How To Analyze a Work of Art

“We only see what we look for, but we only look for what we can see.”
Heinrich Wölflin

For inquiries and further help, contact the Art History subject specialist or your professor.

1. Find out basic information about the artist:
You may do this simply through the introduction of the artist by your professor during lectures, but also through dictionaries and encyclopedias:

- Gowing, Lawrence. *A Biographical Dictionary of Artists*. Full references to major and minor Western artists. Includes artists from other cultures, chronological charts, illustrations, author and subject indexes. 
  **REF N40.B53 1995**
  **N6490.C6567 1989** (Floor 3)
- *The Dictionary of Art*. Grove’s Dictionaries, 1996. Complete coverage of photography, and fine or decorative arts from Asia, Africa, Australia, the Americas and Europe from pre-history to present.
  **N31.D5** or online access via Library Catalogue

2. Describe the work of art through a Formal Analysis:
Formal analysis requires a critical look at the artwork, not a simple description of it. Looking closely will help you to better understand the artwork as a whole, and entry points are elements such as line, shape, color, texture and mass. Be sure to read your assignment carefully, as some professors expect a formal analysis alone, while others require you to frame your formal analysis in its historical and cultural context, with interpretations of the possible meanings of the work.

Visual Rhetoric & Visual Literacy - Writing about Paintings & Photographs:

3. Refer to resources that aid in the methods for interpretations and appreciation of a work of art.
(Approaches to interpreting and understanding art in a wider social context such as feminist art criticism, visual perception, art appreciation, aesthetics, semiotics, etc.)

- Harris, Jonathon P. *Art History: The Key Concepts*. London; New York; Routledge, 2006. A comprehensive and essential critical guide to undergraduate and postgraduate students in the history of art, covering a full range of issues such as cultural theory and media studies.
  REF N40.B53 1995
  REF N85.A654
  N7480.A32 (Floor 3)

4. Tips on finding primary materials for the artist or their work. Primary source materials may be autobiographical, biographical, or historical information and provide valuable insight to the artist's life and their work. Primary sources may be found in general texts of the period or in separate printed text in the form of critical reception and exhibition reviews, journals, diaries, poems, letters and artist interviews.

- **Author searches**: searching an artist as the author may be helpful to find primary sources. For example, “Gogh, Vincent” may retrieve *The Letters of Vincent van Gogh*.

- **Key Word Searches**: Searching key words may also link to you primary documents. For example, “art and history and (sources or document*)” may retrieve *The Renaissance and Reformation: a History in Documents*. (The * allows the search to identify resources that may contain the word documents, documentation, and document.)

5. Examine the work of art in relation to similar works of art of that period, and examine the historical and cultural context of the period in which the artist worked. Look up the theme of the work of art for a contextual analysis.

- Try a KEYWORD search such as “Women – History – Social conditions” or “Art and Philosophy” or “Art and Politics”