

WRITING ESSENTIALS IN STYLE & COMPOSITION

Week 2: Critiquing, Evaluating, and Judging

Words are not only used to describe; they are also used to evaluate something. This is sometimes called the “fact-value” distinction. When we describe something, we state a fact; when we evaluate something, we say how valuable it is. Look at the following pairs of sentences, noticing how the first sentence differs from the second. Which sentences describe? Which evaluate? What makes them different? Make up some sentences of your own which resemble the previous pairs of sentences.

Jane likes to help people who are in need.
It is good that Jane likes to help people who are in need.

Medea is a Greek tragedy written by Euripides.
Medea is Euripides’ greatest play.

Michelangelo’s Pieta is in Rome, Italy.
Michelangelo’s Pieta is the most beautiful work of sculpture in all of Italy.

Mozart’s Mass in C Minor was influenced by Bach’s Mass in B Minor.
Mozart’s Mass in C Minor is less perfect, in almost every way, than Bach’s Mass in B Minor.

Read the following evaluations of works of painting, music and sculpture and think about these questions as you read: Is the writer’s opinion of the art obvious and clear to the read? Are these critiques positive or negative? Which are positive and which are negative? Are they too positive or too negative? Should a critique be balanced, pointing out the good as well as the bad? Can you identify the evaluative words?

Painting

John Ruskin, on the wall paintings of a church

Excerpt from *The Stones of Venice* (Chapter 4, Section 62)

The character of the features is almost always fine, the expression stern and quiet, and very solemn, the attitudes and draperies always majestic in the single figures, and in those of the groups which are not in violent action; while the bright coloring and disregard of chiaroscuro cannot be regarded as imperfections, since they are the only means by which the figures could be rendered clearly intelligible in the distance and darkness of the vaulting. So far am I from considering them barbarous, that I believe of all works of religious art whatsoever, these, and such as these, have been the most effective. They stand exactly midway between the debased manufacture of wooden and waxen images which is the support of Romanist idolatry all over the

world, and the great art which leads the mind away from the religious subject to the art itself.

John Ruskin, on *The Goddess of Discord in the Gardens of the Hesperides* (1806)



We may grant the grey colour to Turner's system; we may accept the wild ground as the only kind of garden which would be probable under Atlas; though the places which Discord seeks, and the dragons guard, are usually of a nature at once brighter and baser. But we cannot accept the impossibilities of mountain form into which the wretched system of Poussin's idealism molded Turner's memory of the Alps. It is not possible that hill masses on this scale, should be divided into these simple, steep, and stone-like forms. Great mountains, however bold, are always full of endless fracture and detail, and indicate on the brows and edges of their cliffs, both the multitudinousness, and the deeply wearing continuance, of the force of time, and stream, and tempest. This evidence of subdivision and prolonged endurance is always more and more distinct as the scale increases; the simple curves which are true for a thousand feet are false at three thousand, and falser at ten thousand; and the forms here adopted by Turner are not mountain forms at all, but those of small fragments of limestone, with a few loose stones at the top of them, magnified by mist into mountains. All this was the result of Idealism. Nature's mountains were not grand, nor broad, nor bold, nor steep enough. Poussin only knew what they should be, and the Alps must be rough-hewn to his mind. Farther, note the enormous torrent which roars down behind the dragon, above the main group of trees. In nature, that torrent would have worn for itself a profound bed, full of roundings and wrinkled lateral gulphs. Here, it merely dashes

among the squared stones as if it had just been turned on by a New River company. And it has not only had no effect on its bed, but appears quite unable to find its way to the bottom, for we see nothing more of it after it has got down behind the tree tops. In reality, the whole valley beneath would have been filled by a mass of rounded stones and debris by such a torrent as that.

Music

On Bach's The Art of the Fugue by John Stone

(source: <https://www.kunsterfuge.com/theory/stone/artfuge.htm>)

One of the many, seemingly inexhaustible pleasures of listening to and studying this music is admiring the skill with which Bach varies the main theme, opening it up as he does to countless permutations. (Really, the same can be said for his Goldberg Variations, Chaconne for violin solo, etc.) The theme is stretched and shrunk in time, flipped upside down, turned backwards, coupled with other themes, rendered in mirror form. A further pleasure lies in witnessing the ways in which Bach alternates between tightly packed counterpoint and the freer episodes (moments when the statement and answer pairs of fugue are absent), giving a sense of contraction and release throughout the music. The music affords intense intellectual excitement as one tries to hear all four lines (or voices) in their horizontal independence and vertical unification. Emotionally speaking, Bach covers enormous ground all the while sticking to his one theme; though a general tone of seriousness and even melancholy pervades the work, there are elements of intense joy, exuberance, vivacity, and freshness.

