

Exegesis

Academic Tip Sheet



This academic tip sheet:

- explains what is meant by an exegesis;
- looks at what can you include in an exegesis; and
- discusses what traps you should avoid.

What is an exegesis?

The exegesis is a form of assessment that often accompanies a student's creative product; in particular in areas such as painting, sculpture, photomedia and film. At undergraduate level, a written exegesis takes the structure (format) of an essay, but its content is different.

Whereas an argumentative essay centres upon a thesis or idea, the central focus of the exegesis is a creative work or works, for instance a painting, installation, photomedia portfolio or film script. These works will be

the student's own creative product. In the exegesis, the student critically examines their creative product in the light of contemporary theory and practice.

What can you include in an exegesis?

With the creative work as the focal point, there are many aspects you can explore in an exegesis to meaningfully situate your work in contemporary theory and practice. You may explore the influences, ideas, decisions, materials, technologies, events, theories, (the list goes on and depends on the terms of reference your lecturer gives you), which inspire, inform, restrain or facilitate the process and production of your work.

Writing an exegesis demands that you use a reflective and reflexive voice. Kroll (2004), in an address on the use of exegesis as an academic assessment, states that a student writing an exegesis must become “an expert reader of his own work – a critic and examiner...”(p.9). Further, they must become expert at ‘reading’ the cultural and theoretical matrix in which their work exists. These two abilities are combined in the exegesis, which will then clearly articulate the connections and resonances between contemporary theory and practice.

When writing an exegesis be aware of:

- The ideas, both personal and cultural, which engendered (gave birth to) and inform the art work. This conceptual context might include:
 - the artist’s own age, gender, cultural background, values, beliefs, previous practice;
 - other artists’ practice, both historical and contemporary;
 - the culture/s of art, both historical and contemporary;
 - cultural setting/s, both historical and contemporary; and/or
 - art and cultural theory, both historical and contemporary.
- The practical constraints on the creative work, such as:
 - the strengths and weaknesses of different materials and methods; and
 - any technological limitations and advances.
- The physical context of the work; where it is, should and might be displayed, now and in the future.
- The function of the work and the relationship between form and function.

An exegesis may look at any or all of the points above, and at the relationships between them. At the post-graduate level, an exegesis should not just add to your understanding of the text which is being examined, but to your understanding of art as a whole, and perhaps – through that – to culture and our humanity

in general.

Process

An exegesis is generally more powerful if it is not just an afterthought tacked on to an artwork. If you can record your creative process, your record will provide the basis of your exegesis. A simple recording method might include:

- Keeping a visual diary of your work, showing its progress and transformations.
- Keeping written notes alongside the visuals. These might include such things as your intentions, ideas, methods, problems, reading.

Once the creative process is finished, you should start analysing the process you used, the decisions you made and the context you made them in.

Structure

Be aware that different contexts may demand different structures. Check with your lecturer. The depth and breadth of the theory sections (indeed of all sections) will change depending on whether this is a first year or postgraduate assessment. Write in paragraph form.

1. Introduction – a brief outline of the work you are writing about, why it is important to you/your audience, what aspects you will concentrate on.
2. Section on the relationship of the form, content and materials to the purpose and function of the work. The relationship between ideas and practical considerations (between inspiration and execution) should be included here. Some theory should inform this section.
3. Section on the context of the work, including physical, artistic, historical, social, theoretical contexts. This section should draw on theory.
4. Extensive section which discusses the project or individual work in detail, closely analysing each aspect of the work in relation to the ideas and theories expressed in sections 2 & 3.
5. Conclusion.

Traps to avoid

Reading theory and thinking deeply about their art can sometimes lead students to a point where their exegesis begins to drive their practice, rather than to explain and examine that practice. A student’s work can become institutionalised; they may end up merely illustrating a theory rather than creating. This is why the process above suggests that detailed and sustained analysis of the work is left until after the creative process is finished. The opposite mistake, of avoiding theory and

analysis altogether, is equally unfortunate. Ultimately, you will have to find a process that works for you.

Note: You should ask your lecturer and/or tutor about good examples of exegeses in your assessment area. Honours and postgraduate students must check with their lecturer and the unit guide to find the correct ratio of exegesis to creative product.

Exegesis checklist

- **Are you recording and analysing your creative processes?**
- **Have you looked at the context that has engendered or informed your artwork?**
- **Do you have a balance between theory and practice?**
- **Have you submitted your exegesis on time and in an appropriate format?**
- **Have you kept a copy of your exegesis?**

References

- Andersson, B., & Beveridge, A. (2007). *A guide to assessments and skills in SCCA* (2nd ed.). [Booklet]. Perth, WA: Edith Cowan University.
- Kroll, J. (2004). *Exegesis and the gentle reader* [Electronic version]. TEXT Special Issue, 3.

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