

Methods in the Humanities

Research in the humanities can be accomplished through a surprisingly diverse range of methods, which apply equally well to the study of languages, literatures, the fine arts, applied arts, and religion. Most of these methods fall into two basic categories: **Extrinsic** or **Contextualist** approaches and **Intrinsic** or **Isolationist** approaches.

Extrinsic or Contextualist Approaches

Extrinsic or contextualist approaches are largely **historical** in orientation; that is, they seek to examine the context, the milieu, the background that produced the literary text, artwork, idea, or author/artist. Such approaches assume that there are causal connections between the nature of a work of art (including its content and its form), or a linguistic or an ideological phenomenon, and the historical moment in which it occurred. However, it should be understood from the outset that no single such factor ever fully accounts for the complexity of a text, artwork, or idea, which tends to be the product of many different causes. Although the term “historical” would seem to suggest that such methods are applicable only to older works of art, texts, or ideas, they are in fact equally useful in a discussion of contemporary works and ideas as well; however, they are then more properly described as “extrinsic” or “contextualist” approaches. Under this general rubric fall several more specialized methods:

(1) Texts, artworks, and ideas are born of individuals; thus many studies are specifically **biographical** or **psychological** in orientation, focusing directly upon the life and mind of the author/artist, seeking connections between life experience and the product(s) of his or her mind. Also included under this rubric are so-called **influence** studies, which chart the impact of a particular individual, work, idea, or movement of some kind upon another. **Comparative** studies might likewise be made of two or more works by the same author or artist, as a way of arriving at some conclusions about the author’s/artist’s intellectual, personal, aesthetic preoccupations and development; or of works by different authors/artists working in the same medium or genre, as a means of discovering the uniqueness of a particular person’s body of work. These modes of analysis presuppose substantial research into primary documents such as letters, journals, diaries, first-person accounts of contemporaries, and so forth. Careful investigation of an author’s/artist’s stated **intentions** with regard to his or her work should be considered as interpretations are advanced.

(2) Works are likewise produced within an **institutional** context; thus it can be productive to examine the **social, economic, and political** conditions that surrounded an author/artist, in order to determine whether directly or indirectly they affected the artworks or the more widespread movements of which specific works form only a part. Under this rubric an even narrower focus can be achieved by using the following closely related methods:

Gender, race, ethnicity, identity, and sexuality studies focus upon the literary and artistic representations of specific groups such as women, gays, lesbians, African Americans, Hispanics, Asians, and Jews. These kinds of studies examine the lives, attitudes toward, and social conditions of such groups as either the background against which a work or an idea was conceived, or as phenomena reflected within a work or an idea—often, but not exclusively, in

works produced by members of that group. For example, **feminist** critics seek to understand historical concepts of “the feminine” and their impact upon an author’s/artist’s representation of or assumptions about women. Such studies often critique the masculine, authoritarian tradition of misrepresenting or excluding the female. This tradition, operative in both literary and art history, has been shown by feminist critics to be responsible for the suppression of countless works of art by women; thus, much feminist criticism has devoted itself in recent years to locating and re-establishing the primary texts by women authors/artists and securing for them a place in the canon. Feminist scholarship in the field of religion has generated radical revisionist readings of major theological texts, particularly of the Bible. Film criticism has likewise benefited from feminist interpretations, prompting fascinating explorations of the masculine “**gaze**” of the camera upon a variety of feminine stereotypes, real and imagined. All versions of gender, race, ethnicity, identity, and sexuality studies share a common interest in the expression and interrogation of such depictions, as well as their relationship to the prevailing power structures within a society.

A **Marxist** approach is derived from a specific scientific theory of human societies—namely, that history is the record of people engaged in struggles to free themselves from oppressive class and economic systems; and that history can be properly understood only in terms of a society’s modes of production and the material life they afford—for all attitudes, values, and expressions of culture (e.g., its art) are necessarily linked to the economic conditions of daily life. Thus a Marxist interpretation of art would address itself not only to the more obvious depictions of the political and economic lives and struggles of individuals (as in, say, Delacroix’s painting *Liberty Leading the People*, Hardy’s novel *Jude the Obscure*, or Strindberg’s play *Miss Julie*), but to subtler manifestations of these phenomena, such as the evolution of genres; the rise of new forms of artistic expression; and the means by which works were actually produced, marketed, and received by the public and by those in power. For instance, how does one explain the rise of the novel in the 18th century? The appearance of Cubism in painting? The use of polyphonic voices in Eliot’s *The Waste Land*? The rise of the International Style in architecture? The movement from Naturalism to Expressionism in the European drama of the 1890s? How politics affected the translation of certain passages in the King James version of the Bible? Why Wordsworth chose to publish his poem *The White Doe of Rylstone* in the more expensive quarto format and how this decision affected the sales, reviews, and subsequent literary reputation of the poem? The Marxist critic would argue that all of the foregoing questions are answerable within a political, social, or an economic context.

