

CRIT NOTES

When I was in Peace Corps I remember reading a handout on building your resume - it was geared towards volunteers who were leaving for stateside.

There was a great section on vocabulary. Instead of “I inspected latrines for 2 years” I could write “I organized the community...enabled the distribution of...administered the health program...”

there were all these great empowering descriptive alternatives.

The same holds true writing about art - there are a number of alternative ways to describe something that ultimately works in your favor. I’ve stated this many times, and I’ll say it here as well: your ability to analyze and communicate is important to the people who are working with you. It makes the difference between you spending your life as a mouse jockey or becoming an art director.

Get your vocabulary together. If you are going to analyze something formally (in terms of how it looks, not what it means) then make a list of the design elements and principles. Ask yourself how the image you are analyzing incorporates and combines the following ¹:

ELEMENTS	PRINCIPLES
LINE	MOOD
SHAPE	PATTERN
TEXTURE	CONTRAST
SPACE	BALANCE
SCALE	UNITY
COLOR	EMPHASIS
VALUE	MOVEMENT
	RHYTHM

There are additional things to consider as well:

Symmetry and Asymmetry
Framal reference (does the composition extend outside the border?)
Figure/ground, positive and negative space
Other? More later...

All of the above items are combined to form an image that reflects and conveys an idea. Ideas are concepts. That is why you often hear the terms Formal and Conceptual used in descriptions.

Anything in a design that isn’t required to convey the idea is considered to be purely decorative. More on this later. Unless decoration is handled correctly it becomes distracting and marks you as an amateur.

So how do you begin? Look for 2 areas that you think are successful, and 2 areas that are less successful. Describe them using the vocabulary above.

¹ This is my own list - you may encounter variations from other sources.

You can always find something good in a poor presentation. If, however, you are commenting on something you love, then spend more time on the positive elements.

EXAMPLE



Let's use the above student drawing assignment, "Wrapped". And we'll have a few versions, from each opposing end of the scale.

Version 1

"Great work, I really like it. Keep it up - fantastic job!"

Let's build on this.

Version 2

“Great work! You spent a lot of time rendering the texture, and the shading is done really well. I like the contrast between the background and foreground. Keep it up - fantastic job!”

Let's continue removing generalizations, replacing them with specifics, and also looking for alternatives to words that are often overused such as “great”. I did an online search in the thesaurus and came up with: excellent, fine, impressive, notable, outstanding, primary, remarkable, superior, talented.

A cautionary note - as you expand on your writing - work on keeping it in your unique, personalized style as well.

Version 3 more specific, replacing overused general terms.

“Great work! You spent a lot of time rendering the texture on the drapery, and the shading overall is remarkable and adds to the representational nature of the drawing. The contrast in value between the background and foreground contributes to the dramatic mood. Keep it up - fantastic job!”

This is pretty good - but it's only 49 words. What about a longer response?

Version 4 Adding critical observations, and incorporating elements and principles. Spending more time looking...Talking about ideas as well as form. Word count:256

“Great work! You spent a lot of time rendering the texture on the drapery, and the undulating shapes of the compressed and knotted folds of the sheet makes for a dynamic composition full of movement. Your attention to detail in areas such as the front right chair leg extending out from the sheet, and the creases in the sheet on the chair back give me lots to look at and holds my attention.

The negative space is handled with as much care as the positive forms - I could turn this drawing upside down and turn it into an abstract composition, and the dark negative shape would hold its own...looking further I can see other negative shapes under the chair that are developed just as carefully. This attention to all parts of the drawing gives it a strong sense of unity.

The shading overall is remarkable and adds to the representational nature of the drawing. The contrast in value between the background and foreground contributes to the dramatic mood.

There is a visual and conceptual tension created by placing the chair right up against the edge of the composition - the wrapped chair becomes iconic, alone, harshly lit and energized. I'd be interested in getting other viewer reactions - is this a hostile, serene, quiet, or isolated environment?

My only critical observation would be that I'd be interested in seeing another of these drawings where the negative space was developed in greater detail so we would engage the Z axis.

Keep it up - fantastic job!”

In conclusion:

You can see the approach I've taken in writing a number of responses, from short to lengthy.

Start with a general shoot-from-the-hip response, and then expand on it. Have a list of design elements and principles next to you. Have a thesaurus handy for vocabulary. And spend time looking, going through a checklist: positive/negative space, line quality, contrast, accurate observation...

Cite specific areas of the drawing. Never be negative, always be analytical, look for opportunities to both encourage and criticize.

In an environment where participation and interaction is important it's best to maintain a balance between quantity and quality. It would be unrealistic to require every response to be as verbose as the final example above. However, numerous short responses would be unsatisfactory as well. Compromise by including both.

In general, In an online weekly evaluation, I look for two long responses of 150 - 200 words, some shorter, thoughtful observations, and a number of informal conversations. That way we achieve both the quantity and quality of conversation that helps you work on general communication skills and the development of formal, analytical vocabulary.

People get ruffled when criticized, they also appreciate it when you take the time to review their work. Uncritical praise is ignored. And negative input guarantees unproductive responses. However objective peer analysis, in my experience is invaluable. I always know who my best friends are because they are the ones who care enough to give me insight I may missing - an extra set of eyes.