

WRITING ESSENTIALS IN STYLE & COMPOSITION

Week 1: Descriptive Writing

Reading 1: Description of Achilles' Shield

Homer, Iliad Book XVIII

(Lines 478 - 608) -translated by A.T. Murray (revised by William F. Wyatt)

First he made a shield, great and sturdy, adorning it cunningly in every part, and round about it set a bright rim, threefold and glittering, and from it he fastened a silver baldric. Five were the layers of the shield itself; and on it he made many adornments with cunning skill.

On it he fashioned the earth, on it the heavens, on it the sea, and the unwearied sun, and the moon at the full, and on it all the constellations with which heaven is crowned – the Pleiades and the Hyades and mighty Orion and the Bear, that men call also the Wain, that circles ever in its place, and watches Orion, and alone has no part in the baths of Ocean.

On it he made also two fair cities of mortal men. In the one there were marriages and feastings, and by the light of the blazing torches they were leading the brides from their rooms through the city, and loud rose the bridal song. And young men were whirling in the dance, and with them flutes and lyres sounded continually; and the women stood each at her door and marvelled.

But the people were gathered in the place of assembly; for there a strife had arisen, and two men were striving about the blood price of a man slain; the one claimed that he had paid all, declaring his cause to the people, but the other refused to accept anything; and each was eager to win the decision on the word of an arbitrator. Moreover, the people were cheering both, showing favour to one side or the other. And heralds held back the people, and the elders were sitting on polished stones in the sacred circle, holding in their hands the staves of the loud-voiced heralds. With them then would they spring up and give judgement, each in turn. And in their midst lay two talents of gold, to be given to the one who among them should utter the straightest judgement.

But around the other city lay two armies of warriors gleaming in armour. And two plans found favour with them, either to lay waste the town or to divide in two all the substance that they lovely city contained. But the besieged would not hear it, but were arming to meet the foe in an ambush. Their dear wives and young children were guarding the wall as they stood on it, and with them the men whom old age held; but the rest were going out, led by Ares and Pallas Athene, both fashioned in gold, and of gold were the clothes with which they were clad.

Fair were they and tall in their armour, as befits gods, clear to view among the rest, and the people at their feet were smaller. But when they had come to the place where it seemed good to

them to set their ambush, in a riverbed where there was a watering place for all herds alike, there they sat down, clothed about with ruddy bronze. Then two scouts were by them set apart from the army, waiting till they should have sight of the sheep and sleek cattle.

And these came soon, and two herdsmen followed with them playing on pipes; and of the guile they had no foreknowledge at all. But the ambushers, when they saw them coming on, rushed out against them and speedily cut off the herds of cattle and fair flocks of white-fleeced sheep and slew the herdsmen. But the besiegers, as they sat before the places of assembly and heard much tumult among the cattle, mounted immediately behind their high-stepping horses, and set out, and speedily came on them. Then they set their battle in array and fought beside the riverbanks, and were ever striking one another with bronze-tipped spears. And among them Strife and Tumult joined, and destructive Fate, grasping one man alive, fresh-wounded, another without a wound, and another she dragged through the melee by the feet; and the raiment that she had about her shoulders was red with the blood of men. Just like living mortals joined they and fought; and they each were dragging away the bodies of the others' slain.

On it he set also soft fallowland, rich soil and wide, that was three times ploughed; and in it many plowmen were wheeling their teams and driving them back and forth. And whenever after turning they came to the end of the field, then would a man come up to each and give into his hands a cup of honey-sweet wine; and the ploughmen would turn in the furrows, eager to reach the end of the deep soil. And the field grew black behind and looked as if it had been ploughed, though it was of gold; that was the great marvel of the work.

On it he set also a king's estate, in which labourers were reaping, holding sharp sickles in their hands. Some handfuls were falling in rows to the ground along the swath, while others the binders of sheaves were binding with twisted ropes of straw. Three binders stood by, while behind them boys would gather the handfuls, and carrying them in their arms would continually give them to the binders; and among them the king, staff in hand, was standing in silence at the swath, glad at heart. And heralds apart underneath an oak were making ready a feast, and were dressing a great ox they had slain for sacrifice; and the women sprinkled the flesh with white barley in abundance for the workers' meal.

On it he set also a vineyard heavily laden with clusters, a vineyard fair and golden; black were the grapes, and the vines were set up throughout on silver poles. And around it he drove a trench of cyanus, and about that a fence of tin; and one single path led to it by which the vintagers went and came whenever they gathered the vintage. And maidens and youths in childish glee were carrying the honeysweet fruit in wicker baskets. And in their midst a boy made pleasant music with a clear-toned lyre, and to it sang sweetly the Linos song with his delicate voice; and they beating the earth in accompaniment followed on with skipping feet and dance and shouting.