More recent incarnations of this mode of analysis are the **New Historicism, Cultural Criticism, and Post-Colonialism**, all heavily historical and sociological in orientation but manifesting a postmodern skepticism about history and culture’s somewhat deceptive self-fashioning. These modes of criticism seek to explore aspects of, and the relationship between, “high culture” and “low culture” (as they have frequently been described), recognizing that the identity of a society and its values are influenced by both spheres. Since working-class voices and native voices (in the case of societies colonized by outsiders) have often been ignored, suppressed, or co-opted by the proponents of the hegemonic “high culture,” the three critical approaches above focus their attention on these uneasy relationships and on the significance and vehicles of expression that emerge from mass culture.

Among the several institutional contexts, a **technological** or **materials-based** approach would

examine the impact of a particular technological innovation upon a specific work, movement, medium, or discipline, such as the invention of color film or the ultra-high-speed lens upon photography or filmmaking; of tempered glass upon contemporary architectural style; of acrylic paint upon traditional easel-painting; or of digital technology on preserving glass-plate negatives.

(3) A **history-of-ideas** approach seeks to explain texts, artworks, and other intellectual developments in terms of a larger context of ideas characteristic of an age. These leading ideas can be philosophical, scientific, or religious in origin (e.g., positivism, evolution, evangelicalism) but are nonetheless profoundly influential upon many other areas of knowledge. Some scholars subscribe to the notion of a *Zeitgeist*, a “spirit of the age,” which simultaneously permeates all intellectual disciplines; this method thus assumes a kinship of ideas among the several arts, philosophy, religion, the sciences, and various other creations of the human mind that comprise “culture” in a given age. Scholars have often traced the metamorphosis of a single idea through several ages and its appearance in various media (e.g., the concept of the “great chain of being,” the idea of skepticism, the psychological principle of the association of ideas, the neo-Platonic concept of beauty). Under this same rubric we may place studies of the “**taste**” of an age; as well as of **movements**, of which, according to intellectual history, individual writers or artists formed a part (e.g., Neoclassicism, Romanticism, Dadaism, Russian Constructivism).

(4) A related approach concerns itself with the analysis of **myth, archetypes, folklore, iconography, iconology, and other patterns of visual or verbal imagery**, which occur as *leitmotifs* within individual works or groups of works. Extrinsic treatments of this subject often focus upon the historical origins of such stories or emblems, their reappearance in various ages and media, their evolution from one kind of representation to another, and the social, political, or psychological causes that prompt their re-emergence (e.g., the creation story, Camelot, the leprechaun, the Madonna, the fisher-king, the vampire).

(5) Furthermore, charting the development of a specific **genre, medium, or category** of *objet d’art* (the sonnet, Victorian “moral art,” the improvisational drama, the Greek amphora) and its attendant conventions or characteristics can prove a fruitful approach, particularly when analyzing a work according to the “horizon of expectations” that the genre sets for the reader/viewer, and the degree to which that work gratifies or thwarts those expectations (e.g., In what ways do John Donne’s *Holy Sonnets* defy our expectations of the sonnet? On what generic grounds was Beckett’s *Waiting for Godot* a shock to the typical theater-goer of the 1952 season? How did Beethoven’s Symphony No. 3 [“Eroica”] depart from the earlier conventions of symphonic composition? How did Horne Tooke’s notion of “abbreviation” revolutionize eighteenth-century concepts of grammar?).

(6) The methods known as **hermeneutics** and **reception theory** offer real challenges to the researcher; for both demand that one recreate as accurately and completely as possible the exact historical milieu in which a work was conceived in order to comprehend the intentions of the artistic or authorial consciousness that created it, as well as the audience’s subsequent response to it.

The **hermeneutical** critic charts the *meaning* of the work through time; believing, however, that meaning itself is a historical—and therefore relative—construct, subject to changes from one period to another. (What Shakespeare’s plays meant to the Renaissance audience is different

from their meaning to a twenty-first-century one.) The author may intend to invest his or her text/artwork with certain meanings, but the audience will always endow it with additional ones; or to put it another way, the text/artwork will—as it continues through time—accrue further meanings, regardless of the author’s original intentions. Interpretation is, therefore, *situational* and is necessarily a dialogue between past and present interpretations of a work. In this interpretive history, the hermeneutical critic must be well versed.

