**Guide to Writing a Formal Analysis**

**The Basics**
In the simplest terms, a formal analysis is an analysis of any artwork in terms of its formal qualities. This type of analysis will identify different forms and elements the artist used; however, it goes beyond just listing these aspects. It describes the artist’s use of varying elements (line, color, space, and/or texture) and interprets the meaning behind those elements. Keep in mind that not every art element or design principle will apply to every piece of art!

A well-written formal analysis should include the following three items:
- identification of the formal elements and/or design principles used
- clear and elaborative descriptions of the identified elements
- explanation of the effect the elements have on the overall work of art

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**The Four Parts of Analysis**

1. **DESCRIPTION** – defining and describing the work of art using art elements and the principles of design. *“What do you see?”*
   - a. Basic Facts (artist’s name, medium, title, date, location, condition)
   - b. Art Elements (line, shape, light, color, texture, space)
2. **ANALYSIS** – researching the reasons why the artist used certain elements and exploring what these features suggest about the work. *“How did the artist do it?”*
   - a. Subject Matter (iconography)
   - b. Formal Qualities (perspective, brushwork or handling, proportion, composition)
   - c. Design Principles (unity, variety, balance, emphasis, scale, mass/volume, rhythm, setting, interior/exterior relationship)
3. **INTERPRETATION** – discovering the meaning behind the artwork and relating it to historical context. *“Why did the artist create it and what does it mean?”*
   - a. Theme (overall meaning of the work)
   - b. Style (personal style, national style, period style)
   - c. Patronage (commissioner of the work)
   - d. Historical Context (evidence of the time)
4. **JUDGMENT** – assessing if the work succeeded in conveying its intended purpose, in relation to other works from the same period. *“Is it a good piece of art?”*
   - a. Art Historian Critique
   - b. Historical Significance
   - c. Personal Statement