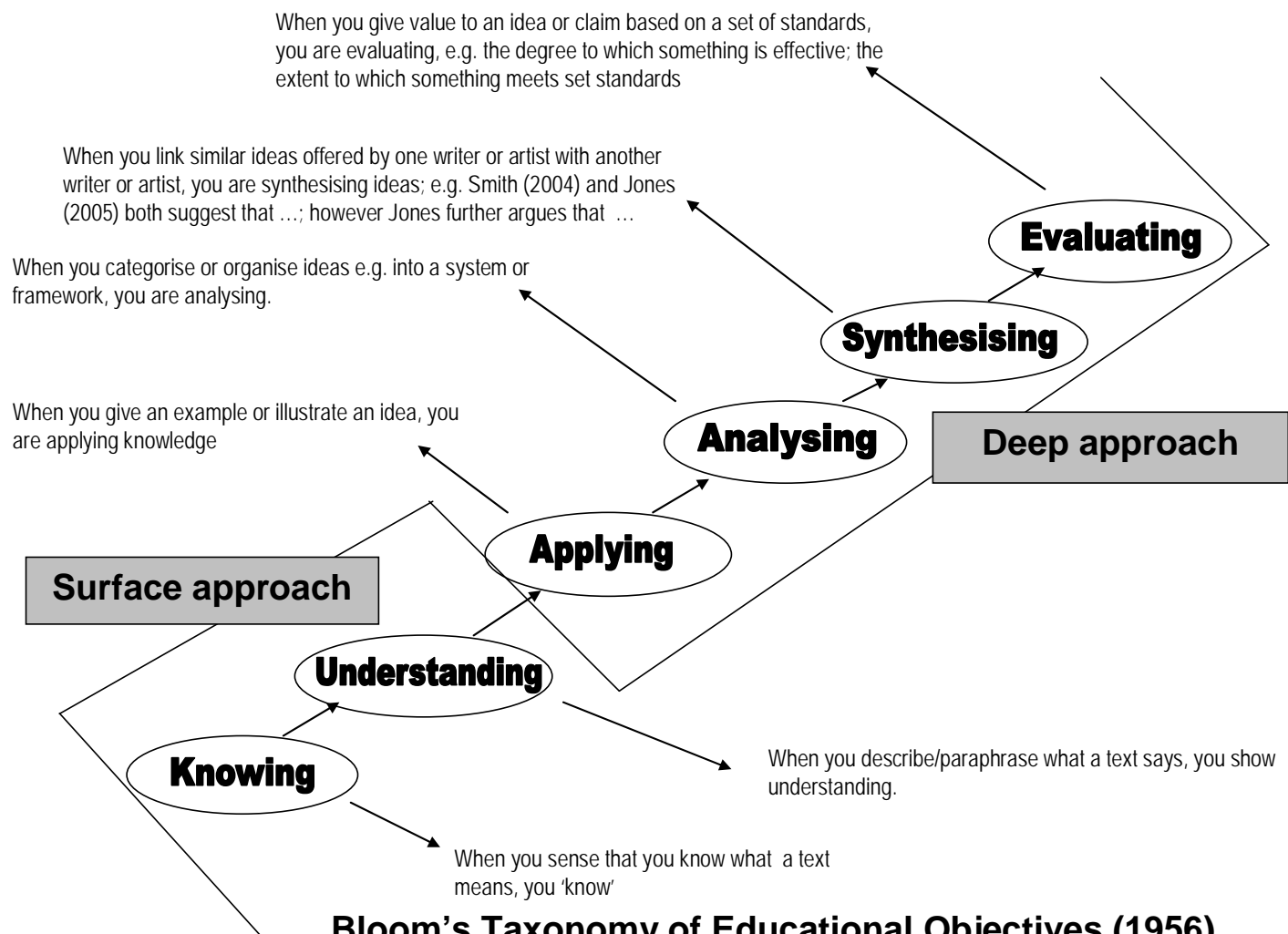


The essay

In your essay you want to show the lecturer that you have:

