APPENDIX III: Sample student papers (visual descriptions)

The CCNY students who wrote these papers were given a variation of the assignment below. In all cases, they were told to go to the Metropolitan Museum of Art and select one work on display in the galleries of modern art. The first version of the paper is what the students actually handed in, which did not necessarily receive an A, but showed a basically strong organization and mentioned the most important visual qualities. The second version has been edited by me for this book, underlining the topic sentences, correcting the grammar, adding significant details that were missing, and making the wording a little more graceful and a little less repetitious. I have tried to stay as close to the original texts as possible. Note that the papers could have been revised in many different ways. There is no one answer to an assignment like this, just something that succeeds more or less well for the reader.

THE ASSIGNMENT:
Write a two-page visual description of the work you selected. NO RESEARCH. Include the name of the artist, the title, the date, the medium, the approximate dimensions, the name of the collection, and the museum number. Be sure to give enough details for the reader to be able to visualize the work in all its important aspects. Paragraphs should be the basic unit of organization. Check your topic sentences, grammar, and spelling. To find out how effective your description is, draw a picture of what you have written or have someone else read it. Revise, revise, revise.

SAMPLE VISUAL DESCRIPTION #1
ORIGINAL PAPER:
“From Green to White, by Yves Tanguy”

From Green to White (Metropolitan Museum of Art, 1999.363.82) is a surrealistic painting by Yves Tanguy in 1954. In the lower part of the painting, what appears to be an strange city, or part of some device. The rest of From Green to White is covered in a strange, organic-looking background, with any shadow washed out by fog or some omni-present light. In contrast, the city is naturalistically shaded, creating even greater contrast to the barren fog occupying the upper three fourths of the painting. The fog is not completely featureless, however. The lower
part of it is darkened, interspersed with streaks of color. Past the dark area is a section of white with a slightly blue tinge, with streaks of bright white. The streaks gives the impression of being shimmers of light, giving the whole section a look similar to a block of partly melted ice. The ice quickly fades out the blue, leaving what appears to besky.

The city itself has a certain organic look to it. The buildings are all rounded, with the roofs each at different slopes. In general the city is simple shapes, distorted yet still recognizable. There are a few buildings that stand out in the painting. One building in the middle, with a blue roof and curved outer walls, has strange waves on the roof, and shapes cut out from the walls. Another building, to the left of the blue-roofed one, has grey-green tubing coming from the shaft of the tower. The top of the tower has window-like openings going around its circumference.

What Tanguy meant this painting to represent is unknown. The title, From Green to White, gives us no hint of what Tanguy meant by this, if he meant anything at all. One possible idea is that the city represents human innovation or civilization. This is surrounded by a vast empty gulf of nothingness, representing our potential for growth. An alternative interpretation is that the void is a barrier, restricting our growth beyond a certain point. This barrier is represented by the section of the void that has the appearance of melted ice. Beyond the wall is the sky, representing freedom. We, however, are trapped on the swamp-like surface, slowly expanding our city—until we reach this barrier.

REVISION OF PAPER #1:
1. Read the paper all the way through, underlining the first or topic sentence of each paragraph. (This will be easiest to do if you print out a copy from www.writingaboutart.org.) These sentences should form an outline of the paper. Do they? Do you know what the work looks like from this description? Do you know all of its qualities as a physical object - medium, size, colors, surface texture? Which elements are missing?
2. Find a reproduction of the painting online (Google the name of the artist and the title) so you know what it actually looks like. Is this what you imagined? Why not? In fact, this painting is extremely difficult to describe because it is very precise in its description of unrecognizable objects. If you have a choice, select a topic you can write about easily!
3. Now go back to the paper, and begin going through it sentence by sentence. First check for mistakes in spelling, grammar, and word usage. Then consider whether words have been used effectively to make the meaning clear. The first sentence is especially important because it tells the reader what the paper will be about.
From Green to White (Metropolitan Museum of Art, 1999.363.82) is a surrealistic painting by Yves Tanguy in 1954. In the lower part of the painting, what appears to be an strange city, or part of some device. The rest of From Green to White is covered in a strange, organic-looking background, with any shadow washed out by fog or some omni-present light. In contrast, the city is naturalistically shaded, creating even greater contrast to the barren fog occupying the upper three fourths of the painting. The fog is not completely featureless, however. The lower part of it is darkened, interspersed with streaks of color. Past the dark area is a section of white with a slightly blue tinge, with streaks of bright white. The streaks gives the impression of being shimmers of light, giving the whole section a look similar to a block of partly melted ice. The ice quickly fades out the blue, leaving what appears to besky.

