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BEYOND WIKIPEDIA AND GOOGLE: WEB-BASED LITERACIES AND STUDENT LEARNING

James G. R. Cronin

ABSTRACT

The Educause Horizon Report states that while web-based tools are rapidly becoming standard in education and in the workplace and technologically mediated communication is the norm, fluency in information, visual, and technological literacy is not formally taught to most students. In the light of this educators need new and expanded definitions and paradigms of academic digital literacy that promote mastering critical thinking as well as technical proficiency. This study attempts to test an assumption that entrants to the humanities are media literate. This is an assumption often made yet it largely goes unchallenged. Currently, Irish universities are forging programmes in Humanities Computing at doctoral level. Unless rudimentary media literacy skills are fostered at undergraduate level the skills acquisition required at for these programmes, may not have been sufficiently appropriated by graduate entrants. This chapter reflects on the strengths and weaknesses of a series of media literacy workshops currently facilitated during the undergraduate History of Art at University College Cork. It concludes with an example of how these media literacy workshops, indirectly, had surprisingly positive affects on a dyslexic student by scaffolding his learning and providing him with alternative entry points to learning, whereby, he was empowered to confidently articulate the discipline's signature skills-set of critical visual analysis at a foundation level.

1. INTRODUCTION

In April 2009, the *Shock of the Old* symposium on digital literacy hosted by Oxford University Computing at the Saïd Business School in Oxford, engaged in teasing out current understandings of the term 'digital media literacy' and user experiences using the Educause *Horizon Report* as a departure point (Johnson, Levine and Smith, 2009). Educause is a nonprofit association whose mission is to advance higher education by promoting the intelligent use of information technology. In forecasting future trends, the report identifies a need to formally teach information literacy, visual literacy and technological literacy in order to equip students for the demands of a sophisticated global techno-culture. The symposium concluded with a fundamental question: how can information professionals and academics promote understandings of new literacy behaviours both within and across disciplines? What follows here is an attempt to tease out some of the issues arising from putting this pertinent, yet provocative, question into action.

Characteristically, new technologies always emerge within the context of established technologies; the new is also quickly embedded into patterns of everyday life as these technologies become enfolded within a wider semiotic field of human

communication (Crispin and Jaworski, in-press). Educators may broadly agree that Information and Media Literacy (IML) should be included as a set of competencies within curricula, however, current opinion on how best to enact this is divided. Some argue that new literacy skills need to engage with critical thinking across disciplines, as articulated through the concept of 'transliteracy', others argue that enactments should be disciplinary specific. Educational institutions are struggling to keep pace with the implication of technological change for literacy behaviours and are beginning consider a need to reinvigorate their roles as educators in critical awareness for a current generation where the 15-25 year old age-group strongly relies on peer-to-peer collaboration, drawing on collective knowledge of social networks and evaluate information strategically, but not necessarily critically.

The proliferation of unmediated information construction and access through new media is challenging the hegemony of educational institutions. This study surveys, on a micro level, challenges to institutional collaboration for embedding IML workshops within the humanities. These sessions, run in partnership with librarians in the Boole Library, University College Cork, were dedicated to the critical understanding of the Web for the disciplinary study of art history. In Ireland, it is often assumed that students are completely Web literate by the time they enter third-level education. Broadly speaking, this assumption is tacitly accepted and generally goes unchallenged (Cronin, 2009; Cronin, McMahon and Waldron, 2009).

This chapter is presented in sections. Section 2 explains the method and approach adopted for this case study within the context of the Irish Integrative Learning Project. Case studies bridge theory and practice, section 3 explores frameworks supporting a critical engagement with media literacy within the context of the role of information authorship which implies awareness of discursive traditions, information transmission and knowledge transformation. Section 4 offers a reassessment of the role higher education provides in mentoring the facilitation of media literacy competencies. The case study, in section 5, examines skill-sets and institutional dynamics involved in establishing and embedding media literacy programmes. Section 6 explores these dynamics at a disciplinary level. Section 7 surveys the user experience of a dyslexic student as a way of illustrating how media workshops can enhance disciplinary understanding and can potentially scaffold learning for non-traditional learners. Section 8 concludes by acknowledging a need for educators to act as mentors in the process of facilitating the multiple skill-sets, identified in the Scholarship of Teaching and Learning, as requirements of being fully literate in the early twenty first century.

