



Abstract Art



Reading to Writing Summary

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Teacher's Notes

Lesson Contents	
1.	Instructions.
2.	Text: Understanding abstract art.
3.	Summary note-taking page.
4.	Summary notes suggested answers.
5.	Summary task page.
6.	Sample summary for comparison.
7.	Critical thinking questions.
8.	Critical thinking suggested answers for comparison.

Instructions

Option 1 [Medium] **** [B2/C1]

1. Distribute the text a week /day before the test. Students read, check vocabulary & meanings.
2. Test day: distribute a **new copy of text** and the **summary question**.
3. Set 1 hour to read the text, take notes and write a one-paragraph summary of 200-250-words.
4. Feedback¹: take in and mark [\[use our correction code*\]](#).
5. Feedback²: distribute **completed outline & model answer**. Students compare with their own work.
6. Summary marking: **should contain at least 4 main ideas with support – see summary key points**.
7. Extra: **critical thinking questions / group discussion (30 minutes)**.

Option 2 [More challenging] **** [C1]

1. Set 1 hour to read the **text** and write a one-paragraph summary of 200-250-words.
3. Feedback¹: take in and mark [\[use our correction code*\]](#).
4. Feedback²: distribute **completed outline & model answer**. Students compare with their own work.
5. Summary marking: **should contain at least 4 main ideas with support – see summary key points**.
6. Extra: **critical thinking questions / group discussion (30 minutes)**.

Link for Additional Material

Correction code	www.academic-englishuk/error-correction
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Understanding Abstract Art

By A. Watson (2025)

1. Abstract art is a style of visual art that does not attempt to represent an accurate depiction of visual reality. Instead, it uses shapes, colours, forms, and gestural marks to achieve its effect. Emerging in the early 20th century, abstract art represented a radical break from traditional forms of art, such as realism or naturalism, where the goal was to create recognisable images of the physical world (Chilvers, 2019).
2. One of the earliest pioneers of abstract art was Russian painter Wassily Kandinsky. He believed that art should express the inner life of the artist and that colour and form could convey emotion in the same way music does (Kandinsky, 1912). His paintings avoided direct representation, aiming instead to capture spiritual or emotional truths. Around the same period, Dutch artist Piet Mondrian developed a style known as neoplasticism. Using grids of vertical and horizontal lines and primary colours, Mondrian reduced visual elements to their most basic forms, believing that this would reveal a universal aesthetic order (Blotkamp, 2011).
3. Another significant figure in abstract art was Kazimir Malevich, the founder of Suprematism. His most famous work, *Black Square* (1915), challenged viewers to confront a canvas with no recognisable imagery at all. For Malevich, this reduction to pure geometric form was a way of freeing art from the burden of representation and engaging directly with feeling and intuition (Bowlt, 2021). His ideas influenced later movements that also sought to distil visual language into its essential components, setting the stage for mid-century developments in the United States and beyond.
4. The rise of abstract art was not merely an aesthetic movement but also a reflection of changing philosophical and political ideas. As the world underwent rapid industrialisation, technological change, and political upheaval, many artists felt that traditional art forms no longer captured the complexity of modern life. Abstract art, with its emphasis on subjective experience and non-representational form, offered a new visual language to express uncertainty, transformation, and freedom (Harrison and Wood, 2003). For artists, it became a way of questioning conventions and expanding the boundaries of what art could be. Philosophers and theorists, too, began to consider abstraction as part of a broader cultural shift toward modernity, breaking with classical notions of representation and objectivity.
5. In the United States, abstract art reached new heights in the mid-20th century with the emergence of Abstract Expressionism. Artists like Jackson Pollock, Mark Rothko, and Willem de Kooning used scale, texture, and innovative techniques to explore the unconscious mind and emotional intensity. Pollock's drip painting technique, for example, involved pouring or splattering paint onto large canvases laid on the floor. This method allowed him to engage directly with the medium and produce works that seemed to capture movement, chaos, and energy. Rothko, in contrast, used vast fields of colour to evoke deep emotional states, inviting viewers into a contemplative space. De Kooning's work combined abstraction with traces of figuration, suggesting the struggle between control and spontaneity (Varnedoe and Karmel, 1998).
6. Despite its popularity, abstract art has often divided opinion. Critics have sometimes dismissed it as meaningless or inaccessible, while supporters argue that its value lies in its ability to evoke personal interpretation and emotional response. Unlike figurative art, which tells a specific story or depicts a clear scene, abstract art invites the viewer to participate actively in making meaning. The viewer's reaction becomes part of the artwork's experience, making it deeply subjective and dynamic. This openness has inspired debate in both academic and public circles, where questions about artistic intention, technique, and value continue to surface (Corris, 2013).
7. Today, abstract art continues to evolve, incorporating digital media, installation, and performance.