Original first sentence: From Green to White (Metropolitan Museum of Art, 1999.363.82) is a surrealistic painting by Yves Tanguy in 1954.

Grammar: What was in 1954? The word "made" has been left out. PROOFREAD!
Comments: What does "surrealistic" mean? CHECK A DICTIONARY:
http://www.merriam-webster.com/dictionary/surrealistic: Adjective. 1: of or relating to surrealism 2: having a strange dreamlike atmosphere or quality like that of a surrealist painting
Does the writer intend 1 or 2? The first definition means that the painting is an example of the historical style Surrealism. The second refers to a visual quality. Changing the placement of the word eliminates the ambiguity.

Possible revision: The painting called From Green to White (Metropolitan Museum of Art, 1999.363.82) was made by the Surrealist artist Yves Tanguy in 1954.
Comments: The reader now knows the title of the work, the name of its artist, the historical movement with which he is associated, and the year in which it was painted. Nothing has been said about the work as a physical object however - size, medium, surface, colors - nor has any indication been given of what the paper will be about. It is best to be clear, even if the result is not elegant.

Final revision: This paper will be a visual description of From Green to White (Metropolitan Museum of Art, 1999.363.82), an oil painting made by the Surrealist artist Yves Tanguy in 1954.

Original second sentence: In the lower part of the painting, what appears to be an strange city, or part of some device.
Grammar: This is a sentence fragment because there is no verb, and "an" is used incorrectly because the following word begins with a consonant. It can be made into a complete sentence by adding "there is" before "what appears to be."
Comments: The "lower part" is only meaningful if we can visualize the work as a whole, and it doesn't indicate exactly how much of the composition it fills. The order of the information can be reversed to get rid of the passive "there is." The phrase "part of some device" is too vague to mean anything. The more specific a description is the better. Since the most tangible phrase connected to this area of the picture is "appears to be a strange city," that can be kept, although it would be better to know a little more about what it looks like so the reader can judge the ways in which it is and isn't like a city. Furthermore, we still do not know the picture's size, orientation, subject, or how it was painted. That information must be added.

Final revision: A vertical composition of about 39 x 32 inches, the work depicts an imaginary place. Tanguy used tiny, barely visible brushstrokes, so that the surface of the painting is almost perfectly smooth. What appears to be a strange city fills the bottom fourth of the canvas.

Original third sentence: The rest of *From Green to White* is covered in a strange, organic-looking background, with any shadow washed out by fog or some omnipresent light.

Comments: Something can't be covered with a background, "organic-looking" is too vague to evoke anything specific in the mind of the reader, the absence of shadow comes as a surprise since its presence has not been mentioned, and how can something be both a "fog" and an "omnipresent light"? Although the topic - the rest of the picture - is what should come next, the information must be much more specific. Looking at the picture again suggests "sky" as another way to describe this area, which fits with the idea of organic shapes (like clouds, for example), fog, and a pervasive light. "Background" suggests that the picture contains an illusion of three-dimensional space. It is important not to confuse the two-dimensional or flat design of a picture with a three-dimensional or spatial organization. The first is described by the words top, middle, and bottom, while the second by front, middle, and back. Since it is confusing for the reader to switch between different frames of reference, and no indication of a spatial structure has been given, it is better to stay with the two-dimensional reference already used ("lower part," "bottom fifth").

Final revision: The rest of *From Green to White* looks like sky.

Original fourth sentence: In contrast, the city is naturalistically shaded, creating even greater contrast to the barren fog occupying the upper three fourths of the painting.

Comments: Something that appears to be a strange city has been transformed into a city with naturalistic shading. This would make more sense if the reader knew the ways in which it does and doesn't look like a city. Furthermore, the information about shading would be more useful if it was explained where it appears. Notice that relative dimension is now given with "the upper three-fourths of the painting." Information like this, pertaining to the entire composition, should
be given as early as possible. If the relative size of the first area had been given as the bottom quarter - or fifth, which seems more accurate - it would have established the proportions of the two major areas of the composition.

**Final revision:** What appears to be a strange city, naturalistically shaded to suggest space, fills the bottom fifth of the composition. The rest of *From Green to White* looks like sky.