2. RESEARCH METHODS

Mindful of the focus of the Irish Integrative Learning Project (Higgs, Ryan and Kilcommins, 2009), this case study aims to investigate and document how new Web-based literacies enhance student learning. This study focuses on the enactment of a series of information literacy workshops over a two-year period (October 2007 to October 2009). Longitudinal analysis is the study of short series of observations obtained from many respondents over time. From January 2009, the weekly

workshops were opened to undergraduates and postgraduates and included students from History as History of Art within the School of History at University College Cork. A trace of topics covered is archived on a blog e-image space (http://eimagespace.blogspot.com/).

In aligning with practitioner enquiry and adopting a critical theory approach, this study recognises that knowledge is personally and socially constructed and mediated. Practitioner enquiry is characterised by practice change through action-research. Action-research is a form of problem-solving based on increasing knowledge through observation and reflection, then following this with a deliberate intervention intended to improve practice (O'Hanlon, 2003). Cases are 'conduits between theory and practice' (Shulman, 2004, pp. 26-30). A case study method was chosen, focused through action-research, but modified by a conceptual lens drawn from critical theory and set within an overarching practitioner enquiry frame. Compared with other methods, the strength of the case study approach is an ability to examine a case within its 'real-life' context. The case study approach has the advantage of direct observation and data collecting in natural settings compared to relying on derived data. Mixing or integrating research strategies (qualitative and/or quantitative) is now considered a common feature of all good research. It is suggested to array data separately from the narration, but analysis can be carried out throughout the case study (Yin, 2006). Interrogating practice often reveals specific ethical dilemmas (Lyons and Kubler LaBoskey, 2002). Privacy, confidentiality and the preservation of the security of the group exchange are general ethical concerns (Lyons and Kubler LaBoskey, 2002; O'Hanlon, 2003; Strike, 2006). It is recommended that data be presented anonymously to protect the privacy of individuals (Strike, 2006).The project team functioned as project advocates by acting as critical friends to the study. A 'critical friend' has been defined as a trusted person who asks provocative questions, provides data to be examined through another lens, and offers critiques of a person's work in a spirit of friendship (Costa and Kallick, 1993). This form of advocacy became, in turn, a catalyst helping to define research questions and to test observations within the case study.

3. MORE INFORMATION, LESS MEANING

Over a decade before the Internet came into being Jean Baudrillard wrote: 'we live in a world were there is more and more information and less and less meaning' (Baudrillard 1994, p. 79). Established literacy behaviours are changing, and online reading experiences do not map exactly onto established literacy patterns. In the West reading patterns, established since the invention of printing in the fifteenth century, emphasise the importance of close reading consisting of textual comprehension, and critical reflection often involving re-reading the text. Reading is often a slow, single-attention, solitary act. Reading on the Internet, however, places emphasis on searching, scanning, jumping, and filtering information. Internet reading is often a fast, multi-attention, communal act as evidenced in the proliferation of blogs, twitters, and online wikis.

With the impact of globalisation, the academy is no longer the sole agent of

knowledge construction and custodianship. As Gerard Delanty writes: 'knowledge is losing its ability to provide a sense of direction for society and is breaking up into specialist discourses that arise in the context of application' (2001, p. 106). The 'information bomb', a term apparently coined by Albert Einstein, represented by relentless information acceleration, as envisaged by Paul Virilio (2000, 2002) has exploded and we are living through, to paraphrase Virilio, 'information fallout'. How does this effect knowledge construction and ways of knowing? As information consumers, we are all centre-points in a knowledge 'rhizome', a communication node characterised by collective and individual information consumption. Similar to Virilio, Giles Deleuze is read as a philosopher of the virtual (Žižek, 2004). Reading the rhizome as metaphor for unmediated knowledge, adapted from Deleuze and Guattari (1987), David Cromier's perception of new communities of knowledge is utopian. He sees the rhizomatic education model, exemplified by educational wikis, as a potentially democratic exchange site allowing for the construction and transfer of utilitarian knowledge (Cromier, 2008). Tools like Wikitrust (http://trust.cse.ucsc.edu/) still use the community to authenticate and validate content. Steve Wheeler interprets Cormier's application of the rhizome metaphor as exemplifying recent understandings of the process of learning (Wheeler, 2009, October 15). Recent research in the field of neuroscience supports learner-centred approaches in education by proposing that the brain's nerve cells (neurons) are loose, flexible and overlapping and woven like an interconnected web (Kringelbach, Vuust and Geake, 2008). In addition, Wheeler applies the rhizome metaphor to explain current shifts away from the generic institutionally led Virtual Learning Environments (VLE) in higher education and towards an adoption of individually constructed Personal Learning Environments (PLE) or collaborative social networks that can cross institutional boundaries and connect to a network of resources within a personally-managed space. Current opinion is divided on how best to engage with this phenomenon. Should these online communities grow organically and regulate themselves or should educators intervene and adopt a pastoral role? This is particularly relevant for ethical and legal issues such as the representation of the online social self. The speed and proliferation of media has not kept pace with corresponding critical reviews. Facebook, the social networking site, reputedly founded by Mark Zuckerberg in his Harvard dorm, dominated international news in 2010. In spring, the site's privacy policy prompted media debate while online identity was the subject of international media attention during July when the site reached 500 million active users thereby making the Facebook population equivalent to the third-biggest country on Earth.