- an understanding of the social and cultural contexts of recent art
- an understanding of some of the ways in which art historians analyse, describe and discuss recent art
- an ability to do research
- an ability to analyse ideas
- an ability to answer the essay question, based on your research

Look at **Bloom’s taxonomy of educational objectives**: your lecturer is hoping that you will *apply* ideas to specific works or artists (examples); that you will *analyse* works in terms of ideas, or analyse key ideas by investigating the style and technique of artistic works; that you will *synthesise* ideas – show how two or more theorists agree or disagree, or show how two or more paintings are similar or different, or show the links between works and/or between artists; and that you will *evaluate* works, that is, assess them in terms of the ideas they represent, or other standards you set.



## ANALYSING THE TOPIC

### Example:

Comment on the similarities and differences in the way the following two artists have depicted the female nude: Gustave Courbet, *Woman with a Parrot* and Alexandre Cabanel, *Birth of Venus*

### Steps for analysis

#### 1. Identify key words:

- the nude, the *female* nude
- artist depictions
- Gustave Courbet and Alexandre Cabanel (when/where did they work; who/what were their influences?)

#### 2. Identify focus words

- **the way they depict** the female nude: space, perspective, treatment of subject matter (theme), colour, material (medium), lines, light, etc
- similarities and differences

What is the same and why? How can we explain the similarities? - historical events/influences

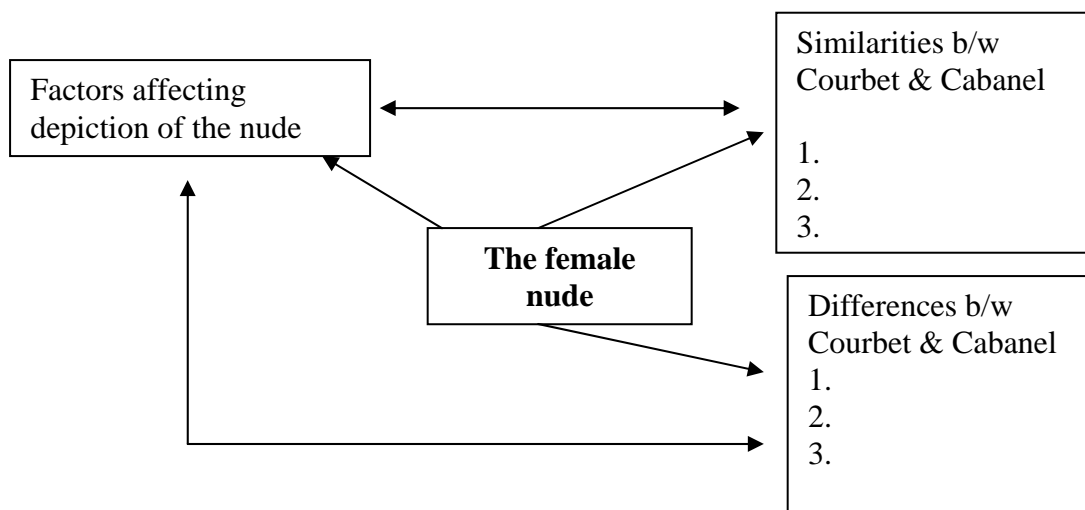
What is different and why? How can we explain the differences? - historical events/influences

#### 3. Identify the key instruction

#### Comment on

*Comment on* usually means: to describe the similarities and differences and explain the reasons they are the same or different.

#### 4. Brainstorm – mindmap & questioning: an example



#### 5. My Draft plan – essay structure

##### Intro

Background – the female nude (a changing history)

Main points – factors affecting the depiction of the female nude

Courbet & Cabanel and their works – key features of their works a) b) c) d) (comparison & contrast. Relate to factors affecting the depiction of works.

