A Short Guide to Writing about Art

TENTH EDITION

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about him. If these remarks are thought to be of compelling value, especially because they were made during Rodin's lifetime or soon after his death, they can probably be considered primary materials. And for a work such as Rodin's *Monument to Balzac* (1897), the novels of Balzac can be considered primary materials.

If possible, draw as heavily as you can on primary sources. If in a secondary source you encounter a quotation from Leonardo or Mary Cassatt or whomever—many artists wrote a good deal about their work—do not be satisfied with this quotation. Check the original source (it will probably be cited in the secondary source that quotes the passage) and study the quotation in its original context. You may learn, for instance, that the comment was made so many years after the artwork that its relevance is minimal.

FROM SUBJECT TO THESIS

First, a subject. No subject is undesirable. As G. K. Chesterton said, "There is no such thing on earth as an uninteresting subject; the only thing that can exist is an uninterested person." Research can be done on almost anything that interests you, though you should keep in mind two limitations.

- First, materials for research on recent works may be extremely difficult to get hold of, since crucial documents may not yet be in print and you may not have access to the people involved.
- Second, materials on some subjects may be unavailable to you because they are in languages you can't read or in publications that no nearby library has.

So you probably won't try to work on the stuff of today's news—for example, the legal disposition of the works of a sculptor whose will is now being contested; and (because almost nothing in English has been written on it) if you can't read Japanese you won't try to work on the date of the introduction into Japan of the image of the Buddha at birth. But no subject is too trivial for study: Newton, according to legend, wondered why an apple fell to the ground.

You cannot, however, write a research paper on subjects as broad as Buddhist art, Michelangelo, or the Asian influence on Western art. You have to focus on a much smaller area within such a subject, and you will have to have a *thesis*, a point, an argument, a controlling idea, a claim that you will be making. Rebecca Bedell's essay on the American painter John Singleton Copley is not simply a survey of Copley's work or a comparison of two portraits, but an argument, that is, a developed presentation of the evidence supporting a thesis. In her second paragraph (page 142) Bedell states the thesis:

Copley reached his artistic maturity years before he left for England.
The essay as a whole argues on behalf of the point she states in her thesis sentence.

Suppose you are interested in the Asian influence on Western art. You might narrow your topic so that you concentrate on the influence of Japanese prints on van Gogh or Mary Cassatt or Whistler (it may come as a shock to learn that the famous picture commonly called Whistler’s Mother is indebted to Japanese prints), or on the influence of calligraphy on Mark Tobey, or on the influence of Buddhist sculpture on Jo Davidson. Your own interests will guide you to the topic—the part of the broad subject—that you wish to explore, and you won’t know what you wish to explore until you start exploring. Research requires searching, and at the outset you can’t be sure of what you will find. Picasso has a relevant comment: “To know what you want to draw, you have to begin drawing. If it turns out to be a man, I draw a man.”

Of course, even though you find you are developing an interest in an appropriately narrow topic, you don’t know a great deal about it; that’s one of the reasons you are going to do research on it. Let’s say that you happen to have a Japanese print at home, and your instructor’s brief reference to van Gogh’s debt to Japanese prints has piqued your interest. You may want to study some pictures and do some reading now. As an art historian (at least for a few hours each day for the next few weeks), at this stage you think you want to understand why van Gogh turned to Japanese art and what the effect of Japanese art was on his own work. Possibly your interest will shift to the influence of Japan on van Gogh’s friend, Gauguin, or even to the influence of Japanese prints on David Hockney in the 1970s. That’s all right; follow your interests. Exactly what you will focus on, and exactly what your thesis will be, you may not know until you do some more reading. But how do you find the relevant material?

✔ Checklist for a Thesis Sentence

Have I asked myself the following questions?

☐ Does the sentence make a claim rather than merely offer a description?
☐ Is the claim arguable rather than self-evident, universally accepted, and of little interest?
☐ Can evidence be adduced to support the claim?
☐ Is the claim narrow enough to be convincingly supported in a paper written within the allotted time and of the assigned length?