

TEACHER RESOURCE 15

How to Critique a Piece of Artwork

A Guided GCSE and A Level Art & Design Pack



HOW TO CRITIQUE A PIECE OF ARTWORK

A GUIDED GCSE & A LEVEL ART RESOURCE

EDITABLE WORD + PRINT-READY PDF

A structured 18-page resource using real public-domain artworks for a worked example and independent practice.

Editable Word document and print-ready PDF

How to use this pack

This pack teaches critique as a sequence of observable, evidence-based decisions rather than a list of unsupported opinions. It uses two genuine public-domain paintings: Vincent van Gogh's *The Bedroom* for the worked example and Georges Seurat's *A Sunday on La Grande Jatte*—1884 for independent practice.

Suggested teaching sequence

1. Display the artwork without giving students contextual information. Allow one minute of silent looking.
2. Separate factual description from analysis: students first identify what is visible, then explain how visual choices affect the viewer.
3. Model one short evidence-based sentence before students use the planning grids.
4. Compare interpretations and require students to point to visible evidence.
5. Finish with a balanced judgement and one connection to the student's own practical work.

Learning outcomes

- Use accurate visual vocabulary for composition, colour, tone, line, shape, space, texture and technique.
- Support interpretations and judgements with specific visual evidence.
- Distinguish description, analysis, interpretation, context and evaluation.
- Use contextual research carefully without allowing biography to replace looking.
- Apply one useful finding to a personal project or practical experiment.

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Six stages and eight guided steps

STEP	WHAT THE STUDENT DOES
1. LOOK	Pause before writing. Scan the whole image, then notice small details.
2. DESCRIBE	State what is visibly present without explaining or judging it.
3. ANALYSE	Explain how formal choices organise the image and direct attention.
4. INTERPRET	Suggest possible meanings or moods, supported by visual evidence.
5. CONTEXTUALISE	Use relevant artist, date, medium and context to deepen—not replace—looking.
6. JUDGE + CONNECT	Reach a balanced conclusion and identify a useful idea for your own work.

The eight guided steps that follow expand the Analyse and Interpret stages into focused pages on composition, colour, line, space, materials, technique, mood and meaning.

A strong critique keeps returning to evidence

CLAIM → EVIDENCE → EFFECT

Claim: the room feels unsettled. Evidence: the floorboards and furniture edges tilt towards different vanishing points. Effect: the space appears compressed and slightly unstable.

Avoid these shortcuts

- “I like it” without explaining why.
- Listing colours or objects without analysing their relationships.
- Assuming the artist’s intention without evidence.
- Retelling the artist’s biography instead of examining the artwork.
- Using confident terminology inaccurately. A precise simple sentence is better than vague jargon.

Visual language and sentence stems

AREA	USEFUL WORDS
Composition	placement, crop, focal point, balance, symmetry, asymmetry, rhythm, scale, viewpoint
Colour	hue, saturation, complementary, analogous, warm, cool, contrast, harmony, accent
Tone and light	value, highlight, mid-tone, shadow, contrast, direction, atmosphere
Line and shape	contour, directional, gestural, geometric, organic, repeated, angular, curved
Space and form	foreground, middle ground, background, overlap, depth, perspective, negative space
Surface and technique	texture, brushwork, mark, layering, transparency, impasto, blend, edge

Build evidence-based sentences

- The artist draws attention to ____ by...
- The repeated ____ creates a sense of...
- The contrast between ____ and ____ makes...
- Although the composition first appears ____, closer inspection shows...
- This interpretation is supported by...
- The medium matters because...
- A strength of the work is...; however...
- I could apply this by testing... in my own work.

GCSE SUPPORT

Choose one formal element, point to one precise area and complete: "The artist uses ____ in the ____, which makes the viewer ____."

A LEVEL EXTENSION

Compare two plausible interpretations. Identify the visual evidence supporting each, then judge which is more convincing and why.

Worked example: first encounter



Vincent van Gogh, *The Bedroom*, 1889, oil on canvas, 73.6 × 92.3 cm, Art Institute of Chicago, accession 1926.417. Public-domain reproduction; source and rights details on page 18.

One minute of silent looking

Do not research yet. Let your eyes move around the image and record immediate observations without trying to sound sophisticated.

