall are gone (probably Whistler put them there to help us to understand that this is a painting about the art of painting, not about the revelation of maternal character), and a vase with flowers replaces the drapery, doubtless in order to show that the woman in the painting likes pretty things, and maybe even that she has a green thumb. The post office's heavy-handed message further demolishes Whistler's picture: "U.S. postage/in memory/and in honor/of the mothers/of America/three cents."

The common title, *Whistler's Mother*, sounds as though the picture must be as American as apple pie, a close relative of Gilbert Stuart's *George Washington* or maybe of Grant Wood's *American Gothic*, but a careful look at this justly famous painting, coupled with an awareness of Whistler's title and a familiarity with the fact that Whistler was much interested in Japanese prints, brings a viewer to see that this painting owes more to Japan than to America or to motherhood.

The Essay Analyzed

The essay includes evaluation, or judgment, as well as analysis of what is going on in the painting. First, the writer (Douglas Lee) judges Whistler's painting as worth talking about. (Newspaper and magazine criticism is largely concerned with evaluation—think, for instance, of film reviews, which exist chiefly to tell the viewer whether a film is worth seeing—but most academic criticism assumes the value of the works it discusses and it is chiefly analytic and interpretive. For a more detailed comment on evaluation, see pages 40–41.) Although Lee explicitly praises the work ("handsome painting"), most of his evaluation is implicit in and subordinate to the analysis of what he sees. (For the moment we can define analysis as the separation of the whole into its parts; the third chapter of this book is devoted to the topic.) Lee sees things and calls them to our attention as worthy of note, for instance:

- the flatness of the figure,
- its detachment from us because it is presented in profile,

- the lack of any action that suggests motherliness,
- the lack of any other figure that would help to confirm the woman's motherliness.

It is clear that Lee values the picture but he does not worry about whether Whistler is a better artist than van Gogh or Grant Wood. He is content to help us to see what is going on in the picture.

Or at least Lee seems to be content to help us see. In fact, he is advancing a thesis (a central point, a main idea), in this case that the picture is not about motherliness but is about the importance of design in art.

A good thesis is

- *not* the assertion of a mere undisputed fact ("Whistler's mother was his model in this picture" or "Whistler was an American who lived chiefly in London")
- *nor* is a good thesis a broad generalization that cannot interestingly be supported ("*Whistler's Mother* is widely admired").

Such statements are true, but they can hardly be argued. Normally a thesis statement names the topic (here, a particular painting) and makes an arguable assertion about it that the writer will support with details later in the essay. This student's thesis statement, appropriately in the first sentence, is

> The painting commonly known as *Whistler's Mother* (Figure 1) is full of surprises.

True, this statement is not specific, for instance, not nearly as specific as

> *Whistler's Mother* is indebted to Japanese prints,

or

> *Whistler's Mother* owes more to Japanese prints than it does to any traditional concept of motherhood

but it does qualify as a thesis sentence because it does offer an arguable assertion, and the writer goes on to clarify it and to support it effectively. The essay is largely an effort to *persuade* us by offering an argument—a reasoned account, consisting of evidence offered in support of the thesis—that indeed the thesis is valid, that the picture is not as simple as it looks or as the common title suggests.

It is not enough for writers to see things and to report to readers what they have seen. Writers have to present their material in an orderly fashion, so that readers can take it in and can follow a developing argument. In short, writers must organize their material. Let's look briefly at the **organization** or plan of this essay.

- The opening paragraph asserts the thesis (the picture is "full of surprises") and gives us some essential information (the original title and the suggestion that this title ought to help us to think about the picture).
- The second paragraph helps us to see the picture; it points out that by presenting the woman without other figures, and by presenting her in profile, Whistler diminishes her motherliness. The comparison with his contemporaries—strictly speaking a contrast rather than a comparison—helps us to see the distinctiveness of this painting.
- The third paragraph explains in large part why the picture looks the way it does: It is indebted to Japanese prints, which tend to emphasize flat designs rather than the illusion of depth, and for Whistler these works of art were chiefly "arrangements," designs rather than revelations of character.
- The next-to-last paragraph introduces another comparison (again a contrast), this time to the postage stamp, which helps us to see even more clearly what Whistler's painting is *not*.
- The final paragraph reinforces the thesis, not by the obvious device of saying "Thus we have seen," or "In conclusion," but by making explicit what until now has been implicit: "This painting owes more to Japan than to America or to motherhood." Like most good concluding paragraphs, while recapitulating the main point it enlarges the vision, in this instance by including references to two other American painters.

A Note on Outlining

If Lee prepared an outline to help him draft the essay, it may have looked something like this or, rather, something like this after he arranged and rearranged it:

Begin with where reader is, "Whistler's Mother," then inform them of real title
  Significance of real title
Not maternal
  no children present
  no action suggesting motherliness
  profile: sort of cold, remote
Infl. of Japanese prints
  flat (uniform) colors
  little sense of depth; no perspective
  emphasis on pattern rather than on character
Contrast with U.S. stamp
  ridiculous flower pot to feminize her
Contrast with other American portraits, reaffirm Japanese influence

An outline—nothing elaborate, even just a few notations in a sequence that seems reasonable—can be a great help in drafting an essay. The very act of putting a few ideas down on paper will usually stimulate you to think of additional ideas, just as when you jot down "tuna fish" on a shopping list, you are reminded that you also need to pick up bread. Outlining, in short, is not merely a way of organizing ideas but is also a way of getting ideas.

If, however, you feel that you can't make a preliminary outline for a draft, write a draft and *then* outline it. Why? An outline of your draft will let you easily examine your organization. That is, when in the course of reviewing your draft you brush aside the details and put down the chief point or basic idea of each paragraph, you will produce an outline that will help you to see if you have set forth your ideas in a reasonable sequence, a sequence that will help rather than confuse your readers. By studying this outline of your draft, you may find, for instance, that your third point would be better used as your first point. (Outlining is discussed in more detail on page 43 and especially pages 124–27.)

A RULE FOR WRITERS:

Organize your essay so that your readers can easily follow the argument you use—the reasons you give—to support your thesis.

WHAT IS AN INTERPRETATION—AND ARE ALL INTERPRETATIONS EQUALLY VALID?

Interpretation and Interpretations

We can define **interpretation** as a setting forth of the meaning of a work of art or, better, as the setting forth of one of the meanings of the work. This issue of *meaning* versus *meanings* deserves a brief explanation. Although some art historians still believe that a work of art has a single meaning—the meaning it had for the artist—most historians today hold that a work has several meanings: the meaning it had for the artist, the meaning(s) it had for its first audience, the meaning(s) it had for later audiences, and the meaning(s) it has for us today. Michelangelo's *David* (page 49), for instance, in sixteenth-century Florence seems to have "meant" freedom from tyranny—the Florentines twice drove out the Medici and established republics—but most of today's viewers, unaware of the history of Florence, do not find this meaning in a sculpture of the youth who killed the giant Goliath.

Similarly, a portrait by Sir Joshua Reynolds (1723–1792) meant one thing to the sitter's descendants when they viewed it in their ancestral country house, and it means something else to us when we view it in a museum. Picasso offers a relevant comment about changes in meaning:

> A picture is not thought out and settled beforehand. While it is being done it changes as one's thoughts change. And when it is finished, it still goes on changing, according to the state of mind of whoever is looking at it. A picture lives a life like a living creature, undergoing the changes imposed on us by our life from day to day. This is natural enough, as the picture lives only through the man who is looking at it.
>
> —Conversation with Christian Zervos, 1935, reprinted in *Picasso on Art*, ed. Dore Ashton (1972), 8

Although viewers usually agree in identifying the subject matter of a work of art (the martyrdom of St. Catherine, a portrait of Napoleon, a bowl of apples), disputes about subject matter are not unknown. Earlier in the chapter, for example, we saw that one of Rembrandt's paintings can be identified as *Self-Portrait with Saskia* or—a very different subject—as *The Prodigal Son;* similarly, later, in Chapter 9, we will see that Rembrandt's painting of a man holding a knife has been variously identified as *The Butcher*, *The Assassin*, and *St. Bartholomew*. Of course, an

interpretation usually goes further than identifying the subject. We have already seen that Kenneth Clark interprets the picture with Saskia not only as an illustration of the story of the Prodigal Son but also as Rembrandt's expression of an insight into his relationship with his wife. Similarly, in Millet's famous painting, *The Gleaners*, an interpretation may begin by saying that Millet's picture shows poor women gleaning, and it may go on to argue that it shows (or asserts, or represents, or expresses) some sort of theme, such as the dignity of labor, or the oppression of the worker, or the bounty of nature, or whatever.

Who Creates "Meaning"—Artist or Viewer?

Artists themselves sometimes offer interpretations of their works. For instance, writing of his *Night Café* (1888, Yale University Art Gallery), van Gogh said in a letter (8 September 1888):

> The room is blood-red and dark yellow with a green table in the middle; there are four lemon-yellow lamps with a glow of orange and green. Everywhere there is a clash and contrast of the most disparate reds and greens . . . in the empty, dreary room. . . . I have tried to express the idea that the café is a place where one can ruin oneself, run mad, or commit a crime. So I have tried to express, as it were, the powers of darkness. . . .

Many viewers find this comment helpful, but what do we make of his comment (in a letter to Gauguin, in October 1888) that the picture of his bedroom expresses an "absolute restfulness" and (in a letter to his brother, Theo, in October 1888) that the "color is to . . . be suggestive here of *rest* or of sleep in general"? Probably most viewers find the heightened perspective and the bright red coverlet on the bed disturbing rather than restful. (In the letter to Gauguin, van Gogh himself speaks of the coverlet as blood-red.)

Does the artist's **intention** limit the meaning of a work? (Earlier in this chapter we touched on intention: If Zuni creators of war god figures did not intend them to be works of art, are we not allowed to discuss these creations as works of art?) Surely one can argue that the creators of artworks may not always be consciously aware of what they are including in the works. And in stating their views artists may even be consciously deceptive. Roy Lichtenstein told an interviewer, "I wouldn't believe anything I tell you."

Some modern critical theory holds that to accept the artist's statement about what he or she intended is to give the artist's intention an

undeserved status. In this view, a work is created not by an isolated genius—the isolated genius is said to be a romantic invention—but by the political, economic, social, and religious ideas of a society that uses the author or artist as a conduit. Hence, we hear about "the social production of art." Most obviously, artists such as Rembrandt, Rubens, and Titian (and in our own time, Andy Warhol, who presided over a site of production called The Factory) worked with circles of assistants and apprentices and provided objects that responded to the demands of the market.

The idea that the creator of the work cannot comment definitively on it is especially associated with Roland Barthes (1915–1980), author of "The Death of the Author," in *Image-Music-Text* (1977), and with Michel Foucault (1926–1984), author of "What Is an Author?" in *The Foucault Reader* (1984). For instance, in "The Death of the Author" Barthes says. "The text [we can substitute "the work of art" for "the text"] is a tissue of quotations drawn from the innumerable centers of culture" (page 142). Similarly in "What Is an Author?" Foucault assumes that the concept of the author (we can say "the artist") is the invention of a society fascinated by personality, an invention that impedes the free circulation of ideas. In Foucault's view, the work does not belong to the alleged maker, who, to repeat, is a conduit for the ideas of the period.

Further, it is sometimes argued, the work belongs—or ought to belong—to the *perceivers*, who of course interpret it variously, according to their historical, social, and psychological states. A proper history of art, in this view, examines works in the light of what they have meant over the years. Their past meanings are recognized as part of our present experience. Works of art, James Elkins argues in *Critical Theory* 22 (1996, page 591), have nothing to say except what we say to them. They do not speak for themselves; viewers speak for the works, i.e., viewers put meanings—depending on their experiences—into the works they look at. This position, called **reception theory**, holds that art is not a body of works but is, rather, an activity of perceivers making sense of images. A work does not have meaning "in itself"; it can mean something only to someone in a context.

To put the matter into almost comically oversimplified terms, in the eyes of a moralist a picture of a female nude may primarily be an obscene threat to decency, in the eyes of an aesthetician it may be a beautiful life-enhancing work of art, and in the eyes of a cultural historian it may be an interesting document revealing the exploitation of women.

In the witty formulation of the novelist Penelope Fitzgerald, in *The Gates of Angels* (1990), "No two people see the external world in exactly the same way. To every separate person a thing is what he thinks it is—in other words, not a thing but a think" (page 49).

A RULE FOR WRITERS:

Because most artists have not told us of their intentions, and because even those artists (or patrons or agents) who have stated their intentions may not be fully reliable sources, and because we inevitably see things from our own points of view, *think twice before you attribute intention to the artist* in statements such as "The designers of the stained glass windows at Chartres were trying to show us . . . ," or "Mary Cassatt in this print is aiming for . . . ," or "In his most recent photographs Hiroshi Sugimoto seeks to convey. . . ."

