



Essay Interpretation 101

What is the first thing I should do before I start my essay?

The first thing to do is read the handout your instructor gave you regarding the assignment; this will be a separate handout or included in your course outline. Read it at least three times. These guidelines are your instructions for how your instructor wants your essay to look, read, and be presented.

Let's look at an example of an essay assignment from a first year Art History class:

Overview

For this research project you are asked to curate an exhibition surveying the relationship between human beings and a specific topic (choose one: fire, water, obesity, death, birth, sheep, play, birds, rain, sleep, caves, dogs, war, cities, paradise, hygiene) as documented in art made between 40,000 BCE and 1450 CE. The final submission an introduction to the theme of the exhibition, 5 works providing a wide ranging survey, each with a catalogue entry, a conclusion.

Based on this description, we know we are to:

1. Write a research essay which covers five works of art made between 40,000 BCE and 1450 CE.
2. We know this will require some level of comparison, as we are looking to discuss the relationship between humans and a specific topic (fire, water, obesity, death, birth, sheep, play, birds, rain, sleep, caves, dogs, war, cities, paradise, hygiene) as it was documented through artwork.

3. If we read a bit more closely, we can see that this essay is also asking us to curate an exhibition of these five artworks centred around our chosen theme, and each of these individual works will require a catalogue entry. In the context of this assignment, curating means our selected artworks should have an apparent relation to both the theme and each other.

4. There is also specific information regarding the general format; we know we are to have an introduction (which would identify our theme and introduce our artworks), the body of our essay will discuss the five artwork and have their catalogue entries, and then we are to have a conclusion. Let's read a bit further to see what other information we can identify:

Specifics

Your 1500 word paper will be based on a process of sustained investigation of the five artworks. The works should be from different cultures and from different times before 1450 and presented in chronological order, oldest first. Your introduction should explain the curatorial theme (conceptual inquiry).

The catalogue entries for the works describe formal traits of the way the artist handles the theme and give context on the relationship between human beings and the topic in the culture embedding the work.

Catalogue content CANNOT be arrived at as an activity of journaling in which you simply consult your own responses and associations and what you think might be your reasons. Content must be available for verification in scholarly texts and cited.

This provides more information. We now know that this essay must be 1500 words, and these five artworks we are writing about must be from different cultures, and from different times in history (remember, our timeline from is from 40,000 BCE to 1450 CE). Our instructor is also asking us present our artworks in chronological order, from oldest to most recent.

We are being asked to create a catalogue entry for each of these five artworks. We know from the description that in this catalogue entry we should:

1. Describe the artwork's formal traits (what it looks like)
2. describe how the artist handles the theme
3. give context on the relationship between humans and our chosen theme within the culture that made this artwork

We also know that this is going to require us to research. Our instructor is making a clear point that we cannot develop the content of our catalogue entries off our own observations and thoughts; we must research to find our information, and we are to conduct this research using scholarly sources and texts.

Our instructor is making a point that the information in our entries must be verifiable – it is obvious that the research component of this assignment is of the utmost importance. Let's read further to see what other information we can gather from this assignment.

Form

*At ACAD you jump to the status of writing as a researcher among researchers. This means **Citation** –acknowledges use of original documents and primary research. One half of the citation is in-text parenthetical referencing, the other half*

is a list of entries under works cited. Your catalogue should have both parts.

Writing to a Style Guide— Modern Languages Association (MLA 8) Style Guide's purpose is to give you agreements about what document design means, for example how illustrations are numbered.

It is your responsibility to start citation and style guide use.

Our instructor is now providing more information about what our essay needs to be. From this, we know that citations are an essential component of this assignment, and they are to contain two parts: in-text parenthetical referencing, and an entry under a list of Works Cited.

We are also being asked to complete this assignment in a specific style, which is MLA 8. We know this is something we are to do on our own, as our instructor makes a point of mentioning that this is our responsibility.

So now that we have reached the end of the instructions from our instructor, what are we to do?

1. We need to select five artworks, from 40, 000 BCE to 1450 CE, and these must relate to a specific theme (fire, water, obesity, death, birth, sheep, play, birds, rain, sleep, caves, dogs, war, cities, paradise, hygiene). The selection and relatability of these artworks to one another is where the 'curation' part of the assignment comes in.
2. We must research these artworks using scholarly research sources.
3. We must write a catalogue entry for each artwork; this must include a description of the artwork, an investigation of how the artist handles

the specific theme, and a discussion of that theme within the broader context of the time period.

4. Our full essay must be 1500 words in length, and have an introduction, body, and conclusion.

5. Our essay must be written using MLA 8 as our style guide.

What if I have a question about essays that isn't included here? Can someone look through my essay before I hand it in?

ACAD has numerous learning supports available, including the Writing Centre and Drop-in Tutoring. These services are available to you as a student for no additional charge.

The Writing Centre is by appointment; please email writingcentre@acad.ca.

Drop-in Tutoring is available all semester long in the Luke Lindoe Library; please email tutoring@acad.ca for hours.