The first area I noticed was:

Three details I saw after looking for longer:

One question the artwork raises:

REMEMBER

An immediate response is a starting point, not a final interpretation. The next pages test it against visible evidence.

Step 1: describe what is visible

Description establishes shared evidence. Use neutral language and locate details precisely. Avoid “beautiful”, “strange” or “sad” at this stage because these are judgements or interpretations.

Model factual description

MODEL

A single bed occupies much of the right side. Two chairs sit at different depths. Blue walls surround a green-framed window, while small pictures hang at varied angles. Strong outlines separate objects and areas of colour.

Sort the statements

STATEMENT	TYPE
The bed fills much of the right foreground.	Description
The room feels private and isolated.	Interpretation
Blue and orange appear in strong contrast.	Analysis
The space was painted in 1889.	Context
The uneven perspective creates tension.	Analysis

Your factual inventory

Foreground:

Middle ground:

Background and edges:

Three repeated shapes or objects:

Step 2: analyse composition and viewpoint



Use a ruler or tracing sheet to follow the floorboards, bed edges and furniture angles.

What to examine

- Focal point: where does attention settle first, and what causes this?
- Directional lines: which edges pull the eye into or across the room?
- Scale and crop: how does the large bed affect the smaller furniture?
- Balance: compare the visual weight on the left and right.
- Viewpoint and perspective: do the lines create a stable or unsettled space?

MODEL ANALYSIS

The large orange-brown bed dominates the right foreground. Its diagonal edge pulls the viewer into the room, but the furniture and floorboards do not converge consistently. This compressed, uneven perspective makes an ordinary bedroom feel immediate and slightly unstable.

The viewer's eye moves from ___ to ___ because:

The most important directional line is:

The composition feels balanced / unbalanced because:

Step 3: analyse colour, tone and contrast

Do more than name colours. Examine their temperature, saturation, placement and relationships. Consider whether colour describes observed reality, organises the composition or contributes to mood.

COLOUR / TONE	WHERE AND HOW	POSSIBLE EFFECT
Blue walls	Large cool field surrounding most objects	Makes orange-brown furniture appear warmer and more prominent
Orange-brown bed and chairs	Warm complementary contrast against blue	Creates unity while drawing attention to the furniture
Red bedding	Small saturated accent near the centre-right	Provides a sharp focal interruption
Green window and floor marks	Repeated cooler notes	Links separate areas and prevents a simple blue/orange split
Pale bedding and pictures	Lightest areas	Breaks the stronger colour fields and creates pauses

Test the interpretation

MODEL

The palette is limited but not quiet. Large blue areas surround warm orange-brown furniture, creating complementary contrast. The red blanket acts as a concentrated accent. These choices make the objects easy to distinguish while giving the room more visual energy than a naturalistic interior might have.

The strongest colour relationship is:

The lightest and darkest areas affect the focal point by:

If one colour changed, the mood might become:

Step 4: line, shape, form and space

Formal elements work together. A line may describe an edge, direct the eye and affect the sense of space at the same time.

ELEMENT	VISIBLE EVIDENCE	POSSIBLE EFFECT
Line	Strong dark contours; angled floorboards; repeated bed and chair edges	Separates objects and creates directional energy
Shape	Large bed rectangle; window panels; framed pictures; chair backs	Builds a pattern of repeated and tilted rectangles
Form	Colour changes and outlines suggest solid furniture without smooth modelling	Keeps forms clear and emphatic rather than illusionistically soft
Space	Overlap, scale and recession imply depth, but perspective is compressed	Places the viewer close to the room and disrupts calm stability
Negative space	Narrow gaps between furniture and walls	Makes the room appear occupied and enclosed

From observation to analysis

WEAK

There are lots of lines and shapes.

STRONGER

Repeated rectangular shapes appear in the bed, window and pictures, but many sit at different angles. Their repetition unifies the room while the tilted edges prevent it from feeling mechanically ordered.

One repeated shape and its effect:

One spatial distortion and its effect:

One relationship between line and mood:

Step 5: materials, technique and surface

The medium is not just a fact to copy from a label. Ask what oil paint allows the artist to do and how the visible handling of paint affects the experience of the room.