3. 'THE TOWER AND THE CLOUD': EDUCATION AND SOCIETY

The social networking characteristics of Web 2.0 have broken down barriers between expert and lay knowledge. In the context of an evolving semantic web of collective information exchange, educational and cultural memory institutions are no longer sole generators and disseminators of knowledge (Terras, 2008). Richard Katz, at the Educause Center for Applied Research, has explored the impact of new media on human interaction. In *The tower and the cloud*, Katz (2008) examines how higher

education institutions (the tower) may interoperate with evolving network-based business and social paradigms (the cloud). These metaphors express the symbiotic aspirations of new knowledge paradigms.

Alan Liu (2008, September 14) has drawn on his experience as both a professor of English and investigator into the application of learning technologies at the University of California to reflect on the evolving nature of online literacy. The University of California's *Transliteracies Project* (http://transliteracies.english.ucsb.edu/), in which Liu is involved, was established in 2005 to investigate the technological, social, and cultural practices of online literacy. Liu has outlined characteristics of wiki behaviour amongst his own students at University of California, Santa Barbara. Most students had the media proficiency to set up a wiki, but, as regards content management, they were often not attuned to established literacy skills. In many cases, citation within the wiki did not extend beyond Wikipedia. This case study illustrated that what now passes for student research largely consists of cutting and pasting from the Web involving rapid content skimming with little or no process of critical reflection. Could such lack of awareness explain actions often considered by institutions as 'plagiarism' from the Web?

Donna E. Alvermann (2001) identified that adolescents' interest in the Internet, and social communication technologies (for example, chat rooms where people can take on various identities unbeknown to others) suggested a need to teach young people to read critically so as to identify how ideas are represented. At the same time, she suggests teaching adolescents that all texts, including their textbooks, routinely promote or silence particular views. Howard Gardner is best known for his theory of multiple intelligences. Gardner's 'Good Play', arising from the 'Good Work' project (http://www.goodworkproject.org; Gardner, Csikszentmihalyi, and Damon, 2001), studies 15-25 year olds who participate in online games, social networking sites, and other online communities. The report authors argue that five key issues are at stake in the new media: identity, privacy, ownership and authorship, credibility, and participation. (James, 2009). Drawing on evidence from informant interviews and theoretical insights from a range of disciplines including: psychology, sociology, political science, new media and cultural studies, the report explores the ways in which youth may be redefining these concepts as they engage with new digital media. Current findings show that far from being passive consumers, or perceived victims, of new media, young people are actively contributing to and defining the new media landscape through user generated content on sites such as Facebook, Myspace, Flickr, YouTube, Second Life as well as blogs and multi-player games. While the research team believes that young people are nurturing important skills through such collaborations, it is currently asking: are digital youth developing a corresponding ethical sense regarding their online activities? The project team is currently working with Project New Media Literacies at MIT to develop a curriculum to encourage high school-aged youth to reflect on the ethical implications of their online activities.

Critics argue that the Internet reinforces learning-as-information accumulation which is the antithesis of critical enquiry and appropriation of information through practice as advocated by constructivist educational paradigms (Coulter and Mandell,

2009). Computer-mediated communication amplifies a conduit view of language, while hiding the metaphorically layered nature of language, as well as masking how language on the screen reproduces a specific form of cultural intelligence (Bowers, 1998). New patterns of online reading emphasise rapid, cursive communal exchange as seen by web blogs, twitters, and online wikis. According to Ollin: ". . .the conflation of language to communicate quickly and the lack of time for thought indicates that texting could be seen as 'fast-time' rather than 'slow-time' communication." (2008, p. 273). Bauerlein (2008) urges the preservation of slow reading and writing spaces in North American educational institutions at a time when the predominant learning culture in Western society is both advocating and facilitating greater information acceleration.