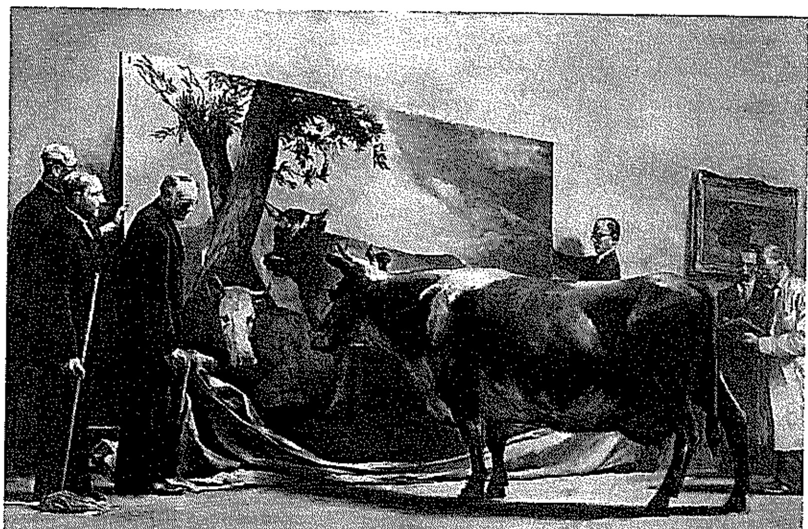
If one agrees that the beholders make or create the meaning, one can easily dismiss the statements that artists make about the meaning of their work. For example, although Georgia O'Keeffe on several occasions insisted that her paintings of calla lilies and of cannas were not symbolic of human sexual organs, we can (some theorists hold) ignore her comments. If *we* see O'Keeffe's lilies with their prominent stamens as phallic, and her cannas as vulval, that *is* their meaning—for us.

Much can be said on behalf of this idea—and much can be said (and in later pages *will* be said) against it. On its behalf one can say, first, that we can never reconstruct the artist's intentions and sensations. Van Gogh's *Sunflowers*, or his portrait of his physician, can never mean for us what they meant for van Gogh. Second, the boundaries of the artwork, it is said, are not finite. The work is not simply something "out there," made up of its own internal relationships, independent of a context (*decontextualized* is the term now used). Rather, the artwork is something whose internal relationships are supplemented by what is outside of it—in the case of van Gogh, by a context consisting of the artist's personal responses to flowers and to people, and by his responses to other pictures of flowers and people, and by our responses to all sorts of related paintings, and (to give still another example) by our understanding of van Gogh's place in the history of art. Because we now know something of his life and something of the posthumous history of his paintings, we cannot experience his work in the same way or ways—in the same context—that its original audience experienced it.

When We Look, Do We See a Masterpiece—or Ourselves?

Writing an essay of any kind ought not to be an activity that you doggedly engage in to please an instructor; rather, it ought to be a stimulating, if taxing, activity that educates you and your reader. The job is twofold—seeing and saying—because these two activities are inseparable. If you don't see clearly, you won't say anything interesting and convincing. In any case, if you don't write clearly, your reader won't see what you have seen, and perhaps you haven't seen it clearly either. What you say, in short, is a device for helping the reader *and yourself* to see clearly.

But what do we see? It is now widely acknowledged that when we look, we are not looking objectively, looking with what has been called an **innocent eye**. That is, we are not like the child who, uncorrupted by the ways of fawning courtiers, accurately saw that the emperor was wearing no clothes. Inevitably, we see from a particular point of view (even if we are not aware of it)—for instance, the view of an aging middle-class white



Mark Tansey. *The Innocent Eyes Test.* 1981. Oil on canvas, 78" × 120". The Metropolitan Museum of Art. Promised gift of Charles Cowles, in honor of William S. Lieberman, 1988. Courtesy of Curt Marcus Gallery, New York.

male, or of a second-generation Chinese-American, or of a young Chicana feminist in the early years of the twenty-first century. Our interpretations of experience certainly feel like our own, but, far from being objective, they are (it is widely believed) largely conditioned by who we are—and who we are depends partly on the cultures that have shaped us. The idea is ancient: St. Thomas Aquinas eight hundred years ago said, "Whatever is received is received according to the nature of the recipient." And almost a century ago Albert Einstein said, "Theory decides what we can observe."

Most people would probably agree with the philosopher Nelson Goodman, who in *The Languages of Art* (1968) says that what the eye sees "is regulated by need and prejudice. It selects, rejects, organizes, discriminates, associates, classifies, analyzes, constructs. It does not so much mirror as take and make" (pages 7–8). Thus, in contrast to the view that the mind simply perceives (the position of the innocent eye), the **constructionist view** holds that the eye is selective and creative. In Degas's words, "One sees as one wishes to see." Some recent critics, influenced by Claude Lévi-Strauss's *The Savage Mind* (1966), have pushed this idea even further: Perceiving and interpreting are, they say, a form of **bricolage** (from the French *bricole*, meaning "trifle")—a form of spontaneously creating something new by assembling bits and pieces of whatever happens to be at hand or, in this case, whatever happens to be in the viewer's mind.

These ideas have engendered distrust of the traditional concepts of *meaning*, *genius*, and *masterpiece*. The arguments, offered by scholars who belong to a school of thought called the *New Historicism*, run along these lines: Works of art are not the unique embodiments of profound meanings set forth by individual geniuses; rather, works of art are the embodiments of the ideology (ways of understanding the world) of the age that produced them. To talk of genius is to fetishize the individual. Works of art, in this view, are produced not so much by exceptional individuals as by the "social energies" of a period, which somehow find a conduit in a particular artist.* The old idea of a masterpiece—a work demonstrating a rare degree of skill, embodying a profound meaning, and

*See, for example, Griselda Pollock, "Artists, Mythologies, and Media—Genius, Madness, and Art History," *Screen* 21:3 (1983): 57–96.

exerting a universal appeal—thus is called into question. Theorists of the New Historicism argue that to believe in masterpieces is to believe, wrongly, that a work of art embodies an individual artist's fixed, transcendent achievement, whereas in fact (they argue) the work originally embodied the politics of the artist's age and it is now interpreted by the politics of the viewer's age. (The word *masterpiece* is also sometimes regarded as objectionable because of its alleged sexist implications.) In any given period, art dealers, museum personnel, professors of art history, self-styled artists, collectors, etc., may speak of masterpieces, but all such talk is simply the talk of people associated with particular cultural institutions in a particular age, mistakenly thinking that they are describing objective, eternal values. (We have already looked at the "institutional theory of art," on page 2.)

According to this way of thinking, the **canon**—the body of artworks that supposedly have stood the test of time because of their inherent quality—is not in fact a body of work of inherently superior value but is largely a construction made for political reasons by a self-serving elite. Thus, eighteenth-century landscapes of country estates with ploughed fields or with grazing cattle, it is argued, are in effect propaganda on behalf of landowners, intended to suggest that the landowners are benevolent stewards of their property. Or to take an even more obvious case, we can think about a body of work that until recently was regularly excluded from the canon: The work of women artists has been scandalously neglected because (again, in the view of some writers) patriarchal values have determined the canon. (For additional remarks about analyses that see art as material that does "cultural work," see the discussion of cultural materialism on pages 225–26.)

The idea of a universal appeal—an appeal in a work that transcends the historical circumstances of its production—thus is said to be a myth created by a coterie (chiefly dead white males) that has succeeded in imposing its tastes and values on the rest of the world. The claim that, say, ancient Greece produced masterpieces of universal appeal, with the implication that all people *should* feel uplifted or enlightened or moved by these works of genius, is, according to some writers, the propaganda of European colonialism. In this view, individualism—the idea underlying the cult of genius—is merely another bourgeois value.

But the matter need not be put so bluntly, so crudely. We can hardly doubt that our perceptions are influenced by who we are, but we need not therefore speak dismissively of our perceptions or of the objects in front of us. True, talk about "universal appeal" is a bit highfalutin, but

some works of art have so deeply interested so many people over so many years that we should hesitate before we dismiss these objects as nothing but the expression of the values of a particular class. Further, we should recognize that the traditional canon consists of works by very different kinds of artists. Botticelli, Poussin, Rembrandt, Vermeer, van Gogh, Cézanne, Munch, Klee, Pollock, and Rothko, for instance, do have something in common—they are all dead white males—but their works are amazingly different.

The Relevance of Context: The Effect of the Museum and the Picture Book

Chapter 7, "Writing a Review of an Exhibition," offers suggestions about what to look for in preparing to write not about a particular work but about a curator's choice and presentation of many works, but here we can glance at a few underlying issues.

We can look at ancient Greek sculptures or at Olmec sculptures in a museum—or at pictures of them in a book—but we cannot experience them as the Greeks or the Olmecs did in their social and religious contexts. (Indeed, most of the Greek sculptures that we see today are missing limbs or heads and have lost their original color, so we aren't really looking at what the Greeks looked at.) Historians may think that they can recreate the **context**—the requirements of the patrons, the studio conditions of the sculptors, the religious beliefs of the viewers, and the churches or temples in which the objects were situated—but inevitably the historians (or, rather, all of us) unwittingly project current attitudes into a constructed past. Norman Bryson and Mieke Bal, in "Semiotics and Art History," *Art Bulletin* 73 (1991), put it this way: "What we take to be positive knowledge is the product of interpretive choices. The art historian is always present in the construct she or he produces" (page 175). We cannot even become mid-twentieth-century Americans contemplating American paintings whose meaning in part was in their apparently revolutionary departure from European work. (Even those of the original viewers who are still living now see the works somewhat differently from the way they saw them in the 1950s.)

Meaning, the argument goes, is indeterminate. Further, one can add that when a museum decontextualizes the work or deprives it of its original context—for instance, by presenting on a white wall an African mask that once was worn by a dancer in an open place, or by presenting in a

vitrine with pinpoint lighting a Japanese tea bowl that had once passed from hand to hand in a humble teahouse—the museum thereby invites the perceivers to project their own conceptions onto the work. Or, it can be argued, the museum thereby makes invisible ("appropriates") the social forces that created a culture. Thus, an exhibition of African art, called *Africa: The Art of a Continent*, displayed in London in 1995 and in New York in 1997, evoked considerable criticism on the grounds that the title was a European construction that minimized or homogenized the art of what in fact are numerous independent cultures. After all, the people who created these objects did not think of themselves as "African," nor, for that matter, did the people who carved ritual masks or who wove textiles think of themselves as artists. In short, it is the Western exhibitors who chose to call these objects "African art," who, so to speak, transformed cult objects into cultural objects. In an anthropological museum the emphasis is on function, but in an art museum the emphasis is on form. It has been further argued—how convincingly?—that when exotic objects are shown in an art museum, the real message is this: "Behold the trophies of Western imperialism." The insatiable West, it is charged, seeks to collect the world.

An example: A well-intentioned liberal effort to present Chicano art in an art museum met with opposition from the radical Left, which said that the proposed exhibition was an attempt to depoliticize the works and to appropriate them into bourgeois culture. In other words, it was argued that by framing (so to speak) the works in a museum rather than in their storefront context, the works were drained of their political significance and were turned into art—mere aesthetic objects in a museum in a capitalistic society. The frame (the context) is not neutral; it is not a meaningless container, but rather it becomes part of what it frames. (For further discussion of the museum as a frame, see pages 89–90.)

This decontextualization or, to use a fairly new word, aestheticization has especially troubled some students of photography. Photographs that were intended to stir the viewer to social action, for instance, photographs of the homeless, become something else when they are displayed in a museum. What do they become? They become objects presented for our aesthetic enjoyment, and our interest shifts from the ostensible subject to the skill of the photographer.

Much of what has been said about "white box" (or "white cube") museum displays, with their implication that museums are repositories of timeless values that transcend cultural boundaries, also can be said about the illustrations of art objects in books. Here works of art are presented

(at least for the most part) in an aesthetic context, rather than in a social context of, say, economic and political forces. Indeed, we have already seen that some objects—Zuni war god figures—are sometimes taken out of their cultural context and then are presented (by a sort of benevolent colonialism, it is said) as possessing a new value: artistic merit. Some critics argue that to take a non-Western object out of its cultural context and to regard it as an independent work of art by discussing it in aesthetic terms is itself a Eurocentric (Western) colonial assault on the other culture, a denial of that culture's unique identity.*

Conversely, it has been objected, when a book or a museum takes a single art object and surrounds it with abundant information about the cultural context, it demeans the object, reducing it to a mere cultural artifact—something lacking inherent value, something interesting only as part of a culture that is "the Other," remote and ultimately unknowable. Fifty years ago it was common for art historians to call attention to the aesthetic properties within a work and for anthropologists to try to tell us "the meaning" of a work; today it is common for art historians to borrow ideas from a new breed of anthropologists, who tell us that we can never grasp the meaning of an object from another culture and that we can understand only what it means in *our* culture. That is, we study it to learn what economic forces caused us to wrest the work from its place of origin and what psychological forces cause us to display it on our walls. The battle between, on the one hand, providing a detailed context (and thus perhaps suggesting that the work is alien, "Other") and, on the other hand, decontextualizing (and thus slicing away meanings that the work possessed in its own culture, thereby implying it is part of our culture, or of a universal culture) is still going on.**

Arguing an Interpretation: Supporting a Thesis

Against the idea that works of art have no inherent core of meaning and that what viewers see depends on their class or gender or whatever, one can argue that competent artists shape their work so that their intentions or meanings are evident to competent viewers (perhaps after some historical research). Most people who write about art make this assumption,

*On issues concerning the exhibition of objects in museums, see *Contemporary Cultures of Display*, ed. Emma Barker (1999); Victoria Newhouse, *Art and the Power of Placement* (2005); and Andrew McClellan, *The Art Museum:: From Boullée to Bilbao* (2007).

