Guidelines for Writing an Art Essay

1. Identify the artwork by its <u>type</u>, such as a painting, sculpture, print, architecture (temple, shrine, home, etc.) or decorative arts (ceramics, lacquer ware) when you talk about it.

2. When you begin a section, identify the <u>area</u> that you will discuss – the formal elements or the contextual elements.

3. Identify the element by the proper <u>term</u>: line, symmetry, repetition, pose, perspective, placement or religion, economics or artistic influences.

4. <u>Describe</u> the element as it appears in the artwork, for example:
   • the soft tan *colors* on the figure's face
   • Buddha is *placed* in the center with his disciples around him;
   • this is a *religious* building, a Buddhist temple
   • we can see *international influences* in the use of Western perspective.

5. Identify <u>why</u> the element is important, for example:
   • the bright colors make the figure look realistic and elegant
   • we can see the influence of China in the painting because the figure is dressed in Chinese court robes; Japanese artists were studying in China at this time
   • Japanese woodblock artists developed a unique process for making multi-colored prints, eventually influencing Impressionist artists in Europe

6. Be specific about what that element tells us about:
   • why the element focuses our attention or attracts our eye,
   • why the artwork was created
   • who created the artwork.

7. All essays should be typed and double-spaced with margins of at least one inch. Please use a simple typeface such as Times New Roman (used for this handout) or Tahoma.

Example 1: Formal analysis

The pagoda utilizes the <u>formal elements</u> of symmetrical balance and repetition. <u>Symmetry</u> gives the building a sense of calm and balance, inspiring the viewer to attain balance in his or her life through the teachings of Buddhism. The <u>repetition</u> of the five levels symbolizes the five elements that the Japanese believed were used in the creation of the world: fire, water, wood, metal and earth. Each level rises higher and higher, repeatedly bringing our eyes up to the heavens and Buddha's paradise.

Example 2: Contextual Analysis

The most important <u>contextual elements</u> are international influence and economics. This Buddhist structure shows <u>Chinese influence</u> in Japan. Japan and China were in contact with one another at this time and Buddhism came from China. The multiple roofs and symmetry of the temple are the same as Chinese temples. It also shows the <u>economic</u> level of the government, aristocrats and monasteries. Japan was at peace and patrons were rich enough to be able to spend this much time and money on a temple.

Example 3: Formal Analysis

The subject of this hanging scroll is Kanzan, a Buddhist monk who was a hermit. The most important formal elements are <u>line</u> and <u>pose</u>. The artist used flowing <u>lines</u>, created by brush and ink, to give the simple robes life and energy. This reflects the religious zeal of Kanzan to follow the teachings of Buddha. His body is in a <u>pose</u> that turns away from the viewer. Kanzan was a hermit and turned his back on the physical world. Buddha taught that in order to reach enlightenment, a person must free him/herself from greed and desire.

Example 4: Contextual Analysis

Aoshima Chiho's *Tsunami* is a monumental work that shows <u>artistic influences</u> from traditional prints. In this bold computer graphic design, Aoshima took the multi-colors and black outlines of the traditional ukiyoe prints from the Edo Period. But she adds fluorescent colors to create eye-popping contrasts that have the viewer jumping from one scene to the next. Aoshima seems to be commenting on modern <u>social organization.</u> Her subject appears to be modern people being overwhelmed by a tsunami or great wave of destruction – greed, pollution, consumerism, or something else? Her image communicates danger to me, as I see flaming buildings and exploding stars as well as what may be ghosts floating through the chaos.