There is consensus of opinion that new literacy is wider than the acquisition of traditional information skills (for example, how to use a catalogue, how to locate a book; how to access an e-journal). The information literate person should be able to apply critical thinking to analyse and evaluate information in the general context of problem solving.

4. FACILITATING NEW LITERACY BEHAVIOURS: WHAT IS THE IRISH EXPERIENCE?

In Ireland, the Consortium of National and University Libraries (CONUL) have developed an information literacy policy. In common with international good practice, it identifies key competences of an information literate person. That person should possess:

- an ability to recognise appropriate information;
- an ability to locate the most appropriate information;
- an ability to critically evaluate that information and
- an ability to manage and to apply that information within an ethical and legal framework (CONUL, 2005).

Kerins, Madden, and Fulton (2004) have explored patterns of IML through case studies of Irish engineering and law students. Their observations point to the fact that most students learn their information habits through their respective disciplines. Students tend to be strategic learners, taking their cues from their lecturers. The authors highlight a need to foster lifelong skills in the retrieval and exploitation of information. McGuinness has reported on findings from an Irish-based study into academic–librarian collaboration for information literacy development, demonstrating how entrenched beliefs adversely affect the potential for collaboration and put up barriers to the inclusion of information literacy in undergraduate curricula (2006). She argues that the embedding of IML in the curriculum requires a collaborative approach. Her study reveals the hampering of collaboration by institutional cultures. Most collaborative development is dependent on individual enthusiasm rather than institutional structures. Barriers included: the assumption among academics that IML was adequately catered in undergraduate curricula, as students become information literate through participating in a number of existing learning situations; academics' belief that it was the students' individual

responsibility to avail of the many opportunities to become information literate in their courses; and conceptions of librarians' teaching role as limited only to library orientation. While academics respected librarians, McGuinness' study revealed that there was a perception of librarians' roles being that of support rather than as educational collaborators.

5. *BEYOND WIKIPEDIA AND GOOGLE*: INFORMATION AND MEDIA LITERACY WORKSHOPS SUPPORTING HISTORY OF ART UNDERGRADUATES

Ronan Madden, Humanities and Multimedia Librarian at the Boole Library, University College Cork, was instrumental in developing a series of information literacy workshops to support History of Art students taking a third year supervised research project. The series focused on the application of information literacy to a disciplinary approach. At the end of the series students were expected:

- to recognise reliable information;
- to locate that information;
- to critically evaluate it;
- to correctly cite both online and offline content;
- to apply these skills to their individual research projects.

Student feedback, revealing their previous online behaviour, challenged assumptions that undergraduates were proficiently media literate. At the end of the five-week workshop series, Madden surveyed thirty students taking the course. The survey focused on the perceived relevance of the series to individual research projects (see Appendix, Table I). All respondents found the series very relevant to their disciplinary studies. Through feedback, students revealed that they had previously not known about advanced search engines. Individual responses revealed wishes to learn about the basics of copyright, especially relating to images, yet revealed previous scant awareness of the subject. Such awareness is potentially relevant to the professional lives of art history graduates. When is the most appropriate time to introduce information literacy sessions in a discipline? Collectively, the survey group believed that IML workshops should be embedded into the discipline from first year (see Appendix, Survey I).

The first year of the workshops had been prescriptive in content and had followed a transmission approach to instruction. Student participation had been limited and this had not been helpful for tailoring particular sessions. Angela Brew has spoken of knowledge in higher education as negotiated through 'transaction spaces' if we change the space we change the learning dynamic **(**Brew, 2009, January 27). In the following year, it was decided not to have a defined curriculum, but rather allow students to devise their own topics for discussion in order to foster and facilitate a 'transaction space' for open dialogue.

The workshop series performed best when workshops were embedded within the curriculum and were used to enhance disciplinary understanding. Despite staff support, student attendance was lower in the second year than in the first year of running the programme averaging between five to ten students each week compared

with twenty-five to thirty students in the first year of the programme. During the following year, the workshops were timetabled outside of the normal lecture schedule and were not formally assessed. The series was better attended when it was embedded within a project-based module where topics were directed towards assessment. When embedding IML within a disciplinary study. It is helpful to consider the following:

- involve colleagues in workshop design and session enactments;
- align a workshop series with curriculum objectives;
- embed the enacted skills within the overall assessment process;
- use the workshops to enhance disciplinary understanding;
- begin workshops at an early stage of a degree cycle;
- create a space for student participation and feedback;
- facilitate students to link learning from their experiences and related studies;
- encourage students to practice the skills enacted within workshops.