**For online reviews of exhibitions, see *CAA reviews* <*www.caareviews.org*>.

and indeed such a position strikes most people as being supported by common sense.

It should be mentioned, too, that even the most vigorous advocates of the idea that meaning is indeterminate do not believe that all discussions of art are equally significant. Rather, they usually agree that a discussion is offered against a background of ideas—shared by writer and reader—as to what constitutes an effective argument, an effective presentation of a thesis. (As we saw on page 13, Kenneth Clark's thesis—or, because his thesis is tentative, we can call it a hypothesis—is that Rembrandt's *Self-Portrait with Saskia* "may express some psychological need in Rembrandt to reveal his discovery that he and his wife were two very different characters.") When good writers offer a thesis, they do so in an essay that is

- **plausible** (reasonable because the thesis is supported with evidence)
- **coherent** (because it is clearly and reasonably organized)
- **rhetorically effective** (for instance, the language is appropriate to the reader; technical terms are defined if the imagined audience does not consist of specialists)

✍ A RULE FOR WRITERS:

Support your thesis—your point—with evidence. Assume that your readers are skeptical and show them that details support your interpretation.

This means that the writer cannot merely set down random expressions of feeling or even of unsupported opinions. To the contrary, the writer

- assumes a reasonable but skeptical reader and, therefore,
- tries to persuade the reader by *arguing* a case—by pointing to evidence that causes the reader to say, in effect, "Yes, I see just what you mean, and what you say makes sense."

For many people, the verb *to argue* has unpleasant connotations; it suggests those nasty exchanges on TV programs with such names as *Crossfire* or *Point Counterpoint*. But to argue a case—and this is what your instructor expects you to do—is not to engage in a shouting match or to exchange insults; it is, again, to engage in self-criticism and to offer evidence in support of a thesis.

As readers, when do we say to ourselves, "Yes, this makes sense"? And what makes us believe that one interpretation is better than another? Probably the interpretations that make sense and that strike us as better than other interpretations are the ones that are more inclusive; they are more convincing because they account for more details of the work. The less sensible, less satisfactory, less persuasive interpretations of the supposed meaning(s) are less inclusive; they leave a reader pointing to some aspects of the work—to some parts of the whole—and saying, "Yes, but this explanation doesn't take account of . . ." or "This explanation is in part contradicted by. . . ."

We'll return to the problem of interpreting meaning when we consider the distinction between subject matter and content in Chapter 3 (pages 50–52).

EXPRESSING OPINIONS: THE WRITER'S "I"

The study of art is not a science, but neither is it the expression of random feelings loosely attached to works of art. You can—and must—come up with statements that seem true to the work itself, statements that almost seem self-evident (like Clark's words about Rembrandt) when the reader of the essay turns to look again at the object.

Of course, works of art evoke emotions—not only nudes but also, for example, the sprawled corpse of a rabbit in a still life by Chardin, or even the jagged edges or curved lines in a nonobjective painting. It is usually advisable, however, to reveal your feelings not by continually saying "I feel" and "this moves me," but by pointing to evidence, by calling attention to qualities in the object that shape your feelings. Thus, if you are writing about Picasso's *Les Demoiselles d'Avignon* (see page 34), instead of saying, "My first feeling is one of violence and unrest," it is better to call attention (as John Golding does in *Cubism*) to "the savagery of the two figures at the right-hand side of the painting, which is accentuated by the lack of expression in the faces of the other figures." Golding cites this evidence in order to support his assertion that "the first impression made by the *Demoiselles* . . . is one of violence and unrest."

The point, then, is not to repress or to disguise one's personal response but to account for it and to suggest that it is not eccentric and private. Golding can safely assume that his response is tied to the object and that we share his initial response because he cites evidence that compels us to feel as he does—or at least evidence that explains why we feel this

way. Here, as in most effective criticism, we get what has been called "persuasive description." It is persuasive largely because it points to evidence, but also because most of us have been taught—rightly or wrongly—to respect the authority of an apparently detached point of view.

✍ A RULE FOR WRITERS:

When you use terms such as *forceful, moving, stirring,* or *vivid,* you probably are talking not about the work but about your response to it. If you hope to persuade your reader, you need to point to the evidence: the features in the work that cause you to respond in such a way.

Pablo Picasso, Spanish (1881–1973). *Les Demoiselles d'Avignon*, Paris (June–July, 1907). Oil on canvas, 8' × 7'8" (243.9 × 233.7 cm). The Museum of Modern Art/Licensed by SCALA/Art Resource, NY. Acquired through the Lillie P. Bliss Bequest. Photograph © 2001 The Museum of Modern Art, New York. © 2006 Estate of Pablo Picasso/Artists Rights Society (ARS), New York.

Most readers probably would rather be alerted to the evidence in the work of art than be informed about the writer's feelings, but to say that a writer should not keep repeating "I feel" is not to say that "I" cannot be used. Nothing is wrong with occasionally using "I," and noticeable avoidances of it—"it is seen that," "this writer," "the author," "we," and the like—suggest an offensive sham modesty.

Finally, it must be admitted that the preceding paragraphs make it sound as if writing about art is a decorous business. In fact, it is often a loud, contentious business, filled with strong statements about the decline of culture, revolution, pornography (or a liberating sexuality), the destruction of the skyline, fraud, new ways of seeing. In 1846 Charles Baudelaire called for a criticism that was "partial, passionate, and political," and much of what is written today fits this description. Examining the conflicting critical assumptions and methodologies will be part of your education, and if you find yourself puzzled, you will also find yourself stimulated. An energetic conversation about art has been going on for a long time, and it is now your turn to say something.

2

WRITING ABOUT ART: A CRASH COURSE

Writing is exploration. You start from nothing and learn as you go.
—E. L. Doctorow

I write what I would like to read.
—Kathleen Norris

What can be said at all can be said clearly.
—Ludwig Wittgenstein

The next few chapters amplify the assertions offered in this chapter, and Chapter 8 ("How to Write an Effective Essay") provides a review, but for a start, here is a brief introduction to what composition instructors call the writing process. In fact, no single process works for all writers—indeed, most writers use different processes for different kinds of assignments—but the following advice may help you to get going, especially on a short paper that draws chiefly on your own responses to a work.

STANDING BACK: KINDS OF WRITING

Most writing about art seeks to do one or both of two things:

- **to inform** ("This picture was painted in 1980"; "The anchor in the picture symbolizes hope"; "Conceptual Art favors intellectual over visual pleasure")
- **to persuade** ("This early picture is one of her best"; "Despite the widespread view that the anchor symbolizes hope, I will argue that here the anchor has no symbolic meaning"; "Most exhibitions of Conceptual Art are tedious because there is so little sensuality, so little visual pleasure")

Recall Auden's comments on the function of criticism (page 11), where he said that a critic might "introduce" him to a work of which he had been unaware (here information would be dominant) or might "convince" him that he had undervalued a work (here persuasion would be dominant). Most writing, of course, seeks both to inform *and* to persuade—Kenneth Clark's paragraph (page 13) interpreting a painting by Rembrandt certainly tries to do both—though one purpose or the other usually dominates.

Whether you are chiefly concerned with informing or with persuading (and the two purposes are often indistinguishable, because writers usually want to persuade readers that the information is significant), you ought to be prompted by a strong interest in a work or a body of work. This interest usually is a highly favorable response to the material (essentially, "That's terrific"), but an unfavorable response ("Awful!") or a sense of bafflement ("Why would anyone care for that?") may also motivate writing. We can guess that Kenneth Clark, puzzled by the fact that "Nowhere else has Rembrandt made himself look so deboshed," set his mind to work and came up with some tentative explanations. In any case, stimulated by a work, you put words onto paper, perhaps first by jotting down observations in no particular sequence. Later you will organize them for the benefit of an imagined reader, offering what the novelist D. H. Lawrence calls "a reasoned account of the feelings" produced by a work. Don't be embarrassed if a work produces strong feelings in you, pleasant (van Gogh wanted the picture of his bedroom to induce restful feelings in the viewer) or unpleasant (Damien Hirst says he wants his work to make viewers feel "uncomfortable").

The principle known as Occam's razor is sharp ("Entities ought not to be multiplied, except from necessity"); indeed, we ought not to multiply entities needlessly, but here necessity compels us to go a bit beyond the categories of information and persuasion. Most academic writing about art, such as the material that you will read in courses in art history, is chiefly explanatory, or, we can say, *analytic:* It is concerned with the relationships (for instance, of the parts to the whole within a work, or of historical causes and effects), and indeed your instructors probably will ask you to write papers that are largely analytic. The next chapter is devoted entirely to analysis, but writing about art includes a range of kinds of writing:

- **description,** such as might be given if one is reporting a stolen object ("Giovanni da Bologna's *Mercury* [page 39] is a bronze statue, 69 inches tall, of a male who is nude except for his hat; his

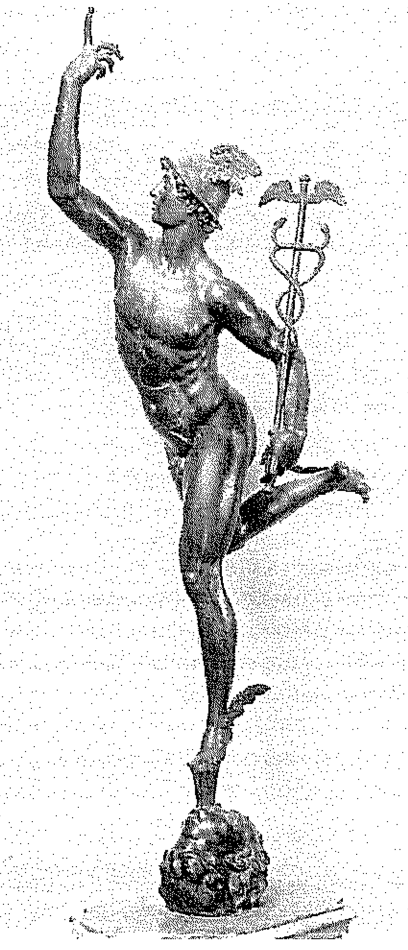
hat and his heels are winged, and he holds a staff with wings at the top.")

- **interpretation** ("A youthful male figure with winged sandals and a winged hat can be identified as Mercury, a messenger of the gods.")
- **analysis** or **explanation** of the internal relationships—the structure—of the work ("The slender outstretched limbs suggest flight, but the sense of motion is countered by the strong vertical of the body and the left leg, which makes the figure seem stable.")
- **personal report,** or what might be called "confession," a report of one's immediate response and perhaps of later responses ("Unlike some sculpture which is interesting only when viewed from the front, *Mercury* is equally interesting when viewed from the sides and the rear.")
- **evaluation** ("The work is masterfully executed not only by the sculptor but also by the craftsmen who cast the image.")

To take a brief example: In a classic essay on Jackson Pollock's *Blue Poles*, Ellen Johnson in *Studio International* (June 1973) calls attention to "the bam-bam-bam of the bright red, blue and yellow, flung and dripped along with the white, black and aluminum, to the powerful beat of the blue poles as they swing across the canvas." We get description (the information about the colors of the painting), but surely we also get personal report—the writer's response—when Johnson speaks of the "bam-bam-bam" of the bright colors. The entire sentence implies a favorable evaluation.

Again, your instructors will probably ask you to write papers that are chiefly analytic, though some description, personal report, and evaluation almost surely will be implicit (if not explicit) in your analyses.

Caution: Bear in mind that **prolonged description** will probably become boring, especially if you include a reproduction of the work of art in your essay: "On the table there is a white tablecloth; at the left is a pitcher, and to the right of the pitcher are six pieces of fruit, including two lemons, two red apples, one green apple, and one pear. The background consists of a wall, partly obscured by drapery." Why, your reader will rightly wonder, are you bothering to tell me all this, when I can see it for myself at a glance? (On the other hand, readers welcome a description that calls attention to what is *not* evident in a reproduction, such as



Giovanni Bologna, *Mercurio*, 1580. Bronze, 69". Photographer: Alinari. Art Resource, N.Y. R. Museo Nazionale, Firenze.

a view of a sculpture from a different angle, or a description of the texture of the brush strokes in a painting.)

