Week 3 Assignment Handout and Prewriting Questions

When we think about history, we can include quite a wide array of human activity: government (formation and law making), religion, art, money/jobs/economics, culture (the way people behaved, spoke, dressed, and so on), and much more. However, when you’re asked to write a three-page paper on an historical artifact or event, all of this is just too much to consider. Historians find it much easier and more rewarding to focus deeply on one of these elements at a time.

This week, you’ll be focusing on cultural and art history. As is stated in the Assignment Connection section of this week’s lesson, as well as in the Assignment module, you will be examining the art of your chosen artist through the lens of cultural history, which means you’ll be examining what people of this period find beautiful, interesting, compelling, or important.

Remember, the theme of this paper is to answer this question: What can students of history learn about the culture of this artist through the artist's work?

Please take the time to answer each of these questions before you begin writing your essay to help you collect your thoughts. You’ll need to choose an artist from the list in the Assignment module and familiarize yourself with that artist’s work. I’ll divide the following questions into three categories: the work(s) of art, the cultural lens, and answering the essay question.

The Work(s) of Art (Review the Art Analysis tutorial in this week’s lesson so you’ll better understand this portion.)

1. Who was the artist (first and last name), when did the artist create the work in question, and what was that artist known for, if anything?
2. Where was the work of art created? For whom? Does it look similar to other art from the period or is it distinctive for any reason?
3. Medium: What is the work of art made of? How was it created? What are the dimensions?
4. What is the subject matter of this painting or sculpture? What seems important?
5. Watch the art analysis tutorial in this week’s lesson and then use that vocabulary to describe the work of art.

The Cultural Lens

1. Does your artist belong to any artistic movement that was trying to make any kind of statement—artistic or cultural? If so, what is the premise of that movement?
2. How is the subject matter related to the artist’s culture (look at clothing, setting, items, religious artifacts or symbols, political artifacts or symbols, a historical figure or place, animals, and so on)?
3. Who was the work created for? For what purpose? Was it commissioned? Created voluntarily? As a gift? As a statement? How did people react to it? Where did it wind up?
4. What do you think the artist was trying to communicate to the contemporary viewer? Was anything unintentionally communicated?

Answering the Essay Question

1. What did you know about the time period and artist before you began working on this assignment?
2. What did you learn about this artist and their time and place in history while working on this assignment?
3. Did you learn anything new or surprising about this time period?

Now that you’ve collected these thoughts on political history, look back to the original essay question: What can students of history learn about the culture of this artist through the artist's work?

Make sure that you develop a thesis statement that explains your point of view and that you discuss points from each category of questions in your answer.