And on it he made a herd of straight-horned cattle: the cattle were fashioned of gold and tin, and with lowing hurried out from stable to pasture beside the sounding river, beside the waving reed. And golden were the herdsmen who walked beside the cattle, four in number, and nine dogs swift of foot followed after them. But two terrible lions among the foremost cattle were holding a loud-lowling bull, and he, bellowing mightily, was being dragged by them, while after him pursued the dogs and young men. The lions had torn the hide of the great bull, and were devouring the inner parts and the black blood, while the herdsmen vainly sought to frighten them, sicking on the swift hounds. But they shrank from fastening on the lions, but coming very close, they barked and sprang aside.

On it also the famed god of the two lame legs made a pasture in a fair dell, a great pasture of white-fleeced sheep, and folds, and roofed huts, and pens.

On it furthermore the famed god of the two lame legs cunningly inlaid a dancing floor like the one which in wide Cnosus Daedalus fashioned of old for fair-tressed Ariadne. There were youths dancing and maidens of the price of many cattle, holding their hands on one another's wrists. Of these the maidens were clad in fine linen, while the youths wore well-woven tunics softly glistening with oil; and the maidens had fair chaplets, and the youths had daggers of gold hanging from silver baldrics. Now would they run around with cunning feet very nimbly, as when a potter sits by his wheel that is fitted between his hands and makes trial of it whether it will run; and now again would they run in rows toward each other. And a great company stood around the lovely dance taking joy in it; and two tumblers whirled up and down among them, leading the dance.

On it he set also the great might of the river Oceanus, around the outermost rim of the strongly made shield.

Reading 2: Description of The Stones of Venice

-an excerpt by John Ruskin (Chapter 4, Section XVIII)

The following is a part of Ruskin's description of the inside of a Venetian church.

Round the domes of its roof the light enters only through narrow apertures like large stars; and here and there a ray or two from some far away casement wanders into the darkness, and casts a narrow phosphoric stream upon the waves of marble that heave and fall in a thousand colors along the floor. What else there is of light is from torches, or silver lamps, burning ceaselessly in the recesses of the chapels; the roof sheeted with gold, and the polished walls covered with alabaster, give back at every curve and angle some feeble gleaming to the flames; and the glories round the heads of the sculptured saints flash out upon us as we pass them, and sink again into the gloom. Underfoot and overhead, a continual succession of crowded imagery, one picture passing into another, as in a dream; forms beautiful and terrible mixed together; dragons and serpents, and ravening beasts of prey, and graceful birds that in the midst of them drink from running fountains and feed from vases of crystal; the passions and the pleasures of human life symbolized together, and the mystery of its redemption; for the mazes of interwoven lines and changeful pictures lead always at last to the Cross, lifted and carved in every place and upon every stone sometimes with the serpent of eternity wrapped round it, sometimes with doves beneath its arms, and sweet herbage growing forth from its feet; but conspicuous most of all on the great rood that crosses the church before the altar, raised in bright blazonry against the shadow of the apse. And although in the recesses of the aisles and chapels, when the mist of the incense hangs heavily, we may see continually a figure traced in faint lines upon their marble, a woman standing with her eyes raised to heaven, and the inscription above her, "Mother of God," she is not here the presiding deity. It is the Cross that is first seen, and always, burning in the centre of the temple; and every dome and hollow of its roof has the figure of Christ in the utmost height of it, raised in power, or returning in judgment.

Reading 3: Description of the Pantheon

(source: <http://greatbuildings.com/buildings/Pantheon.Html>)

The Pantheon was built as a Roman temple and later consecrated as a Catholic Church. Its monumental porch originally faced a rectangular colonnaded temple courtyard and now enfronts the smaller Piazza della Rotonda. Through great bronze doors, one enters one great circular room. The interior volume is a cylinder above which rises the hemispherical dome. Opposite the door is a recessed semicircular apse, and on each side are three additional recesses, alternately rectangular and semicircular, separated from the space under the dome by paired monolithic columns. The only natural light enters through an unglazed oculus at the center of the dome and through the bronze doors to the portico. As the sun moves, striking patterns of light illuminate the walls and floors of porphyry, granite and yellow marbles.

The portico consists of three rows of eight columns, 14 m (46 feet) high of Egyptian granite with Corinthian capitals. They support an entablature facing the square, which bears the famous inscription in Latin, attributing the construction to Agrippa, although the extant temple was rebuilt later by Hadrian. The dome has a span of 43.2 m (142 feet), the largest dome until Brunelleschi's dome at the Florence Cathedral of 1420 - 36. The interior volume is a cylinder above which springs the half sphere of the dome. A whole sphere can be inscribed in the interior volume, with the diameter at the floor of the cylinder of 43.3 m (143 feet) equaling the interior height. Five rows of twenty - eight square coffers of diminishing size radiate from the central unglazed oculus with a diameter of 8.7 m (29 feet) at the top of the dome.