As for a **prolonged personal report,** it will be of little interest unless you can connect your responses with your reader's. An excellent way to connect responses, and perhaps even to create them in the reader, is to point to *evidence* in the work. We have already seen (page 33) an example: In talking about Picasso's *Les Demoiselles d'Avignon*,

John Golding does not merely say, "My first feeling is one of violence and unrest"; rather, he points to "the savagery of the two figures on the right-hand side of the painting." We can look at the picture and examine the evidence; if we agree, we understand why Golding says he experiences violence and unrest. Or we can look and disagree; perhaps we will want to reply to Golding that he confuses an unfamiliar form of sensuous beauty with savagery, but at least we know where Golding stands, why he takes his position, and we know why we are taking a different position.

Personal report often implies **evaluation** ("We are shocked, but we cannot look away," or, on the contrary, "There is simply nothing here that holds our interest"), and in Chapter 10 we will discuss some critical principles that underlie evaluation. Here it is enough to say that the two most common sources for judging are

- a spontaneous personal response ("This picture of a blind beggar is deeply disturbing"), and
- a principle alleged to be widely held ("A picture ought to be unified," "A building should not disguise its purpose").

Although personal responses can hardly be argued about in rational terms, they can and must be set forth clearly and interestingly, so that the reader understands why the writer experiences these responses and why the writer evaluates the work as he or she does.

Again, most writing about art is of a mixed sort. Let's look at part of another paragraph from Ellen Johnson's essay on Jackson Pollock. (For a photograph of Pollock in action, see page 363.) Johnson says that in Pollock's work

> the material nature of the paint insistently demands our sensory response to its enormous variety. This is true even when the paint is thin and stains the canvas—becoming one with it—in this sense also the ground is eliminated and the homogeneity of the surface is further emphasized. In some pictures, Pollock enriched the already sensuous surface by adding bits of other matter; *Full Fathom Five* is especially rich in this regard. Several foreign objects are embedded in its oil and aluminum paint; but the thumb tacks, pennies, cigarettes, paint tube tops, matches, etc., are only discovered with very close scrutiny. Lost in the life of the painting, they "suffer a sea-change into something rich and strange." Pollock's grand scale paintings are curiously intimate and public in what they give—and what they ask of us. Being in their actual presence is somewhat like sitting in the front row at a symphony concert—one feels mixed up with the music, physically involved in the very process of making it.
>
> —"Jackson Pollock and Nature," in *Studio International* 185:956 (June 1973), 260

In talking about Pollock's work, Johnson gives us some relatively objective description (she tells us that thumbtacks, pennies, and other objects are embedded in the paint), and she gives us a personal report (she tells us what "being in their actual presence is . . . like"). She also give us analysis (she tells us *how* Pollock gets his effects, for instance, by enriching the surfaces), and she gives us evaluation (it is clear that Johnson admires the pictures). The metaphoric word *enriched*—used of a surface that has thumbtacks and pennies stuck to it!—strongly implies a favorable evaluation. By the way, Johnson's quotation ("suffer a sea-change") comes from a song in Shakespeare's *The Tempest*, the very song that provided Pollock with his title, *Full Fathom Five*. The quotation thus itself enriches Johnson's writing, lending it weight or authority.

You may want to reread Johnson's paragraph and evaluate her ways of talking about Pollock. Do you imagine that, if you were standing in the presence of a work by Pollock, her paragraph would help you to understand and enjoy the work? If the paragraph shows ways of talking that you like, consider incorporating them into your own essay; and if it shows ways of talking that displease you, try to banish them from your own writing.

CLOSE-UP: DRAFTING THE ESSAY

1. **Consider the writing situation:** Is the specific topic assigned, or do you choose your own topic?
   - If the choice is yours, choose a work you like, but
   - allow plenty of time (you may find, once you get to work, that you want to change your topic).

   How long will the essay be? (Allow an appropriate amount of time.) What kinds of sources are you expected to use?
   - Only your own insights, supplemented by conversations with friends, and perhaps familiarity with your textbooks?
   - Some research?
   - Substantial research?

   Again, allow the appropriate amount of time.

Who is the audience?

- Classmates?
- The general public (e.g., readers of *Time* magazine)?
  Awareness of the audience will help you to determine the amount of detail you need to provide. Unless you are told otherwise, assume that your classmates are your audience; they are intelligent adults, but they have not thought as deeply as you have about the particular topic you are writing about. (More about the audience in a moment, under items 5 and 7.)

When is the essay due? Allow time

- to write, type, and revise the draft several times,
- to proofread, and
- to check any sources.

2. **Jot down at least a few ideas *before* you write a first draft:** You can immediately generate some ideas by thinking about the impact the work makes on you.

- *Why* does it please, displease, or even anger you?
- What relevant assertions have you heard in lectures or read in books, for instance, concerning male representations of women, or concerning colonial influences on tribal art (or conversely, African influences on Western art), or concerning the criteria for judging a public building?
- How convincing *are* these ideas? Now that you are looking closely at a particular work or works, do these criteria really apply without modification? What modifications now suggest themselves? (In your final version, be sure to give credit for any ideas that you borrow.)

Jot down whatever comes to mind—key phrases will do—and you probably will find that these jottings, this mixture of assertions and questions, will engender further ideas. Writing at this stage is not only the setting forth of ideas; it is largely the *discovering* of ideas you didn't know were in you.

3. **Rearrange these jottings into a scratch outline (i.e., a tentative plan for a draft):** A list of a few phrases indicating the topics you plan to address (e.g., "historical context," "symbolic use of color," "woman is nude but not man") and the sequence will help you to get going. In such an outline

- probably the first paragraph will name the artists or the works of art and will specify the general approach (e.g., biographical or comparative) or scope (an early and a late work by an artist) of the paper
- additional jottings, in sequence, will indicate the gist of each paragraph

4. **Start writing without worrying about correctness.** Yes, you have been putting down words, but those preliminary jottings were what composition instructors call "prewriting." Now you are writing a draft—not yet a first draft but a zero draft, so don't worry about mechanical matters such as spelling and punctuation and stylistic elegance. Such things will be important when you revise and edit, but at the moment you are trying to find out what your ideas are and how much sense they make. Don't be afraid to set forth your hunches. As E. M. Forster put it, "How do I know what I think until I see what I say?" Write in a spirit of confidence, and if you are using a computer, be sure to save your material.
   If you have jotted down an outline,

- begin by following the outline, but remember,
- the outline is a helpful guide to get you going; it is not a road map that must be followed.

Write freely and get your ideas down on paper or up on the screen. At this stage, you are still wrestling with ideas, trying things out, clarifying things for yourself, engaging in a search and discovery operation.

Later, of course, you will read and reread with a critical (skeptical) mind what you have said—you will want to make sure that assertions are supported by evidence—but for now, follow your instincts.

5. **Reread and revise the material,** preferably after an interval of a few hours or even a day.

You are now prepared to write a serious draft. Your tentative or working thesis has now evolved into a point in which you have confidence. Revisions will be of two sorts:

- global (large scale, such as reorganization) and
- local (the substitution of a precise word for an imprecise one or a spelling correction).

Generally speaking, try to begin by making the necessary global revisions. You may, for instance, decide that introductory background material is or is not needed, or that background material should be distributed throughout the essay rather than given all at once at the start, or that you are too colloquial, too chatty (or, on the other hand, too formal, too stuffy). But, of course, if you spot a spelling error, or realize that a particular word is not the best word, there is no harm in pausing to make such a correction when you first see the need.

Now is the time to keep asking yourself,

- What will my audience—my readers—make of this paragraph, this sentence, this word?
- Does this word need to be defined?
- Do I offer adequate support for this generalization?
- Is my point clear, and is it expressed effectively?

Put yourself in your reader's shoes; ask yourself if readers will be aware of where they are going. Yes, your instructor or your section leader is in fact your reader, but do *not* write for this specific person. Invent (imagine) a friendly but skeptical reader; if you write for this imagined reader, you will have created a silent but helpful collaborator.

6. **Reread and revise the draft again,** asking yourself what your reader will make out of each sentence.

7. **Make certain that the mechanics are according to specifications:** Here you are acting not so much as an author but as an *editor.*
   - It is appropriate for an author, in the heat of drafting material, to be indifferent to mechanical details, but
   - it is appropriate for an editor to be cool, detached, finicky—in short, for the editor to tell the author to come down to earth and to package the essay correctly.
   - Margins, spacing, page numbering, and labeling of illustrations should follow the instructor's requirements.
   - Documentation should be according to one of the two systems (*The Art Bulletin* or *Chicago Manual*) given in this book.

8. **If possible, get a classmate or a friend to read your essay and to make suggestions.** This representative of your audience should not, of course, rewrite the essay for you, but he or she can call your attention to
   - paragraphs that need development
   - unclear organization
   - unconvincing arguments
   - awkward sentences
   - errors in punctuation and spelling.

9. **Consider the reader's suggestions and revise where you think necessary.** If your reader finds some terms obscure or an argument unsubstantiated, you will almost surely want to revise, clarifying the terms and providing evidence for the argument. As before, in the process of revising, try to imagine yourself as your hypothetical reader.

10. **Print out a copy of the revised draft, read it, and revise again**—and again—as needed.

A RULE FOR WRITERS:

You are not knocking off an assignment; you are *writing an essay*, engaging in a process that, first, will teach *you* and, second, will ultimately engage the interest of your readers and will teach them.

It all adds up to *seeing* and *saying*, to seeing (discovering) in the works of art things that you will then want to communicate to your reader (this is a matter of getting ideas) and to saying effectively the things you want to say. Chapters 1–7 offer suggestions about getting ideas, about finding things that, once found, you will want to communicate to others, and Chapters 8–10 offer suggestions about the art of writing, from developing effective opening and concluding paragraphs to such technical matters as using the accepted forms in documenting print and electronic sources.

✓ Checklist of Basic Matters

Have I asked myself the following questions?

- ❑ Is my title engaging?
- ❑ Does the introduction provide essential information (artist, work, topic, or approach of the essay)?

- ❑ Does the paper have a thesis, a point?
- ❑ Do I support my argument with sufficient persuasive detail?
- ❑ Have I kept the needs of my audience in mind—for instance, have I defined unfamiliar terms?
- ❑ Is the paper organized, and is the organization clear to the reader?
- ❑ Have I set forth my views effectively and yet not talked too much about myself?
- ❑ Does the essay fulfill the assignment (length, scope)?

3

ANALYTIC THINKING

To think is to disturb one's thoughts.

—Jean Rostand

All art is at once surface and symbol.

—Oscar Wilde

There's more to the picture
Than meets the eye,
Hey hey, my my.

—Neil Young

SEEING AND SAYING

An **analysis** is, literally, a separating into parts in order to understand the whole. When you analyze, you are seeking to account for your experience of the work. (Analysis thus includes **synthesis**, the combination of the parts into the whole.) You might, for example, analyze Michelangelo's marble statue *David* (see page 49), the youth who with a slingshot killed the heavily armed giant Goliath, by considering

- Its sources (in the Bible, in Hellenistic sculpture, in Donatello's bronze *David*, and in the political and social ideas of the age—e.g., David as a civic hero, the enemy of tyranny, and David as the embodiment of Fortitude)
- Its material and the limitations of that material (marble lends itself to certain postures but not to others, and marble has an effect—in texture and color—that granite or bronze or wood does not have)
- Its pose (which gives the statue its outline, its masses, and its enclosed spaces or lack of them)
- Its facial expression
- Its nudity (a nude Adam is easily understandable, but why a nude David? Statues of Greek heroes and gods were nude, so

PREPARING THE FINAL VERSION

1. **If you have received comments from a reader, consider them carefully.** Even if you disagree with them, they may alert you to places in your essay that need revision, such as clarification.

In addition, if a friend, a classmate, or another peer reviewer has given you some help, acknowledge that help in a footnote or endnote. (If you look at almost any book or any article in *The Art Bulletin*, you will notice that the author acknowledges the help of friends and colleagues. In your own writing follow this practice.) Here are sample acknowledgments from papers by students:

> I wish to thank Anna Aaron for numerous valuable suggestions.
>
> I wish to thank Paul Gottsegen for calling my attention to passages that needed clarification and Jane Leslie for suggesting the comparison with Orozco's murals at Dartmouth College.
>
> Emily Andrews called my attention to recent studies of Mayan art.
>
> I am indebted to Louise Cort for explaining how Shigaraki ceramics were built and fired.

2. **Write, type, or print a clean copy,** following the principles concerning margins, pagination, footnotes, and so on, set forth in Chapter 12.
3. **If you have borrowed any ideas, be sure to give credit,** usually in footnotes, to your sources. Remember that plagiarism is not limited to the unacknowledged borrowing of words; a borrowed idea, even when put into your own words, requires acknowledgment. (On giving credit to sources, see pages 327–33.)
4. **Proofread and make corrections** as explained on pages 355–56.

