

Colour

The colour combinations artists use can have a dramatic effect on the way we feel. Discover how artists have used colour by looking at a range of works and answering these questions.

Colour range

- Identify the colour types in the art work – eg, primary (red, yellow, blue), secondary (purple, green, orange), complementary (red and green, orange and blue, purple and yellow), monochrome (shades of one colour). Are any areas on the colour wheel missing? If so, which ones?
- Are the colours naturalistic or enhanced?
- Has the artist used pairs of complementary colours? If so, are these colours together or apart? What effect do they create?

Tone

- Has the artist used shades (colour plus black) or tints (colour plus white)?
- Is the overall colour tone light or dark, bright or dull?
- How does the overall colour tone affect the mood of the painting?

Warmth

- Does the art work include warm or cool colours? If it includes both, note their position in relation to each other. What effect do these colours have on how the art work makes you feel?

Depth

- Do colours help to establish a sense of depth in the work, or do they flatten it? Have the colours been blended to define 3-D forms, or are there flat areas of distinct colour?

Colour

Contrast

- Have contrasting (strikingly different) colours been used for a particular effect in the art work?
If so, describe this effect.

Density

- Are the colours opaque (solid) or translucent (see-through), or a mixture?
- Can you see any layers of colour?
- Describe the density, sheen, and surface of the colour.

Composition

- Which colours are dominant? To identify them, note the path your eye takes over the art work.
- Has colour been used to link different parts of the composition?

Symbolism

- How does colour contribute to the meaning of the work? Do any of the colours symbolise something? Could the artist be using certain colours for cultural reasons? If so, which colours and why?

Effect

- Describe the overall effect of colour in the art work. Do the colours evoke a certain mood, atmosphere, or emotional response?



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Context

Artists create their works in all kinds of cultures and societies. How does context and personal experience affect different art works? Look at a range of works and answer these questions to find out.

Artist

- How might the artist's background, age, gender, ethnicity, or beliefs have influenced the work?
- Has the artist been inspired by their experiences of particular social, cultural, historical, political, or environmental events? If so, describe how these experiences are reflected in the work.

Physical environment

- How does the art work's location affect the way you 'read' it? Comment on the space, lighting, and scale.
- Was the work inspired by or created for this particular location? If so, how does it relate to the site?
- Was the work created for another site? If so, where? How did it relate to that site?
- Is it exhibited with other works? If so, comment on their relationships, and the effect these have on your interpretation of the art work.

Other works

- How does this work relate to other works by the same artist?

Other artists

- Identify any connections with other artists' work and discuss.

Context

Culture

- Is the work making a cultural statement? What aspects of which culture(s) does the work relate to?
- Does your cultural background affect the way you 'read' the painting?

Society

- Was the work made in a society that is different to the one in which you are viewing it? If so, identify any differences. How might this affect the way you interpret the work?
- Does the art work have a political, social, economic, or environmental role, function, or message? If so, what is it?

History

- Does the work relate to a historical event or era? If so, which one, and how?

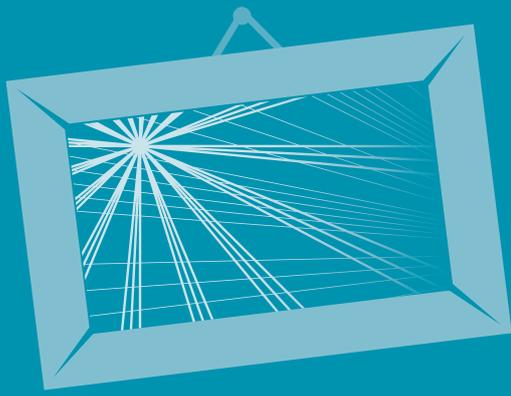
Your view

- Do you feel a personal connection to this work?
- How does your own viewpoint, and your cultural, social, and political context, affect the way you interpret the work?
- Identify key ways in which your personal context may differ from that of the artist. How might these differences affect your understanding of the meaning of the work?



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Composition & space

For centuries, artists have developed ingenious techniques to create the illusion of depth, or 3-D space. To find out how artists are tricking your eyes, look at a range of paintings and answer these questions.