**Original fifth and sixth sentences:** The fog is not completely featureless, however. The lower part of it is darkened, interspersed with streaks of color.

**Comments:** First, there is no need to contradict a statement that has not been made, so the fifth sentence is not necessary. "Lower part" is vague, and the phrase has been used to refer to two different areas of the painting (in the second sentence and in this one), which is confusing to the reader. Rather than "lower part," "darkened," and "streaks of color," be specific about the shapes and colors.

**Final revision:** The lower part of this section consists of dark, wavy, horizontal bands, interspersed with streaks of red, green, pink, and blue.

**Original seventh sentence:** Past the dark area is a section of white with a slightly blue tinge, with streaks of bright white.

**Comments:** "Past" suggests placement in terms of three-dimensional space. Since "lower part" locates the area in terms of two-dimensional design, it's better to be consistent and use "above." Furthermore, the relationship between the "streaks of bright white" and the "section of white" has to be made clear. Since the "streaks" are described more fully in the next sentence, they can be removed from this one. Finally, since the previous sentence used "section," the word here should be changed to another one, like "area."

**Final revision:** Above that is an area of white, tinged slightly blue.

**Original eighth sentence:** The streaks gives the impression of being shimmers of light, giving the whole section a look similar to a block of partly melted ice.

**Grammar:** "Streaks" is plural, so the verb should be "give."

**Comments:** The fact that they are "bright white," eliminated from the previous sentence, must be added. Both "shimmers of light" and "partly melted ice" are images, and it should be made clear that they are alternative descriptions for the same area. Don't use the verb "give" twice in the same sentence.

**Final revision:** Streaks of bright white within it give the impression of being shimmers of light, or reflections from a block of partly melted ice.

**Original ninth sentence:** The ice quickly fades out the blue, leaving what appears to be besky.

**Grammar:** What is "besky"? In fact, it is a typing mistake, with the space between "be" and
"sky" left out. A spelling checker would have picked this up if it had been used.

Comments: What does "fades out the blue" mean? Isn't a sky blue? In fact, the shimmers of light or melting ice fade into blue, to what appears to be sky. Furthermore, no indication has been given of where this takes place in the composition.

Final revision: These streaks fade out about halfway up the picture, leaving what appears to be a blue sky with a few wispy clouds in it.

REVISED FIRST PARAGRAPH:

This paper will be a visual description of From Green to White (Metropolitan Museum of Art, 1999.363.82), an oil painting made by the Surrealist artist Yves Tanguy in 1954. A vertical composition of about 39 x 32 inches, the picture describes an imaginary place using tiny, barely visible brushstrokes, so that the surface of the painting is almost perfectly smooth. What appears to be a strange city, naturalistically shaded to suggest space, fills the bottom fifth of the composition. The rest of From Green to White looks like sky. The lower part of this section contains dark, wavy, horizontal bands, interspersed with streaks of red, green, pink, and blue. Above that is an area of white, tinged slightly blue. Streaks of bright white within it give the impression of being shimmers of light, or reflections from a block of partly melted ice. These streaks fade out about halfway up the picture, leaving what appears to be a blue sky with a few wispy white clouds in it.

Comments: The revised first paragraph gives the reader an idea of the different areas of the composition, their relative sizes, and their colors. Because this paper is a visual description, it needs more information about the only part that still lacks detail, the bottom of the canvas. The elements which suggest the strange city must be described with more precision. This is the subject of the original second paragraph.

ORIGINAL SECOND PARAGRAPH:

The city itself has a certain organic look to it. The buildings are all rounded, with the roofs each at different slopes. In general the city is simple shapes, distorted yet still recognizable. There are a few buildings that stand out in the painting. One building in the middle, with a blue roof and curved outer walls, has strange waves on the roof, and shapes cut out from the walls. Another building, to the left of the blue-roofed one, has grey-green tubing coming from the shaft of the tower. The top of the tower has window-like openings going around its circumference. Original first sentence: The city itself has a certain organic look to it.

Comments: "Certain organic look" is too vague to be useful (how would you draw it?). Furthermore, the reader never was told which elements resembled a city and which didn't. This
must be explained before anything else. The most specific overall description, signaled by the "in general," appears in the third sentence of this paragraph. This might make a better topic sentence than the original one.

Possible new topic sentence: In general the city is simple shapes, distorted yet still recognizable.