Reception theory focuses specifically upon the reader’s role in actually helping to *create* the meanings of a text. The psychodynamics of the act of reading itself are explored, the means by which the reader actualizes or “concretizes” the literary work. Similar studies occur in the visual arts, such as Rudolf Arnheim’s landmark work *Visual Thinking*, which explores the union between visual perception and the rational process of constructing meanings from the act of looking at a work of art. While these methods might seem to imply an anarchical “anything-goes” mode of interpretation, in reality both presuppose a substantial knowledge of history, psychology, and the various conventions of artistic forms, which serve as shorthand “codes” or “signals” utilized by the author/artist in the creation of a work, and which, if recognized, enable the reader or viewer to arrive at *reasonable* interpretations.

(7) In the fine arts, another important approach is referred to as **Connoisseurship**, which involves acquiring extensive knowledge of works of art chiefly for the purpose of attributing them to artists or schools, identifying sources, styles, and influences, and judging their quality in relation to the existing canon.

Intrinsic or Isolationist Approaches

Intrinsic or isolationist approaches concern themselves solely with the structure and materials that constitute the text, painting, sculpture, vase, photograph, film, building, play (or any other artifact). By “structure” and “materials” we mean not only the diverse elements that comprise **form** and **content** but the innate and unique **relationship**—indeed, the complex interaction—that those various elements have with each other, and that collectively produce and unify the aesthetic qualities of the artifact. Factors outside the text or artwork itself are banned from consideration (the author or artist, the facts of his or her life, the historical period in which the work occurred and all events and persons associated with it, the history of the genre or medium of the work under scrutiny, and so on). These methods are also referred to as “**textual**” (in the case of literary works) or “**formal**” (in the case of both art and literary works). The proliferation of intrinsic approaches in the 20th-century reflects a backlash against the more traditional extrinsic ones, which seemed to subordinate the artwork to the artist and his or her times. Intrinsic approaches treat the work of art as an autonomous, unified system of structures or interdependent “signs,” either linguistic or pre-iconographic (to use Erwin Panofsky’s term), depending on the medium under consideration.

For the intrinsic study of literature, several general categories of inquiry—all language-based—can be used to analyze the many strata of a work. As suggested by René Wellek and Austin Warren in *Theory of Literature*, such analyses focus on the following: the **individual units of meaning**—from words and phrases to sentences and stanzas—that determine the formal linguistic structure of the work and its style (including its diction and its syntax); **sound-effects**—euphony, cacophony, rhythm, meter, alliteration, assonance, consonance,

onomatopoeia, rhyme—and their role in creating the totality of a literary work; **literary devices**, such as image and metaphor, symbols and symbolic systems (myths), and the wide range of related figurative devices that contribute to a work’s structure and meaning; the “**world**” or “**consciousness**” within the text, the interplay of “voices” (especially important to narrative fiction) and the tone they create (which, it can be argued, is the sum total of all the stylistic elements previously described—diction, imagery, syntax, sound, and rhythm). Literature is thus seen to be an artful arrangement of language, its content and form inseparable, realized through a variety of techniques—the detailed investigation of which leads the reader to a total experience of the work, without any need for extraliterary considerations. All of the foregoing are really modes of **linguistic** criticism. More specialized versions are described below:

(1) A **structuralist** approach concentrates upon the “structures” that comprise literary language and their complex relationship to each other; these structures are both grammatical and mythic in nature (the former with its roots in linguistics, the latter in anthropology). All entities (whether in a text or in a society) are seen to be comprehensible only in terms of the larger structure of which they form a part. Individual words (the “signifiers”) are used arbitrarily to denote particular objects or abstractions (the “signified”). Together these “signs” constitute language, which is used to express ideas. Words or signs have **syntagmatic** or “horizontal” relations, that is, a linear relationship with the words that precede and succeed them in sentences, the positioning of which affects “meaning”; and **associative** or “vertical” relations, namely, a relationship with all the other words that might have been chosen to express an idea but were not and thus sharpen the meaning of those that were. Literary language, by virtue of its poetic nature and the devices it employs (metaphor, rhyme, and so on), self-consciously courts unique modes of expression, calling attention to its medium over its message, subverting the more “ordinary” linguistic system by extending and modifying it. The text consequently presents many levels of relationship and thus many levels of meaning. This is the aim of a structuralist approach to literature: to discover these relationships as well as these various levels of meaning (although with little of the conventional critic’s concern for the *implications* of those various meanings).

(2) Similar to this method are **formalism** and **semiotics**, both of which—like structuralism—are described as “sciences” of literary or textual analysis.