### Body

<i>Main idea 1: similarity #1 b/w Courbet &amp; Cabanel</i>	Supporting ideas – describe how the paintings are similar	Elaboration – explain why this similarity exists
<i>Main idea 2: similarity #2 Etc...</i>	"	"
<i>Main idea 3: difference # 1 (see above)</i>	Supporting ideas – describe how the works are different	Elaboration – explain why this difference exists
<i>Main idea 4: difference #2 etc</i>	"	"

### Conclusion

Restate main ideas

Explain how these differences may have influenced later art movements/styles with regard to the depiction of the nude.

### 6. Research

My questions for research:

1. **When** did Courbet & Cabanel paint? Are they painting at the same time or one after the other?
2. What/who are **their influences?** (cause and effect)
3. **How was the nude depicted** before, during and after their time?
4. What are the **key similarities in their works** - space, colour, material and subject matter etc? (compare)
5. What are the **key differences between their works** - space, colour, material and subject matter etc? (contrast)
6. Can I **make a link** *between* these similarities & differences *and* the historical factors affecting the period? (cause and effect)

*How will I* conduct my research?

1. Libraries – print materials.

Who is writing about this period? What key words should I use to look for information?

What good quality colour prints can I find of the works of Courbet & Cabanel in order to study them carefully, and analyse them?

What key readings has my lecturer suggested (course guide, tutorials)?

2. Gallery collections – what can I find in the local galleries?
3. On-line searches – *Google* key words to find images and text – collection, galleries, databases

How will I take notes? I will do these activities at the same time:

- Photocopy images of the works of Courbet & Cabanel – describe and compare/contrast them according to the essay criteria of space, subject matter, colour and materials. I will use vocabulary from my own glossary (I have been building this glossary from Week 1)



Gustave Courbet, *Woman with a Parrot*, 1866, The Metropolitan Museum of Art, NY, Oil on canvas, 51 x 77 in. (129.5 x 195.6 cm), [http://www.artchive.com/artchive/c/courbet/thumb/courbet\\_parrot.jpg](http://www.artchive.com/artchive/c/courbet/thumb/courbet_parrot.jpg) accessed Feb.15, 2007

This woman looks relaxed, as if a customer has just left her bed and she is having time off to relax and play with her parrot. Her hair is tousled and so are the white sheets on her bed. Her white legs and arms are quite languid/lazy.

In *Early Impressionism and the French State (1866-1874)*, Roos notes that 'the parrot was long associated with courtesans'.

[http://findarticles.com/p/articles/mi\\_m0422/is\\_3\\_80/ai\\_54073937](http://findarticles.com/p/articles/mi_m0422/is_3_80/ai_54073937)

Some writers suggest that Courbet's painting is a reference to Manet's *Olympia*. In this painting the black cat (on the end of the bed) also implies that the woman is a courtesan.

*Courtesan* = a woman who has an important man as her lover (a paid mistress)



Close-up of *Woman with a parrot*



Edouard Manet, *Olympia*, 1863, Musée d'Orsay Paris, Oil on canvas

<http://www.griseldaonline.it/foto/checcoli/1D%20-Edouard-Manet-Olympia-1863-parigi-museo-d'orsay.jpg> accessed Feb 15, 2007

The room is a private dark space but her bed is bathed in light. Behind her is an oriental rug or tapestry that is hung up like a curtain. The contrast between the dark and the light suggest secret pleasures that are revealed to the eye of the viewer.

She is not looking at the camera; not looking at the owner of the painting, usually a man. She is looking at her parrot, her plaything. She has control over the parrot. Her strong black eyebrows reveal that she has power over others; not just a figure to be looked at and appreciated by others, even though her body is laid out for the viewer to admire.

John Berger in *Ways of Seeing* (1973, p.54) states: "To be naked is to be oneself. To be nude is to be seen naked by others and yet not recognized by oneself. Nudity is placed on display...". He also notes that 'almost all post-Renaissance European sexual imagery is frontal ... because the sexual protagonist is the spectator owner looking at it (1973, p.56). Berger claims that Manet's *Olympia* is different because she challenges the viewer – she is questioning her traditional role. (I think) Courbet's *Woman with a parrot* also challenges the traditional view – the woman's body is on display, but the woman cannot be owned 100% by the spectator.