In short, ask these questions:

- Is the writing true (do you have a point that you state accurately)?
- Is the writing good (do your words and your organization clearly and effectively convey your meaning)?

All of this adds up to a recipe in a famous Victorian cookbook: "First catch your hare, then cook it."

9

STYLE IN WRITING

> Style is character.
>
> —Joan Didion

> To me, style is first the outside of content, and content the inside of style, like the outside and inside of the human body—both go together, they can't be separated.
>
> —Jean-Luc Godard

> To improve one's style means to improve one's thoughts.
>
> —Friedrich Wilhelm Nietzsche

> Have something to say, and say it as clearly as you can. That is the only secret of style.
>
> —Matthew Arnold

PRINCIPLES OF STYLE

Writing is hard work (Lewis Carroll's school in *Alice's Adventures in Wonderland* taught reeling and writhing), and there is no point in fooling ourselves into believing that it is all a matter of inspiration. Many of the books that seem, as we read them, to flow so effortlessly were in fact the product of innumerable revisions. "Hard labor for life" was Joseph Conrad's view of his career as a writer. This labor, for the most part, is not directed to prettifying language but to improving one's thoughts and then getting the words that communicate these thoughts exactly. There is no guarantee that effort will pay off, but failure to expend effort is sure to result in writing that will strike the reader as confused. It won't do to comfort yourself with the thought that you have been misunderstood. You may know what you *meant to say*, but your reader is the judge of what indeed you *have said*. Keep in mind Henri Matisse's remark: "When my words were garbled by critics or colleagues, I considered it my fault, not theirs, because I had not been clear enough to be comprehended."

Many books have been written on the elements of good writing, but the best way to learn to write is to do your best, show it to a friend, think about the response and revise accordingly, revise it a few days later, hand it in, and then study the annotations an experienced reader puts on your essay. In revising the annotated passages, you will learn what your weaknesses are in writing. After drafting your next essay, put it aside for a day or so, then reread it, preferably aloud. You may find much that bothers you. (If you read it aloud, you will probably catch choppy sentences, needless repetitions, and unpleasant combinations of words, such as "We see in the sea. . . .") If the argument does not flow, check to see whether your organization is reasonable and whether you have made adequate transitions. Do not hesitate to delete interesting but irrelevant material that obscures the argument. Make the necessary revisions again and again if there is time. Revision is indispensable if you wish to avoid (in Somerset Maugham's words) "the impression of writing with the stub of a blunt pencil."

Even though the best way to learn to write is by writing and by heeding the comments of your readers, a few principles can be briefly set forth here. These principles will not suppress your particular voice; rather, they will get rid of static, enabling your voice to come through effectively. You have something to say, but you can say it only after your throat is cleared of "Well, what I meant was" and "It's sort of, well, you know." Your readers do *not* know; they are reading in order to know. This chapter will help you let your individuality speak clearly.

GET THE RIGHT WORD

Denotation

Be sure the word you choose has the right explicit meaning, or denotation. Don't say "tragic" when you mean "pathetic," "carving" when you mean "modeling," or "print" (a hand-produced picture transferred from a printing surface to a piece of paper or cloth) when you mean a photographic reproduction of a painting.

Sometimes the word will depend on your point of view. For many English people, Lord Elgin "acquired" or maybe "collected" or even "rescued" the mid-fifth-century BCE Greek sculptures that are now called the Elgin Marbles and are housed in the British Museum, but so far as most Greeks are concerned, Elgin stole or looted (rather than acquired or collected or rescued) these works, and the works are properly called (in the Greek view) "the Parthenon frieze sculptures," or "the Acropolis sculptures," *not* "the Elgin Marbles."

Connotation

Be sure the word you choose has the right association or implication—that is, the right connotation. Here is an example of a word with the wrong connotation for its context: "Close study will *expose* the strength of Klee's style." "Reveal" would be better than "expose" here; "expose" suggests that some weakness will be brought to light, as in "Close study will expose the flimsiness of the composition."

Sometimes our prejudices blind us to the unfavorable connotations of our vocabulary. Writing about African architecture, one student spoke of "mud huts" throughout the paper; a more respectful term for the same type of building would be "clay house" or "earthen compound." When you submit your paper to a colleague for peer review, urge your reviewer to question your use of words that may have inappropriate connotations.

Concreteness

Catch the richness, complexity, and uniqueness of what you see. Do not write "His expression lacks emotion" if you really mean the expression is icy or indifferent. But concreteness is not only a matter of getting the exact word—no easy job in itself. If your reader is (so to speak) to see what you are getting at, you have to provide some details. Instead of writing "The influence of photography on *X* is small," write "The influence of photography is evident in only six paintings."

Compare the rather boring statement, "Thirteenth-century sculpture was colored," or even "Thirteenth-century sculpture was brightly painted and sometimes adorned with colored glass," with these sentences rich in detail:

Concrete

> Color was an integral part of sculpture and its setting. Face and hands were given their natural colors; mouth, nose, and ears were slightly emphasized; the hair was gilded. Dresses were either covered in flowers or painted in vigorous colors; ornaments, buckles, and hems were highlighted by brilliant colors or even studded with polished stones or

colored glass. The whole portal looked like a page from an illuminated manuscript, enlarged on a vast scale.

—Marcel Aubert, *The Art of the High Gothic Era*, trans. Peter Gorge (New York: Crown, 1965), 60

Similarly, in the following passage notice how detailed Robert Hughes is. He does not simply tell us that in *The Migration Series* Jacob Lawrence was concerned with "violence and pathos." He goes on to specify "prisons, deserted villages, city slums, race riots, labor camps." And when he says that Lawrence's images are "restrained," he goes on to specify a particular image of a lynching, and he offers details to support his assertion.

> Lawrence was not a propagandist. He eschewed the caricatural apparatus of Popular Front Social Realism, then at its hightide in America. Considering the violence and pathos of so much of his subject matter—prisons, deserted villages, city slums, race riots, labor camps—his images are restrained, and all the more piercing for their lack of bombast. When he painted a lynching, for instance, he left out the dangling body and the jeering crowd: there is only bare earth, a branch, an empty noose, and the huddled hump of a grieving woman.
>
> —Robert Hughes, *American Visions* (1997), 456

By means of details, Hughes not only makes us see the pictures but he also convinces us that he knows what he is talking about.

A Note on the Use of "This" Without a Concrete Reference

Avoid using "this" when you mean "what I have been saying." Your reader does not know if "this" refers to the preceding clause, sentence, paragraph, or page.

Imprecise

> She did not begin to paint until she was fifty. Moreover, she did not try to sell her work until at least ten years later. This proved to have advantages.

To what does "this" refer? That she did not try to sell her work for ten years? That she did not paint until she was fifty? Both? Perhaps something even earlier in the paragraph? It turned out that "this" refers

to the points made in the first two sentences quoted, and the student successfully revised the third sentence by providing specific references for "this":

Precise and clear because "this" is made specific

> She did not begin to paint until she was fifty. Moreover, she did not try to sell her work until at least ten years later. This late start and lack of concern for the market proved to have advantages.

A Note on Technical Language

Discussions of art, like, say, discussions of law, medicine, the dance, and for that matter, cooking and baseball, have given rise to technical terminology. A cookbook will tell you to blend, boil, or bake, and it will speak of a "slow" oven (300 degrees), a "moderate" oven (350 degrees), or a "hot" oven (400 degrees). These are technical terms in the world of cookery, and no one objects that it is preposterous to define a hot oven as 400 degrees when everyone knows that a hot day is 90 degrees.

In watching a baseball game we find ourselves saying, "I think the hit-and-run is on," or "He'll probably bunt." We use these terms because they convey a good deal in a few words; like "a hot oven," they are clear and precise. Technical language is illuminating—provided (1) it is used accurately, and (2) the audience is familiar with the language. How can an audience not be familiar with language? New ways of thinking—new systems of thought, such as Structuralism and Queer Theory—produce new language, language that is meaningful to the initiated but puzzling to others. Outsiders may object to such language, but their objections may show only that they are unfamiliar with the language that specialists use when they speak concisely to each other.

On the other hand, technical language is sometimes used, unfortunately, in an effort to impress readers rather than to communicate clearly.

Consider the following sentence, taken almost at random from an essay by a professor of art history who is writing about American Indian baskets made for whites in the early twentieth century. The sentence comes from a collection of essays called *Unpacking Culture: Art and Commodity in Colonial and Postcolonial Worlds*, ed. Ruth B. Phillips and Christopher B. Steiner (Berkeley and Los Angeles: University of California Press: 1999).

> Native curios were privileged in bourgeois parlor decoration as metonymic representations of the premodern, their significations enhanced by hand-made production and utilitarian function, two aspects of the premodern also valorized in the contemporary American Arts and Crafts Movement. (148)

If you are writing for readers who write like this—people who in a single sentence use words like *metonymic, significations*, and *valorized*—you probably will have to write like this. More sensible readers, however, will see that the passage is preposterously inflated and obscure—it sounds like a parody of critical talk.

The sad thing about such dreadful language is that it muffles the writer's voice; if the writer has any individuality, it is utterly suppressed by this highly conventional language, this torrent of needless technical terms. Jargon of this sort prevents a writer from sounding like an interesting human being.

Here is a student's revision of the passage, which makes the same points but in a more engaging style.

> Middle-class whites valued native curios and displayed them in their parlors. Because these objects were handmade and because they had been used in daily life, they stood for a pre-industrial world, a world celebrated also in the contemporary American Arts and Crafts Movement.

Your sense of your audience will tell you whether you want your writing to be like the grotesque original passage or like the second version.

What are the chief differences? First, there are differences in vocabulary. Instead of "privileged" and "valorized," the revision says "valued"; instead of "metonymic representations" and "the premodern," it says "stood for" and "a pre-industrial world." In short, the revision is closer to ordinary speech, and the speaker therefore comes across as less preposterous. Second (and closely related), the original consists of one long sentence of thirty-eight words—quite a mouthful—whereas the two-sentence revision mercifully lets the speaker and the reader take a breath midway.

True, even the proposed revision is colorless, but the idea of this exercise in revision is to make all of the points of the original in a more reader-friendly way, without adding anything new. Try your hand at a somewhat freer version, adding details that will enliven the passage. Here is one student's contribution:

> Contrary to what one might expect, small objects made by American Indians became a staple of middle-class interior decoration in the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries. Although the objects were inexpensive, they were valued because in a world in which almost everything else was machine-made, they were handmade, pretty, and often useful.

In writing about art you will, for the most part, use the same language that you use in other courses. You will not needlessly introduce unusual words, but you *will* use the language of art history when it enables you to be clear, concise, and accurate. Some specialized words are known to most native speakers ("etching," "perspective," "still life"); some are known chiefly to highly educated people ("bas relief," "gouache," "vellum"), and some are known only to people who have read a fair amount of critical theory concerning art or literature ("episteme," "poststructuralism," "semiotics"). Obviously readers who for the first time encounter the word "episteme" are aware that they are in new territory, and if the writer has not offered a helpful definition, they either try to understand the word from the context, or they consult a reference work.

Another sort of technical word is more dangerous, a word like "hot," which means one thing when talking about the weather and another thing when talking about an oven. For instance, among the words that look innocent but that recently have acquired highly technical meanings in discussions of art are "appropriation," "code," "discourse," "erasure," and "fetish." How technical? "Fetish" gets a two-and-a-half-page discussion in *Artwords* (1997), a dictionary of current critical terms by Thomas Patin and Jennifer McLerran, and it gets eleven pages in *Critical Terms for Art History*, 2nd ed. (2003), ed. Robert S. Nelson and Richard Shiff.* If you encounter these words in a book or in a lecture, and if you think that they are impressive ways of saying something that otherwise sounds commonplace, do *not* use them in your own writing. After all, in an essay you wouldn't (or shouldn't) speak of a "preliminary overall strategizing concept" when "plan" will do. On the other hand, if indeed you understand the specialized use of certain terms, and if they strike you as the best way to make your point, of course you can use them—though if you are writing for a general public, you will have to clarify them.

*Both of these books are concerned more with the vocabulary of current art theory than with the vocabulary of art history. For other glossaries, see page 221n.

A RULE FOR WRITERS:

Don't use unfamiliar words simply in order to sound impressive.

While we are speaking of writing for the general public, what do you think the public made of these opening sentences in a brochure accompanying an exhibition entitled *Performing Images, Performing Race*, shown at the Davison Art Center, Wesleyan University, in 2003? The brochure was written by the curator of the exhibition.

> The body is both the physical means of performance and the material pretext for ideas about race. Images of human bodies may serve at once to depict specific performative acts and to signify racial typicality. Such portrayals can document and foster interlinked acts of looking, of performing, and of thinking about racial identities—of inhabiting them or assigning them to other.