Focus point

- What is the main focus point of the painting? Generally, the focus point is where your eye goes first when you look at the painting. Where does your eye travel to next?

Composition

- Can you see an underlying structure to the painting? To find it, note the route your eye takes to journey over the surface of the painting. Is the structure simple or complex?
- What effect does the composition have on your interpretation of the art work? Has composition been used symbolically or to create narrative? If the elements were rearranged, how might this affect your interpretation?

Depth

- Does the composition include a sense of depth (3-D space), or is the image more or less flat? If there is depth, can you identify what is in the background, foreground, and middle distance?

Vanishing point

- Does the composition include a vanishing point (the most distant point in the painting)? If so, identify where it is and discuss why it is there.

Perspective

- Is perspective (the illusion of depth) a feature of the composition? If so, describe the type of perspective and how it has been constructed. Eg, has linear perspective (an underlying structure of diagonal lines converging at a vanishing point) been used? Or has the artist created an illusion of depth through colour, the definition or blurring of detail, or changes in scale?

Composition & space



Viewpoint

- Describe the viewpoint of the painting. The viewpoint is where the artist has positioned the viewer in relation to the painted scene. To find it, first find the focus point of the painting. Are you looking up at it, down on it (aerial), from a side angle to it, or directly at it? How does this viewpoint affect your interpretation of the art work?

Balance

- Is the composition balanced (symmetrical) or unbalanced (asymmetrical)? Imagine dividing the painting in half horizontally, vertically, or diagonally. Then look at each half to see if there are more elements on one side than the other. Which elements are being used to balance or unbalance the composition? Does this draw your eye to one part of the painting more than to others?

Cropping

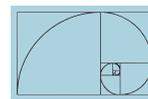
- Have objects or figures been cropped? If so, what effect does this have?

Rule of thirds

- Has the rule of thirds been used to structure the composition? Imagine dividing the picture into a grid of nine equal sections. Look along these imaginary grid lines and within the nine sections to see if the artist has placed key parts of the painting along or in them.

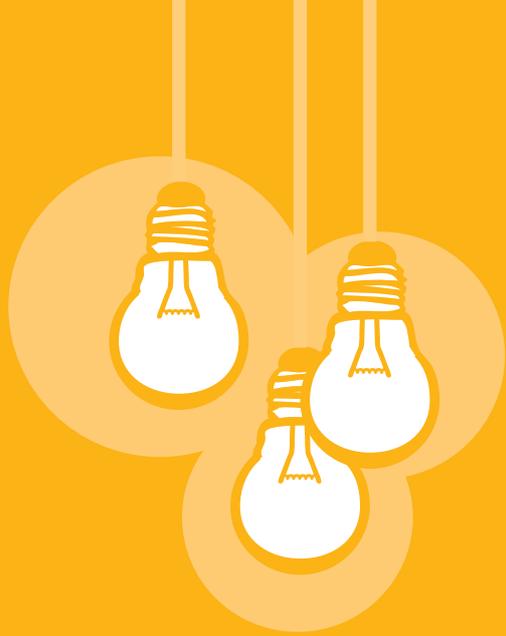
Golden section

- Has the artist used the golden section to structure the composition? The golden section is a mathematical ratio that produces shapes of constant proportions. In nature, it often appears as an expanding spiral – eg, a koru or shell.



Scale

- Has the artist exaggerated the scale or proportion of any elements in the composition? How does this affect the way you view the image?



Light & tone

Light is a crucial element for artists to consider in their work. Some manipulate it for dramatic effect. To explore the wide variety of ways that different artists have used light, look at a range of paintings and answer these questions.

Tone

- Describe the tonal range (brightness levels) of the work. Is there a full tonal range, or is the work predominantly light or dark? What effect does this have on the painting? What would the effect be if more or less light were introduced?

Contrast

- Are there clear areas of contrast? What effect does this have?

Light source

- Is the source of light in the work obvious? If so, what direction is it coming from? To find out, imagine you are holding a torch as the light source for the painting. Where would you need to point the torch?