Alexandre Cabanel, *The Birth of Venus*, 1863, Musée d'Orsay Paris, Oil on canvas

[http://images.google.com.au/imgres?imgurl=http://www.physics.hku.hk/~tboyce/ap/assignments/assign\\_images/Cabanel\\_Venus.jpg&imgrefurl=http://www.physics.hku.hk/~tboyce/ap/assignments/assign6\\_cabanel.html&h=579&w=1000&sz=277&hl=en&start=28&tbid=SI7fhlGdmoRdwM:&tbid=86&tbw=149&prev=/images%3Fq%3Dthe%2Bbirth%2Bof%2Bvenus%2Bcabanel%26start%3D20%26ndsp%3D20%26svnum%3D10%26hl%3Den%26rls%3DGGLD.GGLD:2004-09.GGLD:en%26sa%3DN](http://images.google.com.au/imgres?imgurl=http://www.physics.hku.hk/~tboyce/ap/assignments/assign_images/Cabanel_Venus.jpg&imgrefurl=http://www.physics.hku.hk/~tboyce/ap/assignments/assign6_cabanel.html&h=579&w=1000&sz=277&hl=en&start=28&tbid=SI7fhlGdmoRdwM:&tbid=86&tbw=149&prev=/images%3Fq%3Dthe%2Bbirth%2Bof%2Bvenus%2Bcabanel%26start%3D20%26ndsp%3D20%26svnum%3D10%26hl%3Den%26rls%3DGGLD.GGLD:2004-09.GGLD:en%26sa%3DN) accessed Feb 15, 2007

Cabanel's *Venus* is more 'traditional' in depiction of the nude as a passive object for male admiration. This is almost a religious painting, using the pinks and blues usually used to suggest Heaven. Like Courbet's woman, Venus has long flowing hair and she too lies surrounded by textured lapping waves that suggest sexual activity. She is facing the camera but has her arm across her face as if she is new to this world, or perhaps as if she is afraid of what is about to happen to her. She looks pure and untouched and the Cupids that are flying above her are excited about her birth. The Cupid in the centre looks at her as if she is both an angel and the devil. Perhaps this is the paradox of how Woman was viewed at this time: beautiful & pure, but also evil because they tempt men in lustful ways.

- Take notes from art history texts – *paraphrase* the most important ideas or claims. See the Learning Lab (RMIT on-line) for information about how to paraphrase.
- Keep a list of writers who say the same things. Which say something different? I'll keep a checklist so that I can **synthesise** the information for my essay. For example:

	Idea 1: the Nude	Idea 2: the gaze	Idea 3: the setting	The colours
Writer 1: Berger	a. Courbet b. Cabanel	a. Courbet b. Cabanel	a. Courbet b. Cabanel	a. Courbet b. Cabanel
Writer 2: Roos				
Writer 3: etc.				

4. Link the descriptions of the works with the ideas I read about (see example above)
5. Plan the essay

Take the ideas that are the strongest and use them to plan the body of the essay.

Do more reading to make sure that the ideas you choose can be explained clearly and deeply.

For more information about writing the art history essay, go to:

<http://www.dartmouth.edu/~writing/materials/student/humanities/arthistory.shtml>

## References

John Berger, *Ways of Seeing*, BBC London, Penguin, Harmondsworth, 1972, pp.54-56

Jane Mayo Roos, *Early Impressionism and the French State (1866-1874)*, George Braziller, Inc. New York, 1997 reviewed in

Suri Levine, 'Impressionism: Reflections and Perceptions – Review', *The Art Bulletin*, Sept. 1998, [http://findarticles.com/p/articles/mi\\_m0422/is\\_3\\_80/ai\\_54073937](http://findarticles.com/p/articles/mi_m0422/is_3_80/ai_54073937), accessed Feb. 15, 2007