

Part 2 Teaching and Learning Strategies for Art for Life

theory: expressionist (Is the work highly expressive?), mimetic (Is it realistic or naturalistic?), formalist (Does it seem "right" in terms of color, composition, and so on?), and pragmatist (Does it do something important? Does it do this well?). Other criteria for evaluation include whether the work is well made (skill and technique), the strength of the ideas driving the work (concept), and its overall aesthetic impact.

Summary: The Analytic Model Professional critics undertake reaction, description, interpretation, and evaluation to determine the meaning and significance of works of art. They do not separate these processes but instead use them, often instinctively, as seems appropriate. For educational purposes, however, it is useful to distinguish among the processes or stages of criticism; this facilitates information gathering and enhances the students' understanding, not only of content but of cognitive processes. The educational structure for art criticism presented here is (1) reaction to the work, (2) description of how a work looks (images, themes, composition, embedded ideas and emotions) and its place in society (personal and social functions, history, and circumstances); (3) interpretation, or what the work means; and (4) evaluation, or what the work is worth. The following sample questions provide a structure for analytic art criticism.*

I. **Reaction** (This stage should be brief, only long enough for overall responses.)

A. General questions

1. What's your first response to this work?
2. How does this make you feel?
3. What does it make you think of?
4. What does it remind you of?

II. **Description** (Let's find out why you have this reaction by beginning to describe what we see.)

A. Obvious thematic, formal, and technical qualities

1. What images (illusions, pictures of recognizable things) do you see?
2. What colors (shapes, textures, etc.) do you see?
3. Are there any outstanding or unusual features you notice?
4. What else do you see? (Encourage increasingly subtle discriminations.)
5. Are there any dark (light) areas? Rough or unusual textures? Large or small shapes? And so on.
6. How do you think this work was made? (What was it: a painting? a sculpture? a photograph? something else?)
7. Why do you think so? What types of brush strokes (sculptural finish, photographic technique, etc.) do you see?
8. What is the artist's (physical) point of view? What are your clues?

B. Formal relationships of shapes and images to each other. (The key in formal analysis is to look for relationships between forms and images. Differences such as changes in rhythm or one thing's being bigger, darker, brighter than another are particularly significant clues for meaning. The focus here is on principles of design.)

1. What (colors, shapes, textures, lines) dominate the image? Why?
2. Are there significant negative areas or spaces in the work? What makes them significant?

3. What movement do you see? What elements (line, shape, etc.) and principles (rhythm, proportion, etc.) cause movement?
 4. Where do you see contrast? What causes it?
 5. Where are the figures looking/leaning toward/pointing? (The emphasis here is on implied movement.)
 6. What is the focal point in this work? What causes you to look there? (Is there a single focus? Why? Why not? What features cause us to see it that way?)
- C. Formal characterization (Intended impact of the forms, colors, theme, and their relationships.)
1. What mood is presented? How are we meant to feel in the presence of this piece? Why? What's the evidence?
 2. Why are we meant to focus where we do? (Why is there no central focus, or why is there a central focus?)
 3. Is this work realistic? Formalistic? Expressionistic? Some combination?
 4. Would you characterize it as primitive, slick, aggressive, bold, intellectual, overpowering, timid, monumental, fluid, abstract, cool, static, rhythmic, hot, etc.? Why? What's the evidence?
 5. (Sometimes you need to ask opposites to get at the character of a piece.) What if the background were a different color? What if this work were realistic instead of having exaggerated forms? What if it had soft instead of hard edges? And so on.
- D. Contextual examination: historical and cultural context (These questions will normally be answered by the teacher or through outside research. All or parts of this stage can come before a physical description of the work if the work is very foreign to the students. Physical description should start the process only if a work is from the students' own culture.)
1. Who did the work?
 2. What was the artist's point or intention?
 3. What is the title?
 4. When and where was the work done?
 5. How does it reflect that place and time?
 6. What style is it considered to be?
 7. Does it have or has it ever had a functional purpose? What?
 8. What influenced its production (social context, other art, technology)?
 9. What impact has the work had on work that came later or on society in general?
 10. What does the work tell us about the people who made and used it?
- III. Interpretation (This is the most difficult but ultimately the most significant stage.)
- A. General questions
1. What do you think this work means? (Remind students of the subject matter, qualities, and character as described earlier to stimulate interpretations.)
 2. If you were inside the work, as a particular character, abstract form, or figure, what would you be thinking and feeling?
 3. (In the face of a nonobjective or highly abstract work.) What does it remind you of or make you think of?
 4. What title would you give this work if you were the artist? Why?
- IV. Evaluation
- A. Personal experience
1. What was the quality of your experience in critiquing this work?