Sculpture

William Hazlitt, on the Elgin Marbles



Farther, in a cast from nature there would be, as a matter of course, the same play and flexibility of limb and muscle, or, as Sir Thomas Lawrence expresses it, the same “alternate action and repose,” that we find so admirably displayed in the Elgin Marbles. It seems here as if stone could move: where one muscle is strained, another is relaxed; where one part is raised, another sinks in, just as in the ocean, where the waves are lifted up in one place, they sink proportionally low in the next: and all this modulation and affection of the different parts of the form by others arise from an attentive and co-instantaneous observation of the parts of a flexible body, where the muscles and bones act upon, and communicate with, one another, like the ropes and pulleys in a machine, and where the action or position given to a particular limb or membrane naturally extends to the whole body. This harmony, this combination of motion, this unity of spirit diffused through the wondrous mass and every part of it, is the glory of the Elgin Marbles. Put a well-formed human body in the same position and it will display the same character throughout; make a cast from it while in that position and action, and we shall still see the same bold, free, and comprehensive truth of design. There is no alliteration or antithesis in the style of the Elgin Marbles, no setness, squareness, affectation, or formality of appearance. The different muscles do not present a succession of tumuli, each heaving with big throes to rival the other. If one is raised, the other falls quietly into its place. Neither do the different parts of the body answer to one another, like shoulder-knots on a lacquey’s coat or the different ornaments of a building. The sculptor does not proceed on architectural principles. His work has the freedom, the variety, and stamp of nature. The form of corresponding parts is indeed the same, but it is subject to inflection, from different circumstances. There is no primness or petit maitre-ship, as in some of the later antiques, where the artist seemed to think that flesh was glass or some other brittle substance; and that if it were put out of its exact shape, it would break in pieces. Here, on the contrary, if the foot of one leg is bent under the body, the leg itself undergoes an entire alteration.

If one side of the body is raised above the other, the original, or abstract, or ideal form of the two sides is not preserved strict and inviolable, but varies, as it necessarily must do, in conformity to the law of gravitation, to which all bodies are subject. In this respect, a cast from nature would be the same.

Painting

Mona Lisa: Leonardo's Masterful Technique...

(source: pbs.org)

According to Louvre Curator Jean-Pierre Cuzin, "The entire history of portraiture afterwards depends on the Mona Lisa. If you look at all the other portraits – not only of the Italian Renaissance, but also of the seventeenth to nineteenth centuries – if you look at Picasso, at everyone you want to name, all of them were inspired by this painting. Thus it is sort of the root, almost, of occidental portrait painting."

In a break with the Florentine tradition of outlining the painted image, Leonardo perfected the technique known as *sfumato*, which translated literally from Italian means "vanished or evaporated." Creating imperceptible transitions between light and shade, and sometimes between colors, he blended everything "without borders, in the manner of smoke," his brush strokes so subtle as to be invisible to the naked eye.

Leonardo was fascinated by the way light falls on curved surfaces. The gauzy veil, Mona Lisa's hair, the luminescence of her skin – all are created with layers of transparent color, each only a few molecules thick, making the lady's face appear to glow, and giving the painting an ethereal, almost magical quality.

"Today's art critics call attention to the painting's mystery and harmony," says Cuzin. "But the first art historians to describe it emphasized its striking realism, pointing out 'the lips that smile' and 'the eyes that shine.'" Giorgio Vasari, for example, wrote in his early biography of da Vinci, *Lives of the Painters*: "As art may imitate nature, she does not appear to be painted, but truly of flesh and blood. On looking closely at the pit of her throat, one could swear that the pulses were beating."

The realism of his painting is a result of Leonardo's diverse scientific observations. From the study of human anatomy he developed a mathematical system for determining size in space, perspective that is incorporated in the way Mona Lisa's torso, head and eyes are each turned a little more toward the viewer. Da Vinci also observed differences between the subject and objects in the background, and used aerial perspective to create the illusion of depth: the farther something is in the distance, the smaller the scale, the more muted the colors and the less detailed the outlines.

"Leonardo has studied the sky, the elements, the atmosphere, and the light. He takes the approach of a scientist, but translates it into the painting with superb delicacy and finesse. For him the painting doesn't count. What counts is the knowledge," observes Cuzin. "In the same painting we move from soft places like the clouds to areas of extreme intricacy and fine detail. For example, around the neckline of the lady's dress we have delicate interlacing embroidery.

The contrast of these different areas creates a cohesion that is very rare in painting." All this we now take for granted. The Mona Lisa looks so natural, and so familiar, that we forget how innovative the painting was at the beginning of the sixteenth century.

Even the use of landscape as background was a departure from tradition; Leonardo saw creative and fictional possibilities in it. "The background may be a representation of the universe, with mountains, plains and rivers. Or possibly it is both reality and the world of dream. One could suppose that the landscape doesn't exist, that it is the young woman's own dream world." (Cuzin)

And one could suppose she dreams sweet dreams, and perhaps that is why she smiles...

Assignment

- Using the same piece of art from last week, write a critique/evaluation in 400 - 600 words.
- Evaluate or criticize rather than describe the work of art. Tell the audience how good the work of art is, why it is so good (i.e. what about it makes it that good), and how it is better (or perhaps worse) than other works of art in the same genre.
- Include some descriptive phrases or sentences, try to keep them to a minimum. Give the reader just enough description to picture the piece, but focus primarily on evaluating.
- You may use the internet or books to research the work of art, but this should be minimal. Remember, this is YOUR evaluation of the work of art, not someone else's.
- No no need to provide a picture of the work of art with your assignment. Do give the name of the piece.
- Remember to carefully work through the three stages of **invention, arrangement and elocution**.

Invention:

What are some specific strengths of this piece?

What are some specific weaknesses of this piece?

What are some evaluative words to describe the piece?
(examples: beautiful, fine, graceful, pleasing)

Reasons why the piece is good (or bad)?

Ways this piece could possibly be better?

Ways this piece compares to others which are in some way either superior or inferior?