Now, class, here is an open-book quiz:

1. Are you confident that you understand the first sentence, especially the phrase "the material pretext"? If so, paraphrase the sentence, and then decide whether, given the presumed purpose of the brochure—to introduce visitors to the exhibition—the original is better than your paraphrase.
2. If you were writing a brochure for an exhibition, would you take this author's style as a model? Why, or why not?

If you did not enjoy reading the passage, if you found it hard to understand and hard to paraphrase (maybe especially hard because "pretext" probably is *not* used in its ordinary sense of "untrue reason"), if you would not dream of taking this style as a model because it would make you sound like a windbag, give yourself a grade of A.

The Writer's Voice: Tone

Remember, when you are writing, *you* are the teacher. You are trying to help someone to see things as you see them, and it is unlikely that either pomposity or vulgarity will help anyone see anything your way. There is rarely a need to write that Daumier was "incarcerated" or (at the other extreme) "thrown into the clink." "Imprisoned" or "put into prison" will

probably do the job best. Be sure, also, to avoid shifts in tone. Consider this passage, from a book on modern sculpture:

Faulty

> We forget how tough it was to make a living as a sculptor in this period. Rare were supportive critics, dealers, and patrons.

Although "tough" is pretty casual ("difficult" might be better), "tough" probably would be acceptable if it were not followed, grotesquely, by the pomposity of "Rare were supportive critics." The unusual word order (versus the normal order, "Supportive critics were rare") shows a straining for high seriousness that is incompatible with "tough."

Nor will it do to "finagle" with an inappropriate expression by putting it in "quotes." As the previous sentence indicates, the apologetic quotation marks do not make such expressions acceptable, only more obvious and more offensive. The quotation marks tell the reader that the writer knows he or she is using the wrong word but is unwilling to find the right word. If for some reason a relatively low word is the right one, use it and don't apologize with quotation marks.

The lesson? As Buffon said two hundred years ago, "The style is the man," to which we can add "or the woman." And, as E. B. White said a few decades ago, "No writer long remains incognito."

A RULE FOR WRITERS:

The words that you put on the page will convey an image of you to the reader; make sure that the image is favorable.

Repetition

Although some repetitions—say, of words or phrases like "surely" and "it is noteworthy that"—reveal a tic that ought to be cured by revision, don't be afraid to repeat a word if it is the best word. Notice that in the following paragraph the writer does not hesitate to repeat "Impressionism," "Impressionist," "face," and "portrait" (three times each) and "portraiture" and "photography" (twice each).

Effective

> We can follow the decline of portraiture within Impressionism, the art to which van Gogh assumed allegiance. The Impressionist vision of the world could hardly allow the portrait to survive; the human face was subjected to the same evanescent play of color as the sky and sea; for the eyes of the Impressionist it became increasingly a phenomenon of surface, with little or no interior life, at most a charming appearance vested in the quality of a smile or a carefree glance. As the Impressionist painter knew only the passing moment in nature, so he knew only the momentary face, without past or future; and of all its moments, he preferred the most passive and unconcerned, without trace of will or strain, the outdoor, summer holiday face. Modern writers have supposed that it was photography that killed portraiture, as it killed all realism. This view ignores the fact that Impressionism was passionately concerned with appearances, and was far more advanced than contemporary photography in catching precisely the elusive qualities of the visible world. If the portrait declines under Impressionism it is not because of the challenge of the photographer, but because of a new conception of the human being. Painted at this time, the portraits of van Gogh are an unexpected revelation. They are even more surprising if we remember that they were produced just as his drawing and color was becoming freer and more abstract, more independent of nature.
>
> —Meyer Schapiro, *Vincent van Gogh* (New York: Abrams, 1952), 16–17

When you repeat words or phrases, or when you provide clear substitutes (such as "he" for "van Gogh"), you are helping the reader to keep step with your developing thoughts.

An ungrounded fear of repetition often produces a vice known as *elegant variation*. Having mentioned "painters," the writer, fearful of repeating the word, then speaks of "artists," and then (more desperately) of "men and women of the brush." This use of synonyms is far worse than repetition; it strikes the reader as silly. Or it may be worse than silly. Consider:

Confusing

> Corot attracted the timid painters of his generation; bolder artists were attracted to Manet.

The shift from "painters" to "artists" makes us wonder if perhaps Manet's followers—but not Corot's—included etchers, sculptors, and others. Probably the writer did *not* mean any such thing, but the words prompt us to think in the wrong direction.

Be especially careful not to use variations for important critical terms. If, for instance, you are talking about "nonobjective art," don't switch to "abstract art" or "nonrepresentational art" unless you tell the reader why you are switching.

The Sound of Sense, the Sense of Sound

Avoid jingles and other repetitions of sound, as in these examples:

Annoying

> The reason the season is autumn . . .
> Circe certainly . . .
> Michelangelo's Medici monument . . .

These irrelevant echoes call undue attention to the words and thus get in the way of the points you are making. But wordplay can be effective when it contributes to meaning. For example, in this sentence:

Effective

> The walls of Sian both defended and defined the city.

The echo of "defended" in "defined" nicely emphasizes the unity in this duality.

WRITE EFFECTIVE SENTENCES

Economy

Say everything relevant, but say it in the fewest words possible. Consider the following sentence:

Wordy

> There are a few vague parts in the picture that give it a mysterious quality.

This sentence can be written more economically:

Revised

> A few vaguely defined parts give the picture a mysterious quality.

Nothing has been lost by the deletion of "There are" and "that." An even more economical version could be worded:

Further Revised

> A few vague parts add mystery to the picture.

The original version says nothing that the second version does not say, and it says nothing that the third version—nine words against fifteen—does not say. If you find the right nouns and verbs, you can often delete adjectives and adverbs. (Compare "a mysterious quality" with "mystery.") Something is wrong with a sentence when you can delete words and not sense the loss. A chapter in a recent book begins:

Wordy

> One of the principal and most persistent sources of error that tends to bedevil a considerable proportion of contemporary analysis is the assumption that the artist's creative process is a wholly conscious and purposive type of activity.

Well, there is something of interest here, but it comes along with a lot of hot air. Why that weaseling ("*tends to* bedevil," "*a considerable* proportion"), and why "type of activity" instead of "activity"? Those spluttering *p*'s ("principal and most persistent," "proportion," "process," "purposive") are a giveaway: The writer has not sufficiently revised his writing. It is not enough to have an interesting idea; the job of writing requires *re*writing, revising. The writer of this passage should have revised it—perhaps on rereading it an hour or a day later—and produced something like this:

Revised

> One of the chief errors bedeviling much contemporary criticism is the assumption that the artist's creative process is wholly conscious and purposive.

Possibly the author thought that a briefer and clearer statement would not do justice to the complexity of the main idea, but more likely he simply neglected to reread and revise. The revision says everything that the original says, only better.

Here are some wordy phases, with their concise equivalents:

at the point in time	then
due to the fact that	because
in spite of the fact that	although

When we are drafting an essay we sometimes put down what is more than enough. There's nothing wrong with that—anything goes in a draft—but when we revise we need to delete the deadwood, for instance the redundancies. Here is part of a descriptive entry from an exhibition catalog:

Redundant

> A big black bird with a curved beak is perched on a bare, wintry branch that has lost all its leaves.

If the branch is "bare," it has lost its leaves. No need to write it twice.

Unlike repetition, which often provides emphasis or coherence (for example, "government of the people, by the people, for the people"), redundancy can always be eliminated. Compare the following redundant expressions with the concise versions:

Redundant	*Concise*
future plans	plans
red in color	red
round in shape	round
small in size	small
glossy in appearance	glossy
basic fundamentals	fundamentals
resulting effect	result
connected together	connected
very unique	unique
throughout the entire article	throughout the article
elements common to both of them	common elements

Wordy Beginnings

Wordy beginnings can be especially deadly, for instance sentences that begin "There is" or "There are":

> There is evidence to show that some African symbolic motifs were unchanged over long periods.

Revised

> Evidence shows that some African symbolic motifs were unchanged over long periods.

Even better would be a more precise opening, such as "Much evidence shows," or "A few bits of evidence show," or whatever is the case.

Passive Voice

The **passive voice** (wherein the subject receives the action) is a common source of wordiness. In general, do not write "The sculpture was carved by Michelangelo" (the subject—"the sculpture"—receives the action—"was carved"). Instead, use the **active voice,** in which the subject acts on the object: "Michelangelo carved the sculpture" (the subject—"Michelangelo"— acts—"carved the sculpture"). Even though the revision is a third shorter, it says everything that the longer version says. Often the passive is needlessly vague, as in "It is believed that . . ." when the writer means "Most people believe" or "Most art historians believe. . . ."

Notice the overuse of the passive voice in the following passage, the opening paragraph of an essay on the classical aspects of a library at a women's college:

> A person walking by Jackson Library (1908–13) is struck by its classical design. The symmetry of the façade is established by the regularly spaced columns of the Ionic order on the first story of the building, and by pilasters on the second level. In the center of the lower tier are two bronze doors: On the left door a relief is seen, depicting Sapientia (Wisdom), and on the right is seen the image of Caritas (Charity). The Greco-Roman tradition is furthered by the two bronze statues on either side of the entrance. On the left is Vesta (goddess of the hearth) and on the right Minerva (goddess of wisdom). Through the use of classical architecture and Greco-Roman images, an image is conveyed—one which Charleston College hopes to create in its women.

Although the paragraph is richly informative it is sluggish and eerily lifeless, chiefly because the writer keeps using the passive voice: *A person . . . is struck by; symmetry . . . is established by; a relief is seen; on the right is seen; tradition is furthered by; an image is conveyed.*

Converting some or all of these expressions into the active voice will greatly improve the passage. (A second weakness, however, is the monotony of the sentence structure—subject, verb, object. Notice that in the revision, sentences are more varied. Many versions are possible; try your hand at producing one.)

Revised

> Walking by Jackson Library (1908–13), one notices the classical design. Regularly spaced columns of the Ionic order on the first story, and pilasters on the second, establish the symmetry of the façade. In the center of the lower tier are two bronze doors: On the left door a relief depicts Sapientia (Wisdom), and on the right Caritas (Charity). A bronze statue on each side of the entrance (Vesta, goddess of the hearth, on the left, and Minerva, goddess of wisdom, on the right) furthers the Greco-Roman tradition. Charleston College hopes, through the use of classical architecture and Greco-Roman sculpture, to inspire in its women particular ideals.

Yet the passive voice has its uses as, for instance, when (1) the doer is unknown ("The picture was stolen Monday morning") or (2) is unimportant ("Drawings should be stored in light-proof boxes) or (3) is too obvious to be mentioned ("The inscription has never been deciphered").

In short, use the active voice rather than the passive voice unless you believe that the passive especially suits your purpose.

Parallels

Use parallels to clarify relationships. Few of us are likely to compose such deathless parallels as "I came, I saw, I conquered," or "of the people, by the people, for the people," but we can see to it that coordinate expressions correspond in their grammatical form. A parallel such as "He liked to draw and to paint" (instead of "He liked drawing and to paint") neatly says what the writer means. The following wretched sentence seems to imply that "people" and "California and Florida" can be coordinate:

Faulty

> The sedentary Pueblo people of the southwestern states of Arizona and New Mexico were not as severely affected by early Spanish occupation as were California and Florida.

This sort of fuzzy writing is acceptable in a first or even a second draft, but not in a finished essay.

Variety

You probably have been told that you should vary your sentence structure, and you probably have read essays in which the sentences (and the reader) suffered because the structure was, over and over, subject/verb/object. Here is another example of the sort of monotonous writing no one wants to read:

> Van Gogh wrote several letters to his brother Theo that contain material relevant to the painting of his bedroom. Van Gogh wrote on October 14, 1888, "I have just slept sixteen hours at a stretch, and it has restored me completely." Van Gogh wrote two days later, telling Theo that he had painted a picture of his bedroom, "suggestive of *rest* or sleep in general." Van Gogh wrote the next day, "This afternoon I finished the canvas representing the bedroom."

What is wrong here, however, is not so much that the sentence structure is repeated as that the words "Van Gogh wrote" begin—maddeningly—four consecutive sentences. If we change the second occurrence to "On October 14, 1888 he wrote," the third occurrence to "Two days later he wrote," and the fourth to "On the next day he again mentioned the picture," the passage becomes readable:

> Van Gogh wrote several letters to his brother Theo that contain material relevant to the painting of his bedroom. On October 14, 1888, he wrote, "I have just slept sixteen hours at a stretch, and it has restored me completely." Two days later he wrote, telling Theo that he had painted a picture of his bedroom, "suggestive of *rest* or sleep in general." On the next day he again mentioned the picture: "This afternoon I finished the canvas representing the bedroom."