Contemporary artists build on the legacy of early abstract pioneers while experimenting with new materials and ideas. Whether through minimalist colour fields or complex multimedia compositions, abstract art remains a powerful way of exploring perception, identity, and the boundaries of visual language. As global communication and technology expand artistic possibilities, abstraction persists as a vital and adaptive form of creative expression. Many artists now explore issues such as environmental crisis, race, and gender through abstract forms, connecting personal experience with global concerns (Elkins, 2020).

References

- Blotkamp, C. (2011) *Mondrian: The Art of Destruction*. London: Reaktion Books.
- Bowlit, J. E. (2021) *Kazimir Malevich: Painting the Absolute*. New York: Thames & Hudson.
- Chilvers, I. (2019) *The Oxford Dictionary of Art and Artists*. 5th edn. Oxford: Oxford University Press.
- Corris, M. (2013) *Abstraction and the Politics of Modernism*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.
- Elkins, J. (2020) *What Painting Is: How to Think About Oil Painting Using the Language of Alchemy*. 2nd edn. London: Routledge.
- Harrison, C. and Wood, P. (2003) *Art in Theory 1900–2000: An Anthology of Changing Ideas*. Oxford: Blackwell.
- Kandinsky, W. (1912) *Concerning the Spiritual in Art*. Translated by M.T.H. Sadler. London: Tate Publishing.
- Varnedoe, K. and Karmel, P. (1998) *Jackson Pollock*. New York: The Museum of Modern Art.

Summary: Key Points

Task: Take notes on the key points of the text.

1. Main idea:
Support:
2. Main idea:
Support:
3. Main idea:
Support:
4. Main idea:
Support:
5. Main idea:
Support:
6. Main idea:
Support:
7. Main idea:

Summary: Key Points (Suggested Answers)

Task: Take notes on the key points of the text.

1. Main idea: Early development of abstract art
Support: <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Early 20th century → radical break from realism/naturalism (Chilvers, 2019). • Aim: non-representational, focus on shapes, colours, forms, gestures. • Movement linked to modernity + new ways of seeing.
2. Main idea: Early pioneers
Support: <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Kandinsky (Russian) → art expresses inner life; colour/form = emotion (Kandinsky, 1912). • Mondrian (Dutch) → neoplasticism: grids + primary colours; universal aesthetic order (Blotkamp, 2011). • Both avoided realism, aimed at deeper truths.
3. Main idea: Malevich & Suprematism
Support: <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Founder of Suprematism; <i>Black Square</i> (1915). • No recognisable imagery → pure geometric form. • Aim: free art from representation; focus on feeling/intuition (Bowlit, 2021). • Influenced later movements, especially mid-century developments.
4. Main idea: Cultural/philosophical context
Support: <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Industrialisation, tech change, political upheaval → need for new art forms. • Abstraction = subjective, modern, expressive of freedom + uncertainty (Harrison & Wood, 2003). • Philosophers/theorists: abstraction as cultural shift away from objectivity.
5. Main idea: Abstract Expressionism (US, mid-20thC)
Support: <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Pollock → drip technique; energy, chaos, unconscious (Varnedoe & Karmel, 1998). • Rothko → colour fields; deep emotion; contemplation. • De Kooning → abstraction + traces of figuration; struggle between control/spontaneity.
6. Main idea: Criticism & interpretation
Support: <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Critics: abstract art = meaningless / inaccessible. • Supporters: value = personal meaning, emotional response. • Viewer's reaction: part of artwork → subjective, dynamic (Corris, 2013). • Ongoing debates: intention, technique, value.
7. Main idea: Contemporary developments
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Abstract art evolves with digital, installation, performance. • Continues to explore perception, identity, visual boundaries. • Links to global concerns: environment, race, gender (Elkins, 2020). • Remains adaptive and vital in creative expression.

Summary

Task: Write a 200-250-word summary on the key features of the text using your notes to help you.

Word Count: _____

Sample Summary for Comparison

Abstract art emerged in the early 20th century as a radical break from realism and naturalism, rejecting direct representation in favour of shapes, colours, and forms. Pioneers such as Wassily Kandinsky viewed abstraction as a way to express inner emotion, while Piet Mondrian developed neoplasticism, reducing art to grids and primary colours to reveal universal order. Kazimir Malevich's *Black Square* (1915) exemplified Suprematism, eliminating imagery to focus on pure form and intuition, influencing later movements. The rise of abstraction reflected broader cultural shifts during a period of industrialisation, technological innovation, and political upheaval. Artists sought new visual languages to capture the complexity and uncertainty of modern life, while philosophers and theorists framed abstraction as part of a wider move away from classical objectivity. In mid-20th-century America, Abstract Expressionism marked a new phase. Jackson Pollock's drip paintings conveyed energy and the unconscious, Mark Rothko's colour fields invited emotional contemplation, and Willem de Kooning blended abstraction with figuration to highlight tensions between control and spontaneity. Although critics dismissed abstract art as meaningless or inaccessible, supporters argued that its value lay in encouraging personal interpretation and emotional response. This debate continues today. Contemporary abstract art incorporates digital media, installation, and performance, addressing global issues such as identity, environment, and social change. Despite evolving forms, abstraction remains a dynamic mode of artistic exploration and cultural expression.