Formalist approaches are likewise concerned with literary structure, with the recognition and objective description of their uniquely literary nature and use of phonemic devices. To underscore the “scientific” orientation of their analysis, the (Russian) formalist critics of the 1920s described the literary text using three relatively clinical metaphors: as a machine, as an organism, and as a system. Subsequent formalists have concentrated upon literary language’s self-reflexive quality—its tendency to call attention not to the speaker, the addressee, or the meaning and purpose of their discourse; but to the words themselves and their complex patterns of opposition, similarity, and parallelism. Formalist analyses thus focus upon the processes and devices through which literary language “defamiliarizes” or estranges itself from ordinary language, foregrounding its own “literariness.”

Semiotics, which means the systematic study of signs, is really a *field* of study, rather than a *method* (like structuralism and formalism). Terry Eagleton (in *Literary Theory: An Introduction*) has succinctly summarized its background and its complicated agenda:

The American founder of semiotics, the philosopher C.S. Peirce, distinguished between three basic kinds of sign. There was the 'iconic,' where the sign somehow resembled what it stood for (a photograph of a person, for example); the 'indexical,' in which the sign is somehow associated with what it is a sign of (smoke with fire, spots with measles), and the 'symbolic.' Semiotics takes up this and many other classifications: it distinguishes between 'denotation' (what the sign stands for) and 'connotation' (other signs associated with it); between codes (the rule-governed structures which produce meanings) and the messages transmitted by them; between the 'paradigmatic' (a whole class of signs which may stand in for one another) and the 'syntagmatic' (where signs are coupled together with each other in a 'chain'). It speaks of 'metalanguages,' where one sign-system denotes another sign-system (the relation between literary criticism and literature, for instance), 'polysemic' signs which have more than one meaning, and a great many other technical concepts.

(pp. 100-101)

A literary text is thus seen as the most complex form of discourse, an amalgamation of numerous systems—each containing its own inherent tensions and harmonies, which interact with those of all the other systems. A text's meaning is, furthermore, not simply an internal matter; rather, the text is related to larger systems of meaning in society, in readers, and in the entire history of literature, all of which amplify its meaning. A semiotic approach to a work seeks to discover this network of relations, which the text holds within it.

(3) **Deconstruction** or **poststructuralism** is a complex fusion of structuralism's emphasis upon the patterns and structures inherent in literary language—as well as its tendency to view linguistic and ideological phenomena in terms of binary oppositions or contraries (high/low, light/dark, masculine/feminine, truth/falsehood); assumptions from the field of psychoanalysis, which regards writing as the simultaneous expression and repression of desire; and the post-Enlightenment skeptical tradition in Western philosophy, which ultimately views indeterminacy, alogicality, and self-division as inevitable consequences of human existence and all human endeavor (including language and writing). Language is regarded as consistently subverting or contradicting its own assertions, evading its own apparent inner logic, and all attempts at generalization or systemization. Like the human mind itself, with its conscious and unconscious levels of mental activity (what Freud referred to as the "manifest" and "latent" contents of the mind), a literary work seems to posit certain ideas and relations on the surface (the "text"), which, when examined more carefully, reveals numerous "symptomatic" points—places where impasses of meaning occur because inherent in them are contradictory ideas left unresolved (the "subtext"). Deconstructionist criticism seeks out such oppositions within a text and charts their various configurations.

(4) A **phenomenological** approach (derived from the philosophy of Edmund Husserl known as "phenomenology") seeks a totally immanent reading of a literary text. Nothing but the authorial "consciousness" that the text embodies is considered—from its mode of stylistic expression to its ontological and epistemological assumptions. The purpose is to experience as fully as possible the world of this mind—how it perceives time and space, relations with others, and material objects. Critical judgments are suspended in this mode of criticism, its object being a pure, largely passive experience of the work.

In the fine arts, applied arts, and dramatic arts, the foregoing approaches are removed from a linguistic context and transferred to a **pre-iconographical** or **staging** context. In the fine and applied arts, the emphasis would be on pure forms, line and color, shapes, materials, techniques, poses, gestures, atmosphere, composition, and other such artistic motifs and categories. In dramatic arts [where both the written text of the play and its stage production(s) might be considered], set and costume designs, lighting, blocking, characterization, and other aspects of staging are examined in terms of their role in implementing the total aesthetic conception of the play.

With all of the approaches previously described, extrinsic and intrinsic, candidates should realize that many of the methods require substantial background research before it will be possible to employ them successfully. Methods can be *combined* as well (e.g., a feminist-Marxist approach), if there is a logical reason—associated with the nature of a particular research problem—for doing so. Some of these methods are clearly more appropriate than others for certain types of research problems. **It is therefore important for students to consider fully the implications of their topic, the issues they wish to prove or elucidate, and the approach(es) that will yield the most fruitful results.**