- Look for individual brushstrokes and changes in direction.
- Compare flat areas of colour with more broken or layered marks.
- Notice where outlines are thick, thin, repeated or incomplete.
- Identify hard and soft edges and how they separate forms.
- Consider how a reproduction may reduce the appearance of texture and scale.

MODEL ANALYSIS

Van Gogh uses visible directional brushstrokes rather than hiding the process of painting. Short marks follow the floorboards and furniture, while dark contours clarify object edges. The surface therefore records movement and decision-making; it does not behave like a polished photographic illusion.

Technique grid

VISIBLE FEATURE	LOCATION	EFFECT ON VIEWER
Directional brushwork		
Dark outline		
Broken colour		
Hard or soft edge		

The medium is important because:

I would need to inspect the original to understand:

Step 6: interpret mood and meaning

Interpretation is not guessing. Offer a possibility, then support it with several connected pieces of evidence. Different interpretations can be valid if they account for what is visible.

POSSIBLE READING	EVIDENCE TO TEST
Rest and simplicity	Single bed; limited furniture; clear separated objects; controlled palette
Energy or unease	Tilting pictures; inconsistent perspective; active brushwork; strong colour contrasts
Personal identity	Private room; selected possessions; portraits and everyday furniture
Enclosure or intimacy	Close viewpoint; large bed; narrow spaces between objects
BALANCED MODEL	
The room can suggest both rest and unease. Its simple furniture and repeated blue create order, yet the tilted perspective and energetic brushwork disturb that calm. The tension between these qualities may be more convincing than describing the mood with a single word.	

Build an interpretation

My possible interpretation is:

The first visual detail supporting it is:

A second, different detail supporting it is:

A competing interpretation could be:

Step 7: use context carefully

Context should sharpen visual analysis. Begin with the evidence in the artwork, consult reliable information, then explain how that information changes or qualifies your reading.

Verified object information

FIELD	DETAIL
Artist	Vincent van Gogh (1853–1890)
Title	The Bedroom
Date	1889
Medium	Oil on canvas
Dimensions	73.6 × 92.3 cm
Collection	Art Institute of Chicago; accession 1926.417

Museum interpretation to test

The Art Institute describes the work in relation to Van Gogh's intention to suggest rest and repose, while noting the energetic handling and sharply receding space. Return to the image: which features support calm, and which complicate it?

CONTEXT SENTENCE FRAME

Knowing that ____ helps me notice _____. This strengthens / complicates my earlier interpretation because _____.

One contextual fact that genuinely changes my reading:

A visual detail that becomes more significant:

Information that is interesting but not necessary to this critique:

Step 8: reach a balanced judgement

A conclusion should evaluate how successfully the artwork's visual choices work together. It may recognise tensions or limitations. Personal preference can be included, but it should not be the only basis for judgement.

Checklist for a convincing judgement

- Return to the central interpretation rather than introducing an unrelated idea.
- Identify at least one particularly effective formal choice.
- Acknowledge complexity, tension or a possible alternative reading.
- Refer to precise evidence rather than repeating general adjectives.
- Explain what the artwork helps you understand or reconsider.

MODEL JUDGEMENT

The painting is effective because its colour and simplified furniture make the room immediately legible, while the compressed perspective and visible brushwork keep the image emotionally unsettled. Rather than illustrating rest in a straightforward way, it makes calm feel actively constructed and fragile.

Your balanced conclusion

Overall, the work is effective / less effective because:

The strongest visual decision is:

A tension or limitation is:

The work changes my understanding of:

A model critique: bringing the stages together

Use the model to identify structure, not to memorise sentences. The most useful phrases are those that connect a claim to precise evidence and an effect.

Vincent van Gogh's *The Bedroom* presents a private interior through simplified forms, strong outlines and large areas of colour. A wooden bed dominates the right foreground, while two chairs and a small table occupy the left and centre. This arrangement makes the space easy to read, but it is not conventionally stable. Bed edges, floorboards and furniture recede at different angles, compressing the room and placing the viewer unusually close to its contents.

Colour reinforces this mixture of clarity and tension. Cool blue walls surround warm orange-brown furniture, creating a complementary contrast that separates the major forms. The concentrated red of the bedding interrupts the larger colour fields and helps establish a focal point. Visible brushstrokes follow surfaces and edges, so the painting records the artist's physical decisions rather than hiding them beneath a smooth illusion.