Comments: It is hard to imagine what the shapes might look like if they are simple and distorted - yet recognizable. The natural question is recognizable as what? This must be made more specific. Since the shapes seem to be buildings, perhaps the second sentence ("The buildings are all rounded, with the roofs each at different slopes.") and the third can be combined into a new topic sentence. However, the roofs can't each be at different slopes. Each roof can have a different slope, or all the roofs have different slopes, but the plural "roofs" can't be mixed with the singular "each." Finally, the verb "is" sounds awkward - "consists of" would be better.

Final revision: The strange city at the bottom of the composition consists of simple rounded shapes that suggest oddly proportioned buildings.

Original fourth sentence: There are a few buildings that stand out in the painting.

Comments: Eliminate "there are" or "there is" whenever possible. Since the word "buildings" was just used, and the forms only suggest, but are not, buildings, the use here should be changed.

Final revision: A few of these forms stand out in the painting.

Original fifth, sixth, and seventh sentences: One building in the middle, with a blue roof and curved outer walls, has strange waves on the roof, and shapes cut out from the walls. Another building, to the left of the blue-roofed one, has grey-green tubing coming from the shaft of the tower. The top of the tower has window-like openings going around its circumference.

Comments: Again, if they aren't buildings but only like them in certain ways, they shouldn't be called buildings. Furthermore, if the shapes are rounded, then it needn't be mentioned that the outer walls are "curved." Other changes make the sentences shorter and flow more smoothly.

Possible revision: One in the middle has strange waves on its blue roof, and shapes cut out from its walls. To the left of this one is a tower with grey-green tubing coming from its shaft and window-like openings around its top.

Comments: These sentences are better written and more descriptive than the previous ones, but they are not as clear as they can be, and the reader still needs more information. Look at the reproduction of the painting again. Try to think of elements you can add that would help the reader imagine what the picture looks like. Here's one way:

REVISED SECOND PARAGRAPH:

The strange city at the bottom of the composition consists of many rounded shapes that suggest oddly proportioned structures made out of grey rock. The simplest are cut-off cylinders.
One at the left edge of the picture is the tallest element. A flat low form in the middle, which extends across nearly a third of the width of the picture, has a blue roof with what look like strange waves and a single orange oval on it. These are the only things that are not some kind of grey color. To the left of this structure is a tower with grey-green vertical tubes along its sides. Window-like openings go around it. To the right is the largest structure of them all, like a ziggurat made of three circular flat-topped tiers. Between it and the blue roofed form are 8-10 tall, dark, flat spires. A thin grey cylinder rises along the right edge of the composition.

ORIGINAL THIRD PARAGRAPH:

What Tanguy meant this painting to represent is unknown. The title, From Green to White, gives us no hint of what Tanguy meant by this, if he meant anything at all. One possible idea is that the city represents human innovation or civilization. This is surrounded by a vast empty gulf of nothingness, representing our potential for growth. An alternative interpretation is that the void is a barrier, restricting our growth beyond a certain point. This barrier is represented by the section of the void that has the appearance of melted ice. Beyond the wall is the sky, representing freedom. We, however, are trapped on the swamp-like surface, slowly expanding our city—until we reach this barrier.

Original first sentence: What Tanguy meant this painting to represent is unknown.
Comments: The idea of making the last paragraph about meaning is a good one, since the reader surely wonders if the picture has one. Anything about what Tanguy thought, though, has to have a source given in a note, since it is not possible to know by looking at the work. Therefore, this sentence should be eliminated.
Original second sentence: The title, From Green to White, gives us no hint of what Tanguy meant by this, if he meant anything at all.
Comment: First of all, the title of the painting has been italicized in the rest of the paper, and so it should be here too. Bringing in the title seems like a good idea, especially since it is very specific, but doesn't seem to correspond to anything we can see in the painting. "If he meant anything at all," however, is unnecessary, because it is covered as a possibility by the "no hint." As a topic sentence, this addresses the question of the title, while introducing the subject of meaning, which can be the subject of the rest of the paragraph.
Final revision: The title, From Green to White, gives us no hint of what Tanguy meant by this picture.
Original third sentence: One possible idea is that the city represents human innovation or civilization.
**Comments:** Suggesting a meaning is fine as long as it is clearly presented as the writer's idea. An interpretation must be substantiated by what is shown in the picture, however, which this is not since no evidence has been given that the city - if, in fact, it is one - was made by people. Without something visual to support it, the suggestion cannot be used.