If you vary the beginnings of your sentences, and use pronouns as substitutes for earlier nouns, readers probably will not complain that the structure of your sentences is monotonous.

A RULE FOR WRITERS:

Do not repeat the same words in the same position in more than two consecutive sentences unless you are doing so for emphasis. Similarly, do not begin consecutive paragraphs with the same words ("This painting is . . .") unless you have a good reason.

Subordination

A word about short sentences: They can, of course, be effective ("Rembrandt died a poor man"), but unless what is being said is especially weighty, short sentences seem childish. They may seem choppy, too, because the periods keep slowing the reader down. Consider these sentences:

Choppy

> He was assured of government support. He then started to dissociate himself from any political aim. A long struggle with the public began.

There are three ideas here, but they are not worth three separate sentences. The choppiness can be reduced by combining them, subordinating some parts to others. In **subordinating,** make sure that the less important element is subordinate to the more important. In the following example the first clause ("As soon as he was assured of government support"), summarizing the writer's previous sentences, is a subordinate or dependent clause; the new material is made emphatic by being put into two independent clauses:

Revised

> As soon as he was assured of government support, he started to dissociate himself from any political aim, and the long struggle with the public began.

The second and third clauses in this sentence, linked by "and," are coordinate—that is, of equal importance.

We have already discussed parallels ("I came, I saw, I conquered") and pointed out that parallel or coordinate elements should appear as such in the sentence. The following line gives van Gogh and his brother Theo equal treatment:

> Van Gogh painted at Arles, and his brother Theo supported him.

This example is a **compound sentence**—a sentence composed of two or more clauses that can stand as independent sentences but that are connected with a coordinating conjunction such as *and, but, for, nor, yet;* or with a correlative conjunction such as *not only . . . but also;* or with a conjunctive adverb such as *also* or *however* (these require a semicolon); or with a colon, semicolon, or (rarely) a comma.

A **complex sentence** (an independent clause and one or more subordinate clauses), however, does not give equal treatment to each clause; whatever is outside the independent clause is subordinate, less important. Consider this sentence:

> Supported by Theo's money, van Gogh painted at Arles.

The writer puts van Gogh in the independent clause ("van Gogh painted at Arles"), subordinating the relatively unimportant Theo. Notice, by the way, that emphasis by subordination often works along with emphasis by position. Here the independent clause ("van Gogh painted at Arles") comes after the subordinate clause; the writer appropriately puts the more important material at the end—that is, in the more emphatic position.

A RULE FOR WRITERS:

Gain emphasis not by using italics and exclamation marks but by putting the right words into the right clauses.

Had the writer wished to give Theo more prominence, the passage might have run:

> Theo provided money, and van Gogh painted at Arles.

Here Theo stands in an independent clause, linked to the next clause by "and." Each of the two clauses is independent, and the two men (each in an independent clause) are now of approximately equal importance.

If the writer wanted instead to deemphasize van Gogh and to emphasize Theo, the sentence might read:

> While van Gogh painted at Arles, Theo provided the money.

Here van Gogh is reduced to the subordinate clause ("while van Gogh painted at Arles") and Theo is given the dignity of the only independent clause ("Theo provided the money"). (Notice again that the important point is also in the emphatic position, near the end of the sentence. A sentence is likely to sprawl if an independent clause comes first, preceding a long subordinate clause of lesser importance, such as the sentence you are now reading.)

A brief example will further clarify this business of not putting weak material at the end of a sentence:

Weak

> The evidence supporting this Freudian interpretation is weak for the most part.

Improved

> For the most part, the evidence supporting this Freudian interpretation is weak.

But note: You need not worry about subtle matters of emphasis while you are drafting your essay. When you reread the draft, however, you may feel that certain sentences dilute your point, and it is at this stage that you should check to see if you have adequately emphasized, by subordination and by position, what is important.

WRITE UNIFIED AND COHERENT PARAGRAPHS

A paragraph is normally a group of related sentences that explores one idea in a coherent (organized) way.

Unity

If your essay is some five hundred words long—about two double-spaced typewritten pages—you probably will not break it down into more than four or five parts or paragraphs. (But you *should* break your essay down into paragraphs—that is, into coherent blocks that give the reader a rest between them. One page of typing is about as long as you can go before the reader needs a slight break.) A paper of five hundred words with a dozen paragraphs is probably faulty not because it has too many ideas but because it has too few *developed* ideas. A short paragraph—especially one consisting of a single sentence—is usually anemic; such a paragraph may be acceptable when it summarizes a highly detailed previous paragraph or group of paragraphs, or when it serves as a transition between two

complicated paragraphs, but usually summaries and transitions can begin the next paragraph.

The unifying idea in a paragraph may be explicitly stated in a **topic sentence.** Most commonly, the topic sentence is the first sentence, forecasting what is to come in the rest of the paragraph; or it may be the second sentence, following a transitional sentence. Less commonly, it is the last sentence, summarizing the points that the paragraph's earlier sentences have made. In paragraphs of this sort, the writer usually sets forth descriptive details and then concludes the paragraph with a summary, or a generalization—essentially an argument—that is based on the details. Here, from a student's essay, is an example of a paragraph with a topic sentence at the end of the paragraph. (For Munch's *The Scream*, see page 70.)

> In Edvard Munch's *The Scream* (1896), the little boats seem to rest easily on the water but the wavy lines of the sky suggest the heavens are agitated, and the anguished figure in the center seems surrounded by and assaulted by conflicting lines. At the right, verticals crash into horizontals, and at the left, the diagonals define a walkway that either recedes with frightening rapidity or crashes forward into the viewer's space. Munch seems to do everything possible to unnerve the viewer.

Topic sentences are useful to writers as well as to readers. They help writers to develop ideas and they help readers to follow the argument.

Every paragraph, however, does not need to contain a topic sentence. But if a paragraph does not contain a topic sentence, it must contain a **topic idea**—an idea that holds the sentences together although it has not been explicitly stated. Here is an example, based on the preceding example:

> In Edvard Munch's *The Scream* (1896), the little boats seem to rest easily on the water but the wavy lines of the sky suggest agitation, not rest. The viewer almost experiences the feelings of the anguished figure in the center, who seems surrounded by and assaulted by conflicting lines. At the right, verticals crash into horizontals, and at the left, the diagonals define a walkway that either recedes with frightening rapidity or crashes forward into the viewer's space.

Whether explicit or implicit, an idea must unite the sentences of a paragraph. If your paragraph has only one or two sentences, the chances are that you have not adequately developed its idea.

A paragraph can make several points, but the points must be related, and the nature of the relationship must be indicated so that there is, in effect, a single unifying point. Here is a satisfactory paragraph about the first examples of Egyptian sculpture in the round. (The figures to which the author refers are not reproduced here.)

Unified

> Sculpture in the round began with small, crude human figures of mud, clay, and ivory (Fig. 4). The faces are pinched out of the clay until they have a form like the beak of a bird. Arms and legs are long rolls attached to the slender bodies of men, while the hips of the women's figures are enormously exaggerated. A greater variety of attitudes and better workmanship are found in the ivory figurines which sometimes have the eye indicated by the insertion of a bead (Fig. 4). It is the carving of animals, however, such as the ivory hippopotamus from Mesaeed in Fig. 4, or the pottery figure (Fig. 6) which points the way toward the rapid advance which was to be made in the Hierakonpolis ivories and in the small carvings of Dynasty I.
>
> —William Stevenson Smith, *Ancient Egypt*, 4th ed. (Boston: Museum of Fine Arts, 1960), 20

Smith is talking about several kinds of objects, but his paragraph is held together by a unifying topic idea. The idea is this:

> Although most of the early sculpture in the round is crude, some pieces anticipate the later, more skilled work.

Notice, by the way, that Smith builds his material to a climax, beginning with the weakest pieces (the human figures) and moving to the best pieces (the animals).

The beginning and especially the end of a paragraph are usually the most emphatic parts. A beginning may offer a generalization that the rest of the paragraph supports. Or the early part may offer details, preparing for the generalization in the later part. Or the paragraph may move from cause to effect. Although no rule can cover all paragraphs (except that all must make a point in an orderly way), one can hardly go wrong in making the first sentence either a transition from the previous paragraph or a statement of the paragraph's topic. Here is a sentence that makes a transition and states the topic:

> Not only representational paintings but also abstract paintings have a kind of subject matter.

This sentence gets the reader from subject matter in representational paintings (which the writer has been talking about) to subject matter in abstract paintings (which the writer goes on to talk about).

Consider the following two effective paragraphs on Anthony Van Dyck's portrait of Charles I (see page 209).

Unified

Rather than begin with an analysis of Van Dyck's finished painting of Charles I, let us consider the problem of representation as it might have been posed in the artist's mind. Charles I saw himself as a cavalier or perfect gentleman, a patron of the arts as well as the embodiment of the state's power and king by divine right. He prided himself more on his dress than on robust and bloody physical feats. Van Dyck had available to him precedents for depicting the ruler on horseback or in the midst of a strenuous hunt, but he set these aside. How then could he show the regal qualities and sportsmanship of a dismounted monarch in a landscape? Compounding the artist's problem was the King's short stature, just about 5 feet, 5 inches. To have placed him next to his horse, scaled accurately, could have presented an ungainly problem of their relative heights. Van Dyck found a solution to this last problem in a painting by Titian, in which a horse stood with neck bowed, a natural gesture that in the presence of the King would have appropriate connotations. Placing the royal pages behind the horse and farther from the viewer than the King reduced their height and obtrusiveness, yet furnished some evidence of the ruler's authority over men. Nature also is made to support and suitably frame the King. Van Dyck stations the monarch on a small rise and paints branches of a tree overhead to resemble a royal canopy. The low horizon line and our point of view, which allows the King to look down on us, subtly increase the King's stature. The restful stance yet inaccessibility of Charles depends largely upon his pose, which is itself a work of art, derived from art, notably that of Rubens. Its casualness is deceptive; while seemingly at rest in an informal moment, the King is every inch the perfect gentleman and chief of state. The cane was a royal prerogative in European courts of the time, and its presence along with the sword symbolized the gentleman-king.

Just as the subtle pose depicts majesty, Van Dyck's color, with its regal silver and gold, does much to impart grandeur to the painting and to achieve a sophisticated focus on the King. The red, silver, gold, and black of his costume are the most saturate and intense of the painting's colors and contrast with the darker or less intense coloring of adjacent areas. Largely from Rubens, Van Dyck had learned the painterly tricks by which materials and textures could be vividly simulated, so that the eye moves with pleasure from the silvery silken sheen of the coat to the golden leather sword harness and then on to the coarser surface of the horse, with a similar but darker combination of colors in its coat and mane. Van Dyck's portrait is evidence that, whatever one's sympathy for the message, the artist's virtuosity and aesthetic can still be enjoyed.

—Albert E. Elsen, *Purposes of Art*, 3rd ed. (New York: Holt, 1972), 221–222

Anthony van Dyck, *Portrait of Charles I Hunting*, c. 1653. Oil on canvas, 8′1″ × 6′11″ (2.7 × 2.1 m). Inv 1236. Musees des Louvre, Paris/RMN Reunion des Musees Nationaux, France. SCALA/Art Resource, NY.

Let's pause to look at the structure of these two paragraphs. The first begins in effect by posing a question (What were the problems Van Dyck faced?) and then goes on to discuss Van Dyck's solutions. This paragraph could have been divided into two, the second beginning "Nature also"; that is, if Elsen had felt that the reader needed a break, he could have provided it after the discussion of the king's position and before the discussion of nature and the king's pose within nature. But in fact a reader can take in all of the material without a break, and so the topic idea is "Van Dyck's solutions to the problem."

The second paragraph grows nicely out of the first, largely because Elsen begins the second paragraph with a helpful transition, "Just as." The topic idea here is the relevance of the picture's appeal through color; the argument is supported with concrete details, and the paragraph ends by pushing the point a bit further: The colors in the painting not only are relevant to the character portrayed but also have a hold on us.

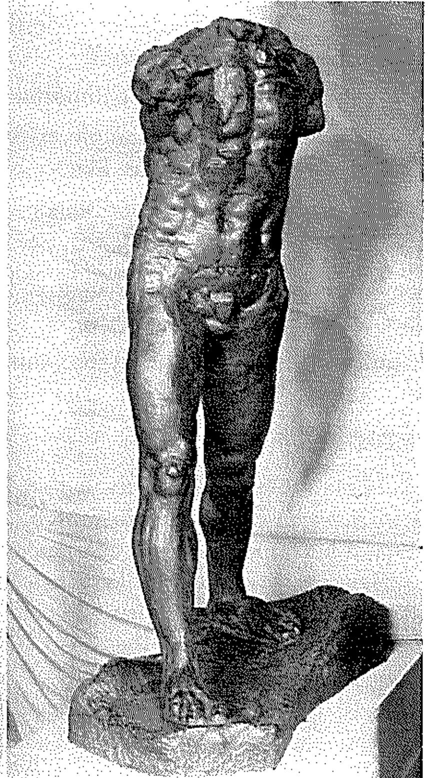
Coherence

A kit containing all of the parts for a model airplane has unity—it does not contain any parts for a battleship—but it does not have coherence, since it is just a lot of loose pieces rather than an ordered whole. Make sure that your paragraphs have not only unity but also coherence. You need to connect or relate each sentence to the preceding and the following sentences, so that (from the reader's point of view) your writing flows, making a steady, intelligible argument.