The room can therefore suggest both rest and unease. Its limited furnishings and repeated colours imply simplicity, yet tilted pictures, inconsistent perspective and active marks disturb complete calm. Context strengthens this reading: museum information connects the subject with Van Gogh's wish to evoke repose, but the formal evidence makes that repose feel energetic and hard-won. The painting is compelling because these apparently opposing qualities remain in tension. It shows how an ordinary interior can communicate an emotional state without relying on a dramatic event.

Find the evidence

- Underline factual description once.
- Underline formal analysis twice.
- Circle the interpretation and balanced judgement.
- Draw arrows from two claims to the visual evidence supporting them.

Improve a weak critique

Rewrite each comment so it names a specific visual choice, locates evidence and explains an effect.

WEAK COMMENT	EVIDENCE-BASED START
I like the colours.	The contrast between ____ and ____ makes...
The composition is good.	The placement of ____ directs the eye towards...
It looks sad.	The mood may feel ____ because...
The artist uses texture.	Visible ____ marks in the ____ create...
The perspective is weird.	The receding lines appear ____, which causes...
Van Gogh was famous.	Relevant context helps explain ____ because...

Three levels of improvement

1 — NAME

Identify the formal element accurately.

2 — LOCATE

Point to a precise area, relationship or repeated feature.

3 — EXPLAIN

State how the choice affects attention, space, mood or meaning.

Rewrite one weak comment as a full claim–evidence–effect sentence:

Add a qualifying sentence beginning “However” or “Although”:

Connect the insight to a practical test you could make:

Independent critique: Seurat



Georges Seurat, *A Sunday on La Grande Jatte*—1884, 1884–86, oil on canvas, 207.5 × 308.1 cm, Art Institute of Chicago, accession 1926.224. Public-domain reproduction; source and rights details on page 18.

First questions

- Where does your eye go first, and what creates that emphasis?
- How do repeated vertical figures and tree trunks organise the wide format?
- Compare the sunlit left area with the shaded foreground and right side.
- How do scale, overlap and the riverbank create depth?
- What mood is suggested by the still poses and repeated shapes?
- What can you infer from the surface of small colour touches?

First evidence-based observation:

A question requiring further looking or research:

Independent critique planning sheet

STAGE	NOTES AND EVIDENCE
Describe: subject, setting, objects	
Composition and viewpoint	
Colour, tone and light	
Line, shape, form and space	
Material, technique and texture	
Mood, ideas and possible meanings	
Relevant context	
Balanced judgement	
Connection to my own practical work	

Paragraph structure

- Paragraph 1: identify the work and describe its most important visible features.
- Paragraph 2: analyse composition and the movement of the viewer's eye.
- Paragraph 3: analyse colour, tone, line, space, surface and technique selectively.
- Paragraph 4: interpret meaning or mood and introduce only relevant context.
- Paragraph 5: reach a balanced judgement and connect one finding to your work.

SUCCESS CHECK

Every paragraph should contain at least one precise visual reference. Replace unsupported adjectives with claim –evidence–effect reasoning.

Teacher notes, artwork sources and permitted use

Artwork 1

Vincent van Gogh, *The Bedroom*, 1889, oil on canvas, 73.6 × 92.3 cm. Art Institute of Chicago, Helen Birch Bartlett Memorial Collection, accession 1926.417. Wikimedia Commons file: Vincent van Gogh - The Bedroom - Google Art Project.jpg. The file page identifies the original work and its faithful two-dimensional reproduction as public domain / Public Domain Mark 1.0.

https://commons.wikimedia.org/wiki/File:Vincent_van_Gogh_-_The_Bedroom_-_Google_Art_Project.jpg

Artwork 2

Georges Seurat, *A Sunday on La Grande Jatte*—1884, 1884–86, oil on canvas, 207.5 × 308.1 cm. Art Institute of Chicago, Helen Birch Bartlett Memorial Collection, accession 1926.224. Wikimedia Commons file: Georges Seurat - A Sunday on La Grande Jatte -- 1884 - Google Art Project.jpg. The file page identifies the artwork and faithful reproduction as public domain / Public Domain Mark 1.0.

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