Word count 222

⇒ How does your summary differ from the sample? Complete the table with the similarities and differences. Consider *coverage of main points, balance of ideas, conciseness, clarity and use of examples*.

	Summaries
Similarities	
Differences	

Critical Thinking Questions

i) What's the stance of the author? What is the evidence for this?

[2 points]

ii) Is this a credible article? Yes /no – why?

[2 points]

iii) Highlight four ideas in the text you would use for an essay titled: *Abstract art is sometimes criticised as 'meaningless' or 'inaccessible'. To what extent do you agree that its value lies in 'personal interpretation'? Discuss with reference to specific examples.*

[4 points]

iv) Highlight two areas in the text that you question, disagree with or lack evidence.

[2 points]

Critical Thinking Questions Suggested **Key** for Comparison

i) What's the stance of the author? What is the evidence for this?

The author's stance is broadly supportive of abstract art as an important and evolving movement. The text highlights its role as a "radical break" from tradition and frames it as a meaningful response to modern social, political, and technological change. Evidence for this positive stance includes:

- *The description of pioneers such as Kandinsky, Mondrian, and Malevich as innovators who sought to express deeper truths.*
- *The portrayal of Abstract Expressionists like Pollock and Rothko as exploring emotion, energy, and the unconscious in creative ways.*
- *The acknowledgment that while critics find abstract art "meaningless or inaccessible," the author emphasises its openness to interpretation as a strength.*
- *The conclusion that abstract art continues to "evolve" and "remain a powerful way" to explore perception, identity, and global concerns.*

[2 points]

ii) Is this a credible article? Yes /no – why?

Yes, it is a credible article. The text is written in an academic style and supports its points with references to recognised scholars and sources (e.g., Chilvers, 2019; Blotkamp, 2011; Bowlt, 2021). It traces the development of abstract art logically, covering major figures, movements, and contexts. The balanced discussion of both criticism and support adds to its reliability. The inclusion of recent sources (e.g., Elkins, 2020) also shows awareness of contemporary developments, which strengthens credibility.

[2 points]

iii) Highlight four ideas in the text you would use for an essay titled: *Abstract art is sometimes criticised as 'meaningless' or 'inaccessible'. To what extent do you agree that its value lies in 'personal interpretation'? Discuss with reference to specific examples.*

1. Criticism of abstract art

- *The text notes that critics have dismissed it as "meaningless or inaccessible."*
- *This provides the counter-argument students can address.*

2. Abstract art as personal interpretation

- *Supporters argue that its value lies in the ability to evoke personal meaning and emotional response.*
- *The text stresses that the viewer's reaction becomes part of the artwork's experience.*

3. Abstract Expressionism as an example

- *Pollock's drip paintings, Rothko's colour fields, and De Kooning's mix of abstraction/figuration show how artists deliberately encouraged subjective, emotional responses.*
- *This gives concrete evidence for the "personal interpretation" side.*

4. Contemporary developments

- *Abstract art continues to explore identity, environment, race, and gender, often through experimental media.*

- Shows its relevance today and reinforces that interpretation is open and connected to broader human issues.

[4 points]

iv) Highlight two areas in the text that you question, disagree with or lack evidence

P1 (Introduction)

Q: The text claims abstract art was a “radical break” from realism. Was it completely separate, or did it still borrow elements from earlier traditions?

→ *How do we know for sure that abstraction was as radical at the time as the text suggests?*

P2 (Kandinsky & Mondrian)

Q: Kandinsky believed colours could directly convey emotions. Is there enough evidence to prove this universally?

→ *Could colour and form be interpreted very differently depending on cultural background?*

P3 (Malevich & Suprematism)

Q: The text says *Black Square* freed art from representation. Can a single painting really achieve this?

→ *Might Malevich’s work still carry political or cultural meanings that the text overlooks?*

P4 (Philosophical & political context)

Q: The text links abstraction to industrialisation and upheaval. Is this connection based on solid evidence or just interpretation?

→ *Could artists have turned to abstraction for purely personal reasons instead?*

P5 (Abstract Expressionism, USA)

Q: The text suggests Pollock and Rothko explored the unconscious mind. Is this an overstatement without psychological proof?

→ *How can we measure whether viewers really experience unconscious or emotional responses?*

P6 (Criticism & interpretation)

Q: The text argues that personal interpretation is a strength. Could this also mean abstract art lacks clear meaning?

→ *If every interpretation is valid, how do we judge the quality of abstract art?*

P7 (Contemporary developments)

Q: The text claims abstract art addresses issues like race and the environment. Is there enough evidence or examples given to support this?

→ *Are abstract forms effective at raising awareness of such issues compared to representational art?*

[2 points]

[Any 2 of these, but this is obviously subjective so accept any credible student answer].