The dome is constructed of stepped rings of solid concrete with less and less density as lighter aggregate (pumice) is used, diminishing in thickness to about 1.2 m (4 feet) at the edge of the oculus. The dome rests on a cylinder of masonry walls 6 m (20 feet). Hidden voids and the interior recesses hollow out this construction, so that it works less as a solid mass and more like three continuous arcades which correspond to the three tiers of relieving arches visible on the building exterior. Originally, these exterior walls were faced with colored marbles.

Reading 4: Description of St. Matthew Passion, by J.S. Bach

(source: <https://www.musicwithease.com/bach-st-matthew-passion.html>)

The St Matthew Passion of J.S. Bach is written in two parts, between which the sermon intervened in olden times. It includes portions of chapters XXVI and XXVII of the Gospel according to St Matthew. The dramatis personae are Jesus, Judas, Peter, Pilate, the Apostles, and the people, or Turbae, and the narrative is interpreted by reflections addressed to Jesus, forming two choruses ("The Daughter of Zion") and ("The Faithful"). They are sometimes given by the chorus, and sometimes by single voices. The chorales are selected from hymns which were in common use in the Lutheran Church. The Gospel text is recitative form throughout, the part of the Evangelist, or narrator, being assigned to a tenor voice, while those of the persons incidentally introduced are given to other singers. In the dialogue, wherever the words of Jesus occur, the accompaniment is furnished by a string quartet, which serves to distinguish them from the others. The incidental choruses, sung by the people and the Apostles, are short and vivacious in character, many of them being in madrigal form. The chorales, fifteen in number, as already been said, were taken from Lutheran service. One of them, which Bach also liberally used in his "Christmas Oratorio," beginning "Acknowledge me, my Keeper," appears five times in the progress of the work, forming the keynote of the church sentiment, and differently harmonized on each occasion. Another ("O blessed Jesus") is twice used -- once where the Saviour announces that he will be crucified after the Feast of the Passover, and again in the scene in the Garden of Gethsemane. The whole work is written for double chorus, the two choruses singing the harmony of the chorales, accompanied by the instruments, while the congregation sing the tune in unison. Each chorus has its own orchestra and its own organ accompaniment. The double orchestra is composed of oboes, flutes, and stringed instruments. Drums and brass instruments are not used, in Bach's estimation, not being fitted with them, sweetness and expressiveness of tone rather than power being required.

Reading 5: Description of St. Matthew Passion, by J.S. Bach

(source: https://kids.kiddle.co/St_Matthew_Passion)

The St. Matthew Passion (German: Matthäuspassion) is a musical composition written by Johann Sebastian Bach. The words tell the story of Jesus' death on the cross as told in chapters 26 and 27 of the Book of St Matthew in the Bible. The work is for a choir, solo voices and orchestra. Both the choir and the orchestra are divided into two sections: Chorus 1 and Chorus 2, Orchestra 1 and Orchestra 2. Bach's St Matthew Passion is thought by many musicians to be the greatest choral work ever written. Bach's St Matthew Passion takes nearly 3 1/2 hours if it is performed without any cuts. It is divided into two parts. There is usually a long interval between each part so that musicians and audience can have a meal before coming back refreshed for the second part.

The words of Bach's St Matthew Passion are partly taken straight from the Bible (Matthew Chapters 26 - 27) and partly made up by the poet Picander. The words from the Bible are used to tell the basic story. They are sung to recitative (music in speech rhythm) by a tenor soloist who is known as the evangelist (Matthew was an "evangelist" because he preached the message of Jesus). The words spoken by Jesus are sung by a baritone or bass soloist. The evangelist is accompanied by the continuo (an organ and a cello, double bass or bassoon). Jesus is accompanied by the strings.

Between the sections of recitatives there are arias, each of which is sung by one of the four soloists: a soprano, an alto, a tenor and a bass. The arias often have an introductory movement called "arioso" which in musical style is something between a recitative and an aria. The arias are accompanied by the orchestra, often with one instrument playing an important solo. The words of the arioso and arias comment on what is happening in the story and describe what is going on in the people's minds.

The choir, divided into two sections ("double choir"), sing some movements in which they represent the crowd of people in the story. Some of these movements, such as the opening one, are quite long, others are very short indeed. In some of these movements there is a vocal soloist, and the choir are commenting on what the soloist is singing about. In addition to the main choir there is a small choir which sings a chorale tune on top of the music during the first movement (this is called a "ripieno"). Sometimes a boys' choir is used for this. There are also several chorales which are sung by the whole choir. These are like hymn tunes. It is likely that in Bach's time the congregation would have joined in singing these, as they were chorales which were often sung at church services.

