

October Assessment Study Guide

Topic: Realism, Impressionism & Post-Impressionism (c.1850–1900s)

Assessment: One-hour written essay

1. Overview of the Period (c.1850–1900s) (Before the period)

Start off the answer with linking back to the question

The second half of the 19th century was a time of enormous social and artistic change. The French Revolution (1789-1799), which aimed to redefine political power and the Industrial Revolution saw urbanisation, and the rise of the middle class all influenced how artists saw the world. Artists began to turn away from traditional subjects like history or religion and started to depict everyday life, work, leisure, and modern society.

Photography also changed how people viewed reality and encouraged artists to experiment with composition and light. Women artists began to emerge despite barriers to training and exhibition. Across the period, artists questioned how people were represented, whether through class, gender, or occupation, and how art could express truth, emotion, or experience.

Also mention:

- The Academy and its influence
- The Salon
- Paint tubes and portable easels
- **Link back to the question and list the artists and artworks that you are going to discuss**

2. Realism (c.1840–1870)

Key Artists: Gustave Courbet, Édouard Manet, Jean - François Millet

Discuss one artist in detail and one of their paintings. List the other 2 artists and even briefly discuss one of the artists and one of their work and link to the question.

Realist artists aimed to show the truth of ordinary life rather than idealised scenes. Their work often highlighted the dignity or hardship of the working class and reflected social change.

- Gustave Courbet – *A Burial at Ornans* (1849):
Courbet depicted a rural funeral in his hometown on a massive scale usually reserved for history paintings. The figures are ordinary people, not heroes.

The dull, earthy tones and horizontal composition emphasise realism and equality. Courbet's brushwork is thick and visible, giving a solid, tactile surface that mirrors the weight of the subject.

- Édouard Manet – *Le Déjeuner sur l'Herbe* (1863):
This controversial work shows two dressed men and a nude woman in a contemporary park setting. Manet's flat perspective, bold lighting, and loose brushwork challenged academic traditions. The subject raised questions about gender, morality, and modern life, marking a step towards Impressionism.

3. Impressionism (c.1870–1890)

Key Artists: Claude Monet, Edgar Degas, Berthe Morisot, Mary Cassatt

Discuss one artist in detail and one of their paintings. List the other artists and even briefly discuss one of the artists and one of their work and link to the question.

Impressionists focused on capturing the changing effects of light and atmosphere. They painted scenes of modern leisure, daily life, and the shifting pace of the city.

- Claude Monet - *Impression, Sunrise* (1872):
Monet's loose, quick brushstrokes and soft colour palette create a hazy, atmospheric view of Le Havre port at sunrise. His focus is on the fleeting quality of light and reflection rather than precise detail.
- Edgar Degas - *L'Absinthe Drinker* (1876):
Degas portrayed a woman sitting alone in a café, reflecting isolation in modern urban life. The composition feels cropped and spontaneous, influenced by photography. Muted tones and diagonal lines guide the viewer's eye through the space.
- Berthe Morisot - *The Cradle* (1872):
Morisot presents an intimate domestic scene of a mother watching her sleeping child. Soft brushwork, gentle colours and rhythm create a mood of tenderness.
- Mary Cassatt - *In the Loge* (1878):
Cassatt's painting shows a woman at the theatre observing and being observed. It subtly comments on the position of women in public spaces. Strong diagonals and contrasting light direct attention to her self-assured pose.

4. Post-Impressionism (c.1885–1905)

Key Artists: Vincent van Gogh, Paul Cézanne, Paul Gauguin

Discuss one artist in detail and one of their paintings. List the other 2 artists and even briefly discuss one of the artists and one of their work and link to the question.

Post-Impressionists built on the techniques of the Impressionists but sought more structure, emotion, or symbolism in their work.

- Vincent van Gogh - *Bedroom in Arles* (1888):
Van Gogh used strong colour contrasts and simplified forms to create a feeling of calm and personal space. The tilted perspective and expressive brushstrokes reflect his emotional state and individuality.
- Paul Cézanne - *Still Life with Apples and Oranges* (1899):
Cézanne explored structure and form through careful arrangement of fruit, bottles, and drapery. He used warm tones, visible brushwork, and shifting perspective to give solidity to everyday objects. The composition is balanced yet dynamic.
- Paul Gauguin - *Two Tahitian Women* (1899):
Gauguin used simplified forms and bold, flat colour to convey calm and timeless beauty. The painting reflects his search for an unspoiled, spiritual world but also raises questions about colonial attitudes and the exoticisation of women.

Conclusion

In your conclusion, always **return to the key words of the question** and summarise what you have shown throughout your essay. Remind the examiner how each movement represented people, society, or identity in new ways.

You might include points such as:

- Realist artists like Courbet, Millet and Manet challenged traditional subjects and represented ordinary people with honesty and directness.
- The Impressionists, including Monet, Degas, Morisot and Cassatt, captured the experiences of modern life, exploring class, gender, and leisure through light, movement, and atmosphere.
- Post-Impressionists such as Van Gogh, Cézanne, and Gauguin developed personal, emotional, and symbolic approaches, using colour and structure to express deeper feelings and ideas.

End your essay by linking to what came next. Explain that these developments paved the way for early 20th-century Expressionism, where artists like Munch and Kirchner took the emotional use of colour and form even further to express inner experience rather than external reality. Also discuss ‘Les Fauves’ and how the artists used intense colour and simplified forms and how Paul Cezanne’s art influenced Cubism.

Tip: A strong conclusion should not introduce new artworks - it should show that you understand how ideas evolved and why this period was a turning point in modern art.