Consistency

- Is the light source consistent (going in the same direction and having the same intensity throughout the entire painting)? If there are inconsistencies, where are they?

Quality

- How would you describe the quality of the light? Is it hard or soft? Look at the edges of objects and their shadows. Is the light dramatic, mysterious, peaceful, gentle, atmospheric, diffuse, dull, sharp?

Shadow

- Can you see any shadows? If so, in which direction are they falling? Are the shadows long or short? What colour are they? Do the shadows have symbolic meaning? Can you see any chiaroscuro (light emerging from areas of darkness)?

Light & tone

Colour

- Is the light in the painting coloured or white?
Look at the objects in the painting and describe how light affects their colours.

Setting

- Is the light natural or artificial? Does it suggest a certain setting – a place, time of day, or season? Eg, is the light warm or cool, and is the source of the light high or low?

Composition

- Is light being used to lead your eye to particular areas of the painting? If so, which ones? What effect does this have on the way you interpret the work?

Form

- Is light being used to create or define 3-D forms in the painting? Imagine what effect altering the light's intensity or direction might have on the forms.

Symbolism

- How does the use of light contribute to the meaning or message of the art work? Is it being used symbolically? If so, how?





Meaning & message

Artists use a range of ingenious methods to communicate meaning in their work. To discover some different approaches, look at a range of art works and answer these questions.

Representation

- Is the art work representational (depicting something easily recognisable) or abstract (not a realistic representation), or both?
- Can you detect a clear meaning or message, or is the artist more concerned with formal elements, such as light, space, and colour?

Symbolism

- Has the artist used any signs or symbols in the art work? If so, for each, identify whether it is personal, cultural, or universal. What might it represent?
- How would you describe the relationships between the symbols (eg, clashing, contrasting, harmonious, incongruous, sympathetic, analogous, sequential, controversial)?

Iconography

- Has the artist used religious or spiritual iconography in the art work? If so, what, where, and to what effect?

Objects

- Can you see recognisable objects in the art work? Why do you think they have been included? Do they have any symbolic associations or relationships with each other that may contribute to the meaning or message of the work?

Meaning & message

Narrative

- Does the art work have a narrative (story)?
If so, describe the time, place, and setting of the story (eg, future, night, fantasy, dream, memory).
What do you think is happening?
Are there figures or animals in the work?
What role could they play in the narrative?

Appropriation

- Are there elements of the work that have been appropriated (taken from other art works)? If so, describe them. Do you think this was deliberate or accidental? Why?

Subject

- What subjects or themes do you think the artist is exploring through this piece? Describe them.

Intention

- What message do you think the artist is trying to communicate? Is the work making a social or political statement? Is it controversial? How?

Title

- Does the title of the work contribute to its message or meaning? How?

Text

- Is there any text in the work? If so, discuss whether it helps to communicate the message of the work.

Emotion

- Does the work make you feel a certain way?
Describe this feeling and how it relates to the meaning or message the artist might be trying to convey.

Personal response

- What was your first impression of the art work? What do you think or feel about it now? Do you think the artist has succeeded in getting their message across? Why or why not?





Personal response

What does an art work mean? No two people will have the same answer. Your perspectives, opinions, and feelings all play a part in your interpretation. To find out what influences your response to art, look at a range of works and answer these questions.

Associations

- Describe the various elements of the art work (eg, figures, objects, colours, shapes). What personal associations do you make with these elements, and the work as a whole?

Ideas

- What ideas and beliefs do you think the artist might be communicating? How do these differ from your own?

Memories

- Does the work trigger any memories for you? Describe them.

Emotion

- Does the work stimulate an emotional response in you? If so, explain how it makes you feel and why.

Intrigue

- Do any elements of the work intrigue you? Describe them and their effect on you. If you could talk to the artist about this work, what questions would you ask?

Message

- What messages do you think the artist might be communicating through the work?
- What other messages do you perceive in the work?

Inspiration

- Does anything about the work (eg, subject, technique) inspire you? Describe what you might create in response.

