

Best Practices in Art History

Verb tenses

While the term “art history” implies that everything we study is in the past, that is not really the case. Many of the artworks that we study still exist, and art historians refer to them in the present. Use present tense when describing an artwork that still exists—as if you are standing in front of it and saying what you see. Use past tense for historical information, such as biographical information or discussion of its context of creation. If you are explaining how the artist made the artwork, for instance, that would be in the past tense instead of the present.

Referring to an artist, scholar, or critic

Be on the lookout for homonyms that your spellcheck won't catch.

Example: complementary, not complimentary

- ◁ The first term refers to color. The second term is used to show appreciation or indicate that something is provided for free.

Example: tempera, not tempura

- ◁ The first term is a painting technique. The second one is a yummy food preparation.

Don't use words such as beautiful, magnificent, amazing (avoid superlatives), masterpiece, realistic, or other words—particularly superlatives—that reflect personal opinion.

Why? These words reflect your judgement and do not communicate information about the artwork. Art History focuses on objective language. (A) 32-50, sec 2 Tf 1 8 n 4

Sample Illustrations Page

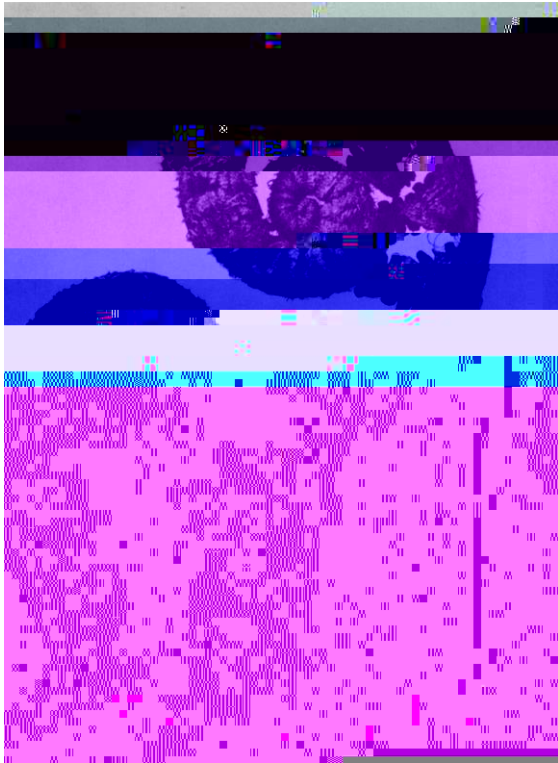


Fig. 1. Karl Blossfeldt, *Aspidium filix mas*, 1928, photogravure, unframed, 25x19cm. Los Angeles County Museum. From Edwards and Wood, *Art of the Avant-Gardes*, 405.



Fig. 2. Robert Capa, *Normandy Invasion, June 6, 1944*, 1944, gelatin silver print. From Arnason and Mansfield, *History of Modern Art*, 408.