

# Interpreting Works of Art

DESCRIPTION	FORMAL ANALYSIS	INTERPRETATION	EVALUATION
<p><i>The process of taking inventory of the objects and elements found in a work of art.</i></p> <p>Begin by naming the objects, people, and setting depicted in the work of art, and identifying the materials and/or equipment used to create the work. Then describe the elements of art: color, shape, line, texture, and value.</p>	<p><i>Discovering relationships between elements in the work.</i></p> <p>Because the eye tends to relate objects that are similar in line, shape, color, or texture, and to separate those that are dissimilar, the artist can arrange, repeat, and vary these elements to create unity, variety, emphasis, rhythm, and balance.</p>	<p><i>Finding the meaning in a work of art.</i></p> <p>Use the information gathered during the description and formal analysis stages to arrive at a meaning for the work of art. Interpretation relates to all comprehension skills, with emphasis on inference, deductive reasoning, and drawing conclusions.</p>	<p><i>The process of forming a judgment about the work of art in relation to other works of its type.</i></p> <p>Edmund Burke Feldman wrote, "This aspect of art criticism . . . may be unnecessary if a satisfying interpretation has been carried out."<sup>1</sup> Few people have the expertise to make critical judgments by comparing works of art to similar works from throughout the history of art. However, teachers can ask elementary students basic questions that help in forming aesthetic judgments.</p>
<p><b>Color</b></p> <p>Color can be described by:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>family — primary, secondary, or neutral</li> <li>hue — color name</li> <li>value — lightness or darkness of color</li> <li>warmth — warm colors are red, yellow, orange; cool colors are blue, green, purple</li> </ul>	<p><b>Unity</b></p> <p>The quality of oneness: the ways in which the artist brings together all parts of the composition. Unity can be achieved by using related or repeated elements throughout a composition.</p>	<p><b>Mood/Feelings</b></p> <p>Determine the mood of the work of art from the colors, lines, textures, and movement.</p>	<p><b>Deduce</b></p> <p>To validate student efforts, compare the processes that students have used to create their art with the processes that artists use.</p>
<p><b>Shape</b></p> <p>Spatial forms distinguished by their outlines; they can be geometric or organic, positive or negative.</p>	<p><b>Variety</b></p> <p>Can be achieved through contrast, exaggeration, and visual surprises (for example, bright colors on a dark background, or contrasting patterns).</p>	<p><b>Characters and Setting</b></p> <p>Interpret the gestures, poses, and expressions of the figures; interpret the setting: time, location, season, and details in the environment.</p>	<p><b>Assess</b></p> <p>Evaluate the work in comparison to other works that have a similar subject, style, or technique.</p>
<p><b>Line</b></p> <p>A mark made by any drawing tool; it can be long, short, thick, thin, curved, crossed, dotted, broken, or wavy.</p>	<p><b>Emphasis or Center of Interest</b></p> <p>Can be achieved by planning a work of art so that some feature or element is visually strongest or dominant.</p>	<p><b>Symbolism</b></p> <p>Identify symbols in the work of art and determine how the symbols contribute to the meaning of the art. Objects, colors, lines, and shapes can all have symbolic meaning (for example, purple for royalty, blue for sadness, an eagle for the United States).</p>	<p><b>Critique</b></p> <p>Evaluate the work in comparison to other works by the same artist or from the same time period and culture.</p>
<p><b>Texture</b></p> <p>The way a surface feels or appears to feel; it can be actual (the texture of the paint, wood, stone, or other medium) or implied (art materials that suggest texture of surfaces like cloth, bark, or skin). Texture can be described as smooth, glassy, soft, pitted, bumpy, rough, etc.</p>	<p><b>Balance</b></p> <p>The arrangement of elements in a symmetrical, asymmetrical, or radial manner.</p>	<p><b>Theme/Main Idea</b></p> <p>Make a hypothesis about what the artist is trying to communicate; determine the overall theme, message, or idea in the work, and the reason the artist chose to create the work.</p>	<p><b>Recommend</b></p> <p>Determine whether students would like to see the work frequently, share it with a special friend, present it as a gift to the school, include it in an exhibition, and so forth.</p>
<p><b>Value</b></p> <p>The degree of lightness or darkness of a color; the range of tones within a color or shade.</p>	<p><b>Rhythm</b></p> <p>The repetition of lines, shapes, patterns, and colors to create movement.</p>	<p><b>Context</b></p> <p>Learn about the artist, the historical period, and the culture in which the work was created; determine what the work reveals about the time and place in which it was made.</p>	<p><b>Justify</b></p> <p>Determine which qualities in the work of art make it important, valuable, or interesting.</p>

**ART EDUCATOR EDMUND BURKE FELDMAN** identified and described in depth four steps that an art critic performs in writing about art: description, formal analysis, interpretation, and evaluation.<sup>2</sup> The Feldman model of art criticism

provides a structured approach that starts with the simpler cognitive skills of knowledge and comprehension, and leads the viewer toward the higher-level skills of applications, analysis, synthesis, and evaluation.

Tina Farrell of the Clear Creek Independent School District adapted Feldman's model for elementary school teachers. When students can describe works of art using vocabulary they already possess, they are more confident in their ability to talk

about art. The Feldman model delays forming judgments about art until the student has invested some time in describing and analyzing the work.

1. Edmund Burke Feldman, *Varieties of Visual Experience*, 4th ed. (New York: Harry N. Abrams, Inc., 1992), pp. 505–6.
2. Feldman, *Varieties of Visual Experience*, pp. 487–510.