6. WEB MEDIA AS ALTERNATIVE ENTRIES TO LEARNING FOR DYSLEXIC STUDENTS

Students of art history, in particular those who are also dyslexic, found the workshops to be beneficial. Dyslexia constitutes part of a group of Specific Learning Difficulties (SpLD) that may affect learning. Dyslexia is the result of cognitive difficulties in the processing of the phonological parts of language. It affects the left-brain where language is not processed in the correct sequence. This means that anything to do with understanding and interpreting sequences of symbols is harder than normal. Dyslexia causes difficulties in learning to read and write due to slow and inaccurate coding of letters and graphic symbols into speech sounds and speech patterns (Smythe, Everatt and Salter, 2004). A predisposition to dyslexia is genetic. The affects of dyslexia vary from person to person. The only shared trait among people with dyslexia is that they read at levels significantly lower than typical for people of their age. Many students with dyslexia develop coping strategies. For others, the demands at third level mean that they may need to develop new coping and learning strategies (Kennedy, Treanor and O'Grady, 2008). A significant problem with dyslexia is a feeling of low self-esteem. This is often as a result of poor interaction with the education system, which can label those with dyslexia as unenthusiastic for learning as a whole without taking into account the problems that dyslexia can create. However, dyslexia is associated with remarkably artistic creativity. Interestingly, the incidence of dyslexia is far higher among visual art students than non-art students (Wolff and Lundberg, 2002).

One of the central issues for the support of dyslexic students in higher education is an understanding of how dyslexia affects the individual's capacity to study within the teaching and learning framework of higher education. People learn in different ways. A dyslexic student benefits from multi-sensory teaching and an acknowledgement of their personal learning styles (Smythe, Everatt and Salter, 2004).

The experience of Paul (permission was given to use his name) illustrates ways the Web offers alternative entry points to learning for dyslexic students. Paul, a mature first year art history student, had only recently discovered his dyslexia as it had been masked in his previous experience of higher education. He was an intelligent, imaginative, motivated and articulate student; however, he experienced difficulties with written expression and information sequencing. This was a barrier to full participation as the majority of undergraduate assignments were written assessments. Art History at University College Cork uses the survey course as a disciplinary foundation. Broadly speaking, this model has a strong chronological structure distinguishing stylistic periods. Students are tested on their ability to distinguish these stylistic phases through written assignments and written visual tests. A student may be required to become familiar with approximately three thousand images over a year (Elkins, 2002). Learning a new discipline involves laying down new patterns of thought and action which become habitual over time. Paul initially found difficultly in articulating the process of visual analysis. He rushed to comprehend meaning without first describing what he was seeing. This is a feature shared in common by undergraduates new to art history. The workshops assisted him in scaffolding his thinking in a structured way by planning and mindmapping.
A 'slow looking' scaffold, enacted through moments of pause, gave him time to sequence his visual analysis (see Appendix, 'slow looking' rubric). Dynamic web tools like audio and video podcasts, reviewed in class and included on the blog site, gave Paul alternative entry points to learning the discipline. Paul found a free multi-media web-book, Smarthistory (http://smarthistory.org/), most helpful for scaffolding his learning. Two North American art historians Beth Harris and Steven Zucker designed the site as a dynamic enhancement to publications. Harris and Zucker are interested in delivering the narratives of art history using the read-write web's interactivity and capacity for authoring and remixing. Smarthistory podcasts and screen-casts are spontaneous conversations about works of art where Harris and Zucker are not afraid to disagree with art history orthodoxy. Harris and Zucker believe that Smarthistory is a dynamic tool for understanding how art history can fit into the collaborative culture facilitated by Web 2.0. At the end of the year, Paul had improved his written assessments by ten percent and he gave credit for this to the scaffolding afforded through the workshops.

8. CONCLUSION

Increasingly, international visions of twenty first century learners include concepts such as enquiry led learners, facilitated yet self directed, collaborative in the construction of knowledge, multi-tasking, and problem solving. Evolving concepts of digital resources in disciplinary fields is that such resources should enhance both the teaching and learning experience and where possible extend that experience in a seamless way. For example, in the discipline of art history, a digital panorama may give a greater experience of spatial relationships in a building or a piece of sculpture than a single slide or static photograph can and so, in this way, the digital tool helps to enhance the teaching and learning experience. The use of dynamic web tools, such

audio and video podcasts, gives dyslexic students alternative entry points to learning.