Personal response

Style and subject matter

- Does the style or subject matter of the work remind you of any works by other artists? If so, identify these aspects and discuss.

Context

- How is the art work displayed, and how does this affect your response to it? How might your interpretation of the work differ if you were to see an image of it in a book or online?
- How do the labels and any other interpretive material (such as sketchbooks, audio guides, online descriptions) affect your experience of the work?

Wider context

- What do other people think of this work?
Eg, people you know, artists, critics, curators?

Opinion

- What is your opinion of the work? Do you think it is effective? Do you like it? Why? Why not?





Painting

The way an artist uses paint can have a dramatic impact on the way we perceive their work. Discover some painting techniques and processes by looking at a range of art works and answering these questions.

Materials

- What materials have been used to create the work? Eg, oil paint, acrylic paint, watercolour, gouache, pencil, crayon, pastel, charcoal, ink, glitter, paper, wood, canvas.

Consistency

- How would you describe the consistency of the paint? Is it impasto (thick) or thin, or a mixture? Is the paint translucent (see-through) or opaque (solid), or a mixture?
- Are there layers of paint?
- Do you think other materials have been added to the paint? If so, which ones?

Technique

- Has the artist used a brush to apply the paint? If so, describe what type of brush and to what effect. Can you see any individual brush marks? Eg, has the paint been applied with a large brush in broad, long strokes and wet washes (can you see drips?), or with a small brush in short strokes with thick, dry layers?
- Is the brushwork gestural (expressive and physical) or mechanical (flat, hard edged)?
- Are areas of paint blended or hard edged, or a mixture of both? Has the artist used glazing, scumbling (softening or blending), or crackle effects?

Painting

Effect

- Do you think the artist used a particular painting technique to reinforce a specific meaning? If the paint had been applied differently, what effect might this have had on your perception of the work?

Texture

- Is the surface of the work smooth or textured, or are there areas of both? Has the artist used a scratching and scraping technique (sgraffito) to reveal layers underneath?

Application tools

- Has the artist used any tools other than brushes to apply paint or construct the image? Eg, rollers, palette knife, spray paint, fingers, pencils. Describe what tools may have been used, where, and to what effect.

Style

- How would you describe the style of the painting (eg, expressionist, realistic, stylised)? How does the style affect your interpretation of the work?

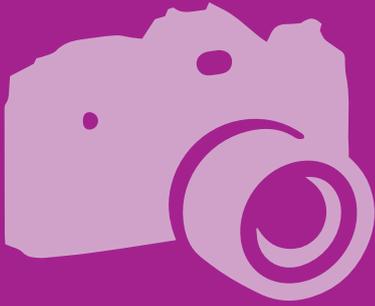
Process

- By looking at the way the paint is applied, can you identify the process the artist used to create the work? Eg, can you predict where they would have started and finished? Did they work intuitively or did they plan? Were stencils, masking, or tracing used? How long do you think the art work took to make?



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Photography

Photography began around 1830, but most people weren't able to instantly capture the world around them until after 1900. It's been said 'the camera never lies'. Keep this in mind as you look at some photographs and consider the following questions.

Photographic style

- What is the main subject of the image?
- How would you describe the style of the photograph? Documentary, abstract, still life, portrait, landscape, nature, fashion, architecture, scientific, fine art, photojournalism, social documentary, snapshot, historical, commercial, conceptual, vernacular, surreal?

Composition

- Can you see an underlying structure for how things have been arranged? Is the composition balanced? Is it simple or complex?
- Has the photographer used the rule of thirds to arrange features within the image? Imagine dividing the image into a grid of nine equal sections. Has the photographer placed key elements along these lines or within these sections?
- Has a sense of depth or perspective been created? Are there leading lines or diagonals? Is scale a key feature?
- Describe the way the composition leads your eye through the image.

Light

- How would you describe the light in the image? Is it natural or artificial? Has the photographer used studio lighting or a flash?
- Is the light directional, creating shadows and depth? If so, where is it coming from? Are there single or multiple light sources? Has the light source been diffused or reflected? Has backlighting been used?
- Does the light create contrast in the image? Is there a full tonal range?
- How would you describe the quality of the light? Hard or soft edged, warm or cool, strong, bright, subtle?
- What impact does the lighting have on the atmosphere of the image?

