

Critical Analysis Process

Stage 1: Initial Reaction

Students are encouraged to express their first reaction to a work. This first impression is the starting point for further investigation and discovery. First impressions may provide a useful benchmark for later evaluations of students' ability to critique a work. Teachers can elicit students' first impressions by asking questions such as those found below. If students cannot easily explain why they are making a judgment, these questions can help them move beyond overly simple value judgments. Students need to be reminded that there are no wrong answers if the responses are sincere.

Sample guiding questions might include:

- What is your first impression of this work?
- What does this work bring to mind?
- What does this movement suggest to you?
- What emotions does this work evoke?
- What puzzles you? What questions do you have?
- What connections can you make between this work and your own experience or other art forms?

Stage 2: Analysis and Interpretation

As part of analysis, students try to figure out what the artist has done to achieve certain effects. Students can discuss the artist's use of the elements, principles, materials, and/or concepts specific to the art form. Students might want to refer back to their first impressions (e.g., analyze how the use of various elements in the work contribute to a first impression of liveliness). Teachers should encourage students to describe and explain how the individual elements have been used and how they relate to each other. Students can also analyze the overall characteristics and compositional features of the work (e.g., how the artist uses and manipulates various elements, principles, sounds, movements, words, images, or ideas).

As students move towards personal interpretation, they connect their own perspectives, associations, and experiences with the characteristics found in the work. As in the "initial reaction" stage of the formal criticism approach, there are no wrong answers. However, students should be able to provide evidence for their interpretations. This stage requires the use of higher-order thinking skills; students should go beyond free association to combine associations based on evidence found in the work. Activities such as discussing interpretations in a small group, writing an artist's statement, reflective journal writing, working independently on a written analysis, or preparing notes for an oral presentation may all be part of this stage.

Sample guiding questions might include:

- What elements, principles, and/or conventions of the art form are used in this work?
- How are the elements and/or principles organized, combined, or arranged in this work by the artist (composer, choreographer, playwright, media artist, visual artist)?
- What do you think is the theme or subject of the work? (i.e., What is the artist trying to communicate, and why? or, in reflecting on their own work: What did you intend to communicate, and why?)
- Why do you think the composer, choreographer, playwright, media artist, or visual artist created this work?
- What message or meaning do you think the work conveys?
- What do you feel is the artist's view of the world?
- How does this view match or contrast with your own view of the world?

Stage 3: Consideration of Cultural Context

As part of the critical analysis process, students develop an understanding of works in the arts in their cultural context. In addition to analyzing and interpreting the art works themselves, students also need to understand how aspects of an artist's life can have a bearing on his or her works and on the interpretation of those works.

Sample guiding questions might include:

- What social, political, and historical events may have influenced the artist in this work?
- What cultural movements, events, or traditions or other works in the arts may have influenced the artist?
- What events in the artist's life may have affected the creation of the work?

In order to extend their understanding of works of art in their context, students may also conduct their own inquiry-based research, or teachers can support them in investigations into the following:

- the similarities and differences between specific works in the past and present
- the way in which a work in the arts represents the perspective of individuals within a specific cultural group
- examples of other works created in the same period
- the expectations and artistic preferences of audiences at the time the work was created
- the initial reception of the work by critics
- the responsibility of an audience, including basic points of audience etiquette and the individual's responsibility to acknowledge any personal biases that may influence his or her response to a work (e.g., cultural biases or past experiences with the arts)

Stage 4: Expression of Aesthetic Judgment

Students compare their perception of the artwork after reflection and analysis to their initial reaction and make connections to other works of art they have seen or heard. They consider the effectiveness of aspects of the work. They also reflect on whether they have learned anything that they can apply to their own work.

Sample guiding questions might include:

- How effectively does the artist select and combine elements to achieve an intended effect in this work? (i.e., What works?)
- What doesn't work, and why?
- Has your point of view shifted from your initial reaction? If so, how has it changed? Why?
- In what ways does the artist evoke joy, sadness, or other emotions in this work?

Ongoing Reflection

Reflection occurs throughout the critical analysis process, whether students are examining their own works or the works of others.

Sample guiding questions to help students in reflecting on a work of their own might include:

- In what ways do you feel your work is successful?
- In what ways would you change the work to improve it?
- How did your work affect the audience? Was it the way you intended?
- How would you alter this work for a different audience, or to send a different message?