Clearly, the speed and availability of information technology means that students have greater access to information than ever before, but can educators assume that students know how to pick their way through the mass of content in a discerning, critical, and ethical manner? Melissa Terras, Centre for Digital Humanities, University College London, predicts that the information professional of the future will have a pivotal role disseminating professional knowledge through public education and feeding back user needs to further develop and refine institutional collections while keeping abreast of technological and cultural shifts in society (Terras, 2008). An information and media literate person should be able to apply critical thinking to evaluate information in the general context of problem solving; to reveal the complexity of things; to value intellectual honesty and to foster critical awareness about all types of authority. Educators have a duty to model good practice. The question we should be asking as educators -- academics, librarians, administrators and technicians -- is the following: how best can we facilitate our students with the skills necessary not just to function, but to behave critically and creatively within a complex information society?

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APPENDIX: SURVEY OF THE WORKSHOP SERIES

TABLE 1: SURVEY OF THE WORKSHOP SERIES: STUDENT EVALUATION FORM

	Strongly Agree	Agree	Neutral	Disagree	Strongly Disagree	Not Applicable
The objectives of the sessions were well communicated to me	9	17	1	0	0	0
The content of the presentations was what I expected	6	14	3	1	0	0
I have understood most of the material covered in the course	12	11	2	0	0	0
This content was logically organised	10	14	2	1	1	0
This series will be relevant to my research	14	11	2	0	1	0
Total students surveyed	30	30	30	30	30	30

SURVEY 1: SAMPLE OF THE PREDOMINANT STUDENT RESPONSES

Question: 'What part/s of the series did you find most useful?'
I found new ways of searching [the Internet] *very relevant*
Question: 'Which part/s of the series did you find least useful?'
One response to this question: *Some of the library searches were too basic for 3rd Year. However, learning about advanced* [Web] *searches would be helpful.*
Question: 'What would you like to see included/covered in more detail?
Respondents would have liked more detailed information on image copyright.
Question: 'What is your overall verdict of the series?'
The following comments are representative of the respondents surveyed: *I think this series is a good idea, however, I feel that it would be more beneficial if the classes were given in 1st Year and then maybe recap in 3rd Year because a lot of the information would have been very helpful in research proposals given in 1st and 2nd Year.* *Perhaps this class could be given in 1st Year. Learning about the library and images would be much more helpful at the beginning.* *The series could have been more relevant to the writing of the dissertation.* *I have applied some of the things I have learned as I research for my dissertation.* *Very helpful series regarding how to search the Net.* *Very useful, I didn't previously know about advanced search engines.* *I would like to learn more about e-journals.* *I'm surprised these workshops have not been offered before.* *Very necessary as I was not aware of all the places I could get information.*

‘SLOW LOOKING’ RUBRIC

Looking at images: questions to ask yourself

The following are a selection of questions you could use to scaffold your critical analysis of an image. The following examples relate to looking at a painting, but you could modify these questions to support looking at a piece of sculpture or a building.

This is not an exhaustive list, add your own questions if you like:

The image caption may answer the following questions:

Who is the artist?
What is the title of the work?
What is the size of the work?
What is the medium (fresco, oil, tempera etc.)?
What is the date?
Where is the work now located?

Many of us forget to describe what we see:

How is the composition arranged (tight or loose)?
How is the subject painted (heavy or light brush work)?
How does colour evoke mood (atmospheric, dramatic)?
What details look familiar or unfamiliar to you?
Is there anything that stands out for you?
Does this connect with anything seen before?

Look closer for meaning through style and symbol:

Do you recognise the subject (content of the painting)?
What does the subject-matter tell you about its meaning?
Who commissioned the work (patron)?
Why was it commissioned (public or private commission)?
Who owned the work (did it change hands)?
Is it characteristic of the period (art historical style)?

Think about the context of the work and what has been critically written about it. How does this effect the way we look at the composition?

What is the original historical context (period)?
How does context inform meaning (significant events)?
Do sketches inform the work (are their changes over time)?
Has the work been restored (any new discoveries)?
What has been written about the work (art history)?
How does critical opinion inform meaning (art criticism)?