During some of the choral movements there are very small sections for a solo voice. These represent one person from the crowd. These may be sung by soloists from the choir. So, as well as Jesus, there are small parts for Judas, Peter, two high priests, Pontius Pilate, Pilate's wife, two

witnesses and two ancillae (maids). These small parts can be sung by different soloists, but in some performances one soloist (possibly one who is also singing the arias) may take several of these parts.

The instruments in the orchestra are string instruments (violins, violas, cellos and double basses), organs (one for each choir), two flutes, two oboes and bassoon. Orchestra I plays with Choir I and Orchestra II plays with Choir II. There are some extra instruments as well: two recorders, three different kinds of oboe and a viola da gamba.

In the tradition of these musical Passions the Resurrection is not mentioned at all. The story ends with the chorus shedding tears after Jesus has been put to death.

Reading 6: Description of the Mona Lisa

(source: <https://www.quora.com/>)

Valued in excess of \$1 billion, the *Mona Lisa* ... is one of many High Renaissance paintings housed in the Louvre. The painting is known to Italians as *La Gioconda*, the French call her *La Joconde*...

The portrait shows the subject sitting upright and sideways in a chair, with her face and chest turned slightly towards the viewer: a posture derived from the 'pyramid' image used to depict a sitting Madonna. Her left arm sits comfortably on the armrest of the chair and is clasped by the hand of her right arm which crosses her front. The slightly protective position of her arms, as well as the armrest, creates a sense of distance between sitter and spectator.

The background landscape behind the sitter was created using aerial perspective, with its smoky blues and no clearly defined vanishing point. It gives the composition significant depth, although its details reveal a clear imbalance between the (higher) rocky horizon to the right, compared to the (lower) flatlands stretching away on the left. This imbalance adds to the slightly surreal atmosphere of the picture.

Another slightly surreal feature of the *Mona Lisa* is her lack of eyebrows and eyelashes. This was not a deliberate act of the artist, as scans indicate that originally she was given both. It is possible that the colour pigment used for these facial features has since faded or been inadvertently removed during cleaning.

The general impression created by the *Mona Lisa* portrait is one of great serenity, enriched by a definite air of mystery. The mystery stems from a number of factors: first, her enigmatic half-smile; second, her gaze, which is directed to the right of the viewer; her hands which have a slightly unreal, lifeless quality - almost as if they belonged to a different body.

The Canons of Composition

(source: <https://www.circeinstitute.org/>)

If we were to ask you what you find challenging about the writing process, what would you say? When we ask this question during workshop we hear answers like these:

- Getting started
- Finding facts
- Defending an argument
- Moving the reader
- Arranging ideas
- Transitioning from one thought to the next
- Having enough to say
- Not saying too much
- Saying things just right

Sound familiar? Do you notice that each of these fit into one of three broad categories: coming up with ideas, putting ideas in order, and expressing ideas appropriately.

These are the universal writing challenges every writer faces. If you can solve them, you can write effectively. Put simply, to write well is to come up with something to say, to put your materials in the best order, and to express your thoughts appropriately.

Solving these challenges was the goal of classical rhetoricians like Aristotle, Cicero, and Quintillian. They noticed that people overcome them by working through three stages, one for each challenge. They gave these stages names, translate to English as follows:

- **Invention** (coming up with ideas)
- **Arrangement** (ordering your ideas)
- **Elocution** (expressing your ideas appropriately)

These solutions comprise the three canons of classical composition...



It will be very important as you write each assignment for this course that you carefully work through the three stages of **invention, arrangement and elocution**. A template for invention has been provided below.

Assignment

- Describe a work of art in 400-600 words. It may be any one of the following: a painting, a statue, a building, a lyric poem, a play, a symphony, a hymn, an opera, or anything similar to these. You may write on almost anything that is called “art” except for a movie, a television show or a contemporary song. (It is not that these are worthless, but that you should try to transcend what is currently popular and too familiar.)
- Describe rather than evaluate or criticize the work of art. Show the audience what the work of art is, how it works, what its parts are, and how it is different from other works of art. Do not to write your opinion of how good or bad the piece is, simply describe it.
- You will evaluate this SAME piece in the next assignment. Choose something that interests you enough to spend two weeks - first describing, then evaluating.
- You may use the internet or books to research the work of art, but keep your research short. Remember, this is your description of the work of art, not someone else’s.
- No need to provide a picture of the work of art with your assignment. You should include the name of the piece you are describing at the top of your assignment.

Invention:

The following might not ALL apply to the piece you choose.

Use it to brainstorm and put some ideas on paper.

Who? What? Where? When? _____

Smell? _____

Touch? _____

Taste? _____

Sight? _____

Hear? _____

To what can we compare this piece of art? _____

What's the overall mood/tone/emotion behind the piece of art?