Nothing is wrong with obvious **transitions** such as *moreover, furthermore, in addition* (these transitions indicate amplification); *but, on the contrary, however, nevertheless, although* (these transitions indicate contrast or concession); *in short, briefly, in other words* (restatement); *finally, therefore, to sum up* (conclusion). But—a transition that tells you to expect some sort of change of direction—transitions should not start every sentence (they can be buried thus: "Degas, moreover, . . . "), and transitions need not appear anywhere in the sentence.

The point is not that transitions must be explicit but that the argument must proceed clearly. The gist of a paragraph might run thus:

> Speaking broadly, there were in Japan two traditions of portraiture. . . . The first. . . . The second. . . . The chief difference. . . . But both traditions. . . .



Auguste Rodin, 1840–1917, Walking Man, *L'homme qui marche*, 1877. Bronze, 7′11¾″. Rodin Museum, Paris. Photographer: Erich Lessing. Erich Lessing/Art Resource, NY.

It is not enough to give the reader pieces of information; rather, sentence by sentence you have to indicate how the pieces are connected.

Consider the following lucid paragraph from an essay on Auguste Rodin's *Walking Man:*

Coherent

> *L'Homme qui marche* is not really walking. He is staking his claim on as much ground as his great wheeling stride will encompass. Though his body's axis leans forward, his rearward left heel refuses to lift. In fact, to hold both feet down on the ground, Rodin made the left thigh (measured from groin to patella) one-fifth as long again as its right counterpart.
>
> —Leo Steinberg, *Other Criteria* (New York: Oxford, 1972), 349

Notice how easily we move through the paragraph: The figure "is not. . . . He is. . . . Though. . . . In fact. . . ." These little words take us neatly from point to point.

Here are some of the most common transitional words and phrases, categorized by their function:

amplification or likeness: similarly, likewise, and, also, again, second, third, in addition, furthermore, moreover, finally

comparison: likewise, similarly, in the same manner

consequence or cause and effect: thus, so, then, it follows, as a result, therefore, hence

contrast or concession: but, on the contrary, on the other hand, by contrast, of course, however, still, doubtless, nevertheless, granted that, conversely, although, admittedly

emphasis: chiefly, equally, indeed, even more important

example: for example, for instance, as an example, specifically, consider as an illustration, that is, such as, like

place: in the foreground, further back, in the distance

restatement: in short, that is, in effect, in other words

time and sequence: afterward, next, then, as soon as, later, until, when, finally, last, at last

summary (conclusion): finally, in short, therefore, thus, to sum up

Introductory Paragraphs

Vasari, in *Lives of the Painters* (1560, 1568), tells us that Fra Angelico "would never take his pencil in his hand till he had first uttered a prayer." All writers can easily understand his hope for divine assistance. Beginning a long poem, Lord Byron aptly wrote, "Nothing so difficult as a beginning." Of course, your job is made easier if your instructor has told you to begin your analysis with some basic facts: identification of the object (title, museum, museum number), subject matter (e.g., mythological, biblical, portrait), and technical information (material, size, condition). Even if your instructor has not told you to begin thus, you may find it helpful to start along these lines. The mere act of writing *anything* will probably help you to get going.

Still, almost all writers—professional as well as student writers—find that the beginning paragraphs of their drafts are false starts. Blaise Pascal shrewdly noted that "The last thing one discovers in composing a work is what to put first." In your finished paper the opening cannot be mere throat clearing. It should be interesting and informative. Don't take your title ("Space in Manet's *A Bar at the Folies-Bergère*") and merely paraphrase it in your first sentence: "This essay will study space in Manet's *A Bar at the Folies-Bergère*." There is no information about the topic here, at least none beyond what the title already gave, and there is no information about you either—that is, there is no sense of your response to the topic, such as might be present in, say,

> The space in *A Bar at the Folies-Bergère* is puzzling; one at first wonders where the man is standing, whose reflection we see in the upper right.

This brief opening illustrates a surefire way to begin:

- Identify the artwork(s) you will discuss.
- Suggest your thesis in the opening paragraph, moving from a generalization ("The space in the picture is puzzling") to some supporting details ("we are unsure of the position of the man whose reflection we see").

Such an introduction quickly and effectively gets down to business; especially in a short paper, there is no need (or room) for an in-depth introduction.

Notice in the following example, the opening paragraph from an essay on Buddhist art in Japan, how the writer moves from a "baffling diversity" to "one major thread of continuity."

Effective Opening

> Amid the often baffling diversity which appears in so much of the history of Japanese art, one major thread of continuity may be traced throughout the evolution of religious painting and sculpture. This tradition was based on the great international style of East Asian Buddhist imagery, which reached its maturity during the early eighth century in Tang China and remained a strong influence in Japan through the thirteenth century.
>
> —John Rosenfield, *Japanese Arts of the Heian Period: 794–1185* (New York: Japan Society, 1967), 23

Similarly, in the next example, the paragraph moves from a general comment about skin-clinging garments to an assertion of the thesis (the convention is exaggerated in English Neoclassical art), and this thesis is then supported with concrete details.

Effective Opening

> The pictorial and sculptural custom of clothing the nude in skin-clinging dress has many and often-copied Classical precedents, but the erotic emphasis of this convention seems exaggerated in English art of the Neoclassic period more than at other times and places. The shadowy meeting of thighs, the smooth domes of bosom and backside, are all insisted on more pruriently through the lines of the dress than they were by contemporary French artists or by Botticelli and Mantegna and Desiderio da Settignano, who were attempting the same thing in the Renaissance—or, indeed, than by the Greek sculptors. The popular

artists Rowlandson and Gillray naturally show this impulse most blatantly in erotic cartoons and satirical illustrations, in which women have enormous bubbly hemispheres fore and aft, outlined by the emphatically sketched lines of their dress.

—Anne Hollander, *Seeing Through Clothes* (New York: Viking, 1978), 118

Here are three other effective ways to begin an essay:

- Use a quotation (notice the use of a quotation from Vasari, on page 212, at the beginning of this section on introductions).
- Use an interesting relevant fact, such as "Grant Wood's *American Gothic* seems to be so American a painting that it comes as a surprise to learn that it is indebted to European sources."
- Ask a provocative question, such as "Why shouldn't we consider Titian's *Venus of Urbino* a pornographic picture?" or "Does it make a difference if the subjects of Grant Wood's *American Gothic* are a father and daughter rather than a husband and wife?"

Sample Revised Paragraph

~~The formal elements of a work of art combine to form a dominant impression that contributes significantly to the understanding of the work's meaning.~~ Two sculptures of seated figures ~~located~~ in the Boston Museum of Fine Arts provide good examples of the principle that in a work of art, form as well as subject matter establishes the meaning. ~~this principle.~~ Dating from the Fourth Dynasty of Old Kingdom Egypt (2613-2494 B.C.), is a foot-high statue of Prince Khunera, ~~This sculpture,~~ originally placed in his burial site at Giza, depicts the prince sitting cross-legged like a scribe. The yellow limestone sculpture is somewhat chipped and cracked but is generally intact. ~~as is~~ The second work of art, the Bodhisattva of Compassion, also known as Avalokiteshvara, carved from a black stone called schist, ~~the Bodhisattva~~ was made in Bihar, in eastern India, in the mid-tenth century A.D. The Bodhisattva is more than twice the size of the prince, but the essential differences are conveyed chiefly by elements of design. ~~Although more than twice the size of the prince, he sits in a similar position. However, both the body language and the overall impression conveyed by the two sculptures differ greatly. Skillful use of~~ ~~the formal elements of design gives~~ Prince Khunera a sense of eternal stillness, whereas ~~and~~ the Bodhisattva of Compassion conveys a sense of movement and accessibility. ~~making~~ Each impression corresponds with the religious meaning and purpose of the object.

Student's revision of the opening paragraph of a draft of an essay comparing two sculptures. ☞ The student probably deleted the first sentence because she realized she was lecturing—at length—about a point that her readers would regard as obvious. In the revision she takes what is essential from the first sentence of the draft and incorporates it into the next sentence, thus getting a stronger opening sentence. ☞ In the original version the second sculpture (the Bodhisattva) is weakly introduced by being tacked on to the end of a sentence about the first sculpture (the prince); in the revision the Bodhisattva rightly gets its own sentence. ☞ The sprawling last sentence of the original paragraph is, in the revision, converted into two sentences, allowing the paragraph to end more emphatically.

A RULE FOR WRITERS:

The introductory paragraph usually identifies the works and indicates the writer's thesis, but whatever it says, it must be interesting.

Concluding Paragraphs

The preceding discussion of opening paragraphs quotes Lord Byron: "Nothing so difficult as a beginning." But Byron went on to add, "Unless perhaps the end."

In conclusions, as in introductions, try to say something interesting. It is not of the slightest interest to say "Thus we see . . . " and then go on to echo the title and the first paragraph. There is some justification for a summary at the end of a long paper because the reader may have half forgotten some of the ideas presented thirty pages earlier, but a paper that can easily be held in the mind needs something different. A good concluding paragraph does more than provide an echo of what the writer has already said. It may round out the previous discussion, normally with a few sentences that summarize (without the obviousness of "We may now

summarize"), but usually it also draws an inference that has not previously been expressed, thus setting the previous material in a fresh perspective. A good concluding paragraph closes the issue while enriching it. You can often get ideas for a good concluding paragraph by asking yourself, "What are the implications?" Your response to this question probably will help you to write a paragraph that goes beyond restating your earlier material.

Consider the following example, the concluding paragraph of an essay by a student (Jane Holly) on small gilt bronzes (2 or 3 inches tall) of the Buddha Shakyamuni, produced in Japan in the seventh century AD. For an example of such an image, see page 157.

Effective Ending

> Small gilt bronzes of the type that we have been discussing are almost unknown outside of Japan, and they are rare even in Japan. Temples do not have them, since they are too small for public worship, and museums rarely display them, since the casual viewer would pass them by, thinking of them as trifles. When we think of a Japanese Buddha, we probably call to mind some enormous figure, such as the seated Great Buddha at Kamakura—about thirty-four feet tall—which is known throughout the world because airlines often use pictures of it on travel posters. But these small gilded images, doubtless commissioned by wealthy people for use in small shrines in their homes, are by no means trivial. They were obviously made with extreme care, and gilding was a costly, time-consuming process, so the bronzes must have been highly valued. Today, as familiarity with East Asian art increases in America, we are beginning to see the beauty and importance of these physically small but spiritually great works.

Pretty much the same technique is used at the end of Elsen's second paragraph on Van Dyck's *Charles I* (page 208), where the writer moves from a detailed discussion of the picture to the assertion that the picture continues to attract us.

Don't feel that you must always offer a conclusion in your last paragraph. When you have finished your analysis, it may be enough to stop—especially if your paper is fairly short, let's say fewer than five pages. If, for example, you have throughout your paper argued that a certain Japanese print shows a Western influence in its treatment of space, you need scarcely reaffirm the overall thesis in your last paragraph. Probably it will be conclusion enough if you just offer your final evidence, in a well-written sentence, and then stop.

Because all writers have to find out what they think about any given topic, and have to find the strategies appropriate for presenting these thought to a particular audience, I hesitate to offer a do-it-yourself kit for final paragraphs, but the following simple devices often work:

- End with quotation, especially a quotation that amplifies or varies a quotation used in the opening paragraph.
- End with some idea or detail from the beginning of the essay, thus bringing the essay full circle.
- End with a new (but related) point, one that takes your discussion a step further.
- End with an allusion, say to a historical or mythological figure or event, putting your topic in a larger framework.
- End with a glance at the readers—not with a demand that they mount the barricades, but with a suggestion that the next move is theirs.

If you adopt any of these devices, do so quietly; the aim is not to write a grand finale, but to complete or round out a discussion.

All essayists will have to find their own ways of ending each essay; the five strategies suggested are common, but they are not for you if you don't find them useful. And so, rather than ending this section with rules about how to end essays, I suggest how not to end them:

A RULE FOR WRITERS:

Don't merely summarize, don't say "in conclusion," don't introduce a totally new point, and don't apologize.

✓ Checklist for Revising Paragraphs

Have I asked myself the following questions?

- ☐ Does the paragraph *say* anything? Does it have substance?
- ☐ Does the paragraph have a topic sentence? If so, is it in the best place? If the paragraph doesn't have a topic sentence, might one improve the paragraph?