

Art Criticism

Excerpts from ARTTALK by Rosalind Ragans

How to Criticize a Work of Art

Doing art criticism is like playing detective. You must assume that the artist has a secret message hidden inside the work. Your job is to solve the mystery and find the message. The following four steps, which must be taken in order, are description, analysis, interpretation, and judgment. By taking these steps you will be able to answer the following questions:

1. "What do I see?" (description)
2. "How is the work organized?" (analysis)
3. "What is happening?" and "What is the artist trying to say?" (interpretation)
4. "What do I think of the work?" (judgment)

First you will collect facts and clues. Then you will make guesses. You will decide what you think the artist is trying to say. Finally, you will express your personal likes and dislikes.

Step One: Description

To begin art criticism, make a list of all the things you see in the work. This step is meant to slow your pace. Slowing down helps you notice things you might otherwise miss. During this step you must be objective. In other words, give only the facts. Include a description of the size of the work and the medium used.

Step Two: Analysis

During step two you are still collecting facts. Now, however, you will pay attention to the elements of art and principles of design. You will study how the artist has used each element (Line, Shape, Form, Space, Color, Value and Texture) and principle (Proportions, Balance, Emphasis, Rhythm, Pattern, Unity and Variety).

Step Three: Interpretation

During step three, you have two questions to answer: "What is happening?" and "What is the artist trying to say?" You will interpret (explain or tell the meaning of) the work. It is here that you can make guesses. Interpretation is the most difficult art criticism step for some people. But it can also be the most creative and the most rewarding. You must use your intelligence, imagination, and courage. You must not be afraid to make an interpretation that is different from someone else's. After all, you are different from anyone else.

How you interpret a work of art will depend on what you have done and seen in your life. However, your interpretation should be based upon the facts and clues you collected during the first two steps. Your interpretation can express your feelings, but your feelings must be backed up by observation.

Step Four: Judgment

In step four you will judge whether or not the work succeeds or fails. This is the time to give your opinions. No one can ever tell you what to like or dislike. You must make up your own mind. To make a good judgment you need to be honest with yourself. You need to know why you feel the way you do.

People who study or judge art sometimes use certain theories that say how a work should be considered. Critics regularly use three of these theories—imitationalism, formalism, and emotionalism. Some people think art should imitate what we see in the real world. Using this theory to judge art is called **imitationalism**. Others feel that the most important part of a work is the use of the principles and elements of art. According to this theory, called **formalism**, the work is successful if the textures, colors, lines and so on are organized properly. Still others believe that art must speak to the viewer through her or his emotions. This theory says that the most important part of the work is the mood the artist communicates. This last theory is called **emotionalism**.

You can judge art using one theory, or more than one, depending upon the type of art and your own purposes. If you stick to one theory, however, you may miss some exciting discoveries in a work. Perhaps the best method is to use all three. Then you will be able to discover as much as possible about a particular piece of art.

Judging Your Own Work

Art criticism will help you analyze your own works of art. The four steps of art criticism will help you be as honest and unbiased as possible. The analysis step will probably be the most useful. It will help you perceive how you have used the elements and principles of art. When you analyze your work you should find out why your work either needs improvement or is a total success.