Photography



Camera angle

- What angle has the photo been taken from?
Is the main focal point in the middle, to one side, above or below the mid-point of the image?
- Has a bird's or worm's eye view been used?
- Is it a close up, mid-range, long shot or panoramic image?
- Has the photographer included a foreground, middle ground and/or background? Which is most prominent?
- What effect does the camera angle have on the way you view the subject?

Focus

- Describe the way the photographer has focused the image. Is it sharply in focus or is some or all of it blurred? If only some parts are in focus, would you describe it as having a shallow depth of field? If it is blurred, has a long exposure time, motion, or a double exposure been used to create the blur, or could it have been achieved by editing?
- What type of lens might the photographer have used? Can you see evidence of a zoom, wide-angle, telescopic, microscopic or fish-eye lens?

Editing and image manipulation

- Do you think the image has been manipulated after it was taken? How? Might the photographer have cropped it or enhanced its colour by using hue separation, brightness controls, or colour saturation? Have they altered the contrast or tonal range?
- Have they applied collage, montage, layering, filters, framing, or cropping techniques to alter the image?
- Describe the impact of any editing or image manipulation techniques.

The message

- What do you think the photo is about? Has the photographer used metaphor, iconography, symbolism, or narrative to construct a meaning or message?
- Do you think the subject has been arranged or not?
- Describe the atmosphere of the image.
- Do you like/dislike it? Why?



Sculpture

Sculptures vary enormously in their materials, techniques, scale, and effects. To explore how different artists create their sculptures, look at a range of works and answer these questions.

Materials

- What materials have been used to create the sculpture? Eg, wood, glass, metal, fabric, bronze, wax, shell, found objects, plastic, clay, wire, plaster, light sources, speakers, digital technology, stone, rubber.

Construction technique

- Was the sculpture made by hand or machine, or both? Describe which tools and construction techniques were used (eg, carving, sewing, weaving, joining, casting, welding, cutting, gluing, modelling, painting, relief, assemblage, binding, wrapping, projection, tying). What is the overall effect?

Meaning

- What does the sculpture mean to you? Do you think the artist has used a particular technique to reinforce the work's meaning? If so, explain where and how. If the sculpture had been created differently with different materials, what effect might this have had on your interpretation? Does the sculpture remind you of anything?

Process

- Does identifying the materials, tools, and construction techniques help you understand the artist's process? Consider these questions:
- Was the sculpture built in separate parts and then assembled?
- Does it have an internal support frame?
- Was it made commercially?
- Was more than one person involved in its creation?
- Were any elements of performance involved?
- How long would it have taken to create?
- How has the process of creating the work contributed to its overall impact?

Sculpture

Subject

- What is the subject matter of the work? Describe what issues and concepts you think it is exploring, and what cultural, historical, and social references it could be making.

Colour

- Describe the range of colours used in the sculpture. Eg, natural, enhanced, warm, cool, bright, tonal, contrasting, symbolic, translucent, opaque.
- How does the colour affect your response to the work?

Surface

- Is the surface of the work smooth or textured, or both? Are you allowed to touch it? If so, what does it feel like? If not, what do you think it might feel like? How has the texture been achieved?

Display

- Is this work an installation (a 3-D work designed to transform the perception of a space)? If so, describe its relationship to the space. If not, describe the way it has been exhibited (eg, plinth, case, lighting, position, arrangement). What effect does this art work's display have on you?

Scale

- How would you describe the way scale is used in the work? Eg, are elements miniature, enormous, out of proportion? Discuss how scale relates to the meaning of the work. What impact does the overall scale of the work have on you?

Style

- How would you describe the style of the sculpture? Eg, realist, stylised, exaggerated, controlled, symbolic, classical, expressionistic, pop art, op art, commercial, minimal, modern, postmodern.
- Is the sculpture abstract or representational, or both? Describe the shapes (2-D) and forms (3-D). How does the style affect your response?

