

Image commentaries

Image description and discussion

Your commentaries should identify the object or structure represented on the image, describe its key aspects, and discuss its significance and interest.

This exercise is designed to help you think about how to present and discuss archaeological and artistic evidence. There is no 'cookbook' for the exercise, since each artwork or building throws up different challenges. Your commentary should however include a description of what you see, to show that you understand the image, and a discussion of what is interesting or significant about it. There are different ways of organizing your commentaries, but most will need some, but not necessarily all, of the following elements:

(1) Factual object description, such as:

- Identification
- Date
- Size
- Material (and provenance)
- Manufacturing techniques
- Preservation (fragmented, complete, how survived)
- Context (provenance, assemblage found with)
- Context (style)
- Context (significance)

- **vital for GCSE, both as knowledge and understanding**

(2) You should briefly state what kind of image is presented (photograph, drawing etc) and what view it gives. If it is a building, is it a plan or an elevation drawing, for example? Does it show only what survives or is it a reconstruction or restoration? If a reconstruction, which elements survive and which are conjectured from either other surviving evidence (e.g. artistic representations or documentary sources) or speculation (e.g. knowledge of better preserved buildings of the same

type)? In other words, briefly assess the value of the image as a source for the object or (especially) the structure in question.

- Probably less important for GCSE

(3) Describe and discuss the principal characteristics of this artwork or building. Refer to what you see on the image and bring in any additional knowledge that you have. It helps if you work from the general to the particular, so for example:

For a building, first describe its general character, for example layout, approximate dimensions, building materials, iconographic programme, topographic context etc and then move to significant individual elements (e.g. the details on a temple's pediment sculpture);

For an artwork, first describe general characteristics, for example the medium, e.g., freestanding or relief sculpture, approximate dimensions, material, what is known of its setting or provenance etc. If it's a complex scene, note the general layout, the principal figures or motifs (human, plant, animal, geometric, architectural etc) and their arrangement. Briefly describe the pose and style in which figures are rendered, if relevant. Note significant individual elements that are relevant to your discussion. For example, dress and hairstyle can give indications of date, while attributions may identify individuals (e.g. Athena's armour).

It's essential to be selective, especially in presentation of detail, and select what is significant on the basis of what you think is important and interesting about the artwork or building concerned for your discussion [see 4]. Knowing technical terms (e.g. Ionic and Doric architecture) helps you describe more economically but the key point is to present the evidence clearly.

- possibly useful for GCSE, if one of the longer answers

(4) What is the significance or interest of the object or structure? This might be artistic or architectural, for example if they illustrate a particular stylistic characteristic of Greek art, such as architectural Orders, but the objects and structures set for the commentaries have also been selected for their broader historical interest. Some monuments or objects may have a propagandistic purpose, and, if so, you should consider how that is achieved, for example through scale, materials, imagery, and location. Do they illustrate an economic, social or cultural phenomenon? How typical is a particular object in terms of its general category, such as red-painted vases? How can style be used to date an object or structure, and how is this different from 'context'? It can also enrich commentaries to make cross-references.

- possibly useful for GCSE, e.g. Mycenae and Tiryns as type sites, but Pylos is stark contrast

Citations

Please note that this is a short piece, and you are required to respond directly to the image. It is not a mini-essay, as such, and you are not expected to provide extensive references. Indeed, you don't have the space for this (citations and footnotes count as part of the word count: bibliographies do not). You need to make sure that you are writing about the image and its context, and not solely about what other people have said about it – when people do this, it is clear that they are responding to the secondary sources, rather than the image itself.