**Original fourth sentence:** This is surrounded by a vast empty gulf of nothingness, representing our potential for growth.

**Comments:** The "this" must refer to the city, although it is not entirely certain. It is essential that references be clear. The "vast empty gulf of nothingness" is confusing, because the first paragraph described shapes and colors in that area. No reason is given for why this might represent "potential for growth." Again, without visual evidence, the suggestion is meaningless. The same can be said of the other suggestions the writer offers, which also use new terms, so we can't be sure what they refer to ("void," "swamp-like surface").

**Original last sentences:** An alternative interpretation is that the void is a barrier, restricting our growth beyond a certain point. This barrier is represented by the section of the void that has the appearance of melted ice. Beyond the wall is the sky, representing freedom. We, however, are trapped on the swamp-like surface, slowly expanding our city – until we reach this barrier.

**REVISED LAST PARAGRAPH:**

The title, *From Green to White*, gives no hint of what Tanguy meant to represent in this painting. The picture itself also provides no clues. The shapes and forms that are so carefully described do not suggest an interpretation that makes sense of what we see. Therefore, the work remains a mystery, a precisely detailed view of an imaginary world we can never know.

**REVISED PAPER:**

This paper will be a visual description of *From Green to White* (Metropolitan Museum of Art, 1999.363.82), an oil painting made by the Surrealist artist Yves Tanguy in 1954. A vertical composition of about 39 x 32 inches, the picture describes an imaginary place using tiny, barely visible brushstrokes, so that the surface of the painting is almost perfectly smooth. What appears to be a strange city, naturalistically shaded to suggest space, fills the bottom fifth of the composition. The rest of *From Green to White* looks like sky. The lower part of this section contains dark, wavy, horizontal bands, interspersed with streaks of red, pink, green, and blue. Above that is an area of white, tinged slightly blue. Streaks of bright white within it give the impression of being shimmers of light, or reflections from a block of partly melted ice. These streaks fade out about halfway up the picture, leaving what appears to be a blue sky with a few wispy white clouds in it.
The strange city at the bottom of the composition consists of many rounded shapes that suggest oddly proportioned structures made out of grey rock. The simplest are cut-off cylinders. One at the left edge of the picture is the tallest element. A flat low form in the middle, which extends across nearly a third of the width of the picture, has a blue roof with what look like strange waves and a single orange oval on it. These are the only things that are not some kind of grey color. To the left of this structure is a tower with grey-green vertical tubes along its sides. Window-like openings go around it. To the right is the largest structure of them all, like a ziggurat made of three circular flat-topped tiers. Between it and the blue roofed form are 8-10 tall, dark, flat spires. A thin grey cylinder rises along the right edge of the composition.

The title, *From Green to White*, gives no hint of what Tanguy meant to represent in this painting. The picture itself also provides no clues. The shapes and forms that are so carefully described do not suggest an interpretation that makes sense of what we see. Therefore, the work remains a mystery, a precisely detailed view of an imaginary world we can never know.

**SAMPLE VISUAL DESCRIPTION #2**

**ORIGINAL PAPER:**

For my analysis, I chose a painting by Emil Nolde, *Large Sunflowers I*. This piece is rather large, about a yard in each direction and is encased in a gold frame. The medium is oil paint on a wood base. The paint is thick, wet on wet, using a big brush.

The composition is of eight sunflowers, some of them cropped, allowing us a partial view of their blooms. The colors of the flowers range from yellow, yellow-orange, light red, to dark red. All but one of the yellow toned flowers have deep brown centers. The artist used deep reds and browns to represent the centers of the red toned flowers. Their size range from about the size of a melon to the size of an orange. They are surrounded by large green leaves and stalks, suggesting a bush. The painting is of an outdoor space. Through the pockets of leaves, there are hints of dark blues and greens, suggesting shadow and depth, possibly a large garden or field. Towards the bottom of the painting, there are dashes of red visible through the leaves, alluding to more sunflowers in the depth of the bush. The sunflowers and leaves take up most of the composition, except for a few inches on the top of the painting. This space is a horizon line, an awesome sunset using reds, oranges, yellows, and browns; with an orb of the deepest red and orange depicting the sun itself.

The focal point of this composition is the biggest sunflower, in the center/left side and a pocket of leaves in the center itself. The flower is deep yellow with a muddy, yellow-brown center. Some of the petals are bending, possibly wilting or swaying in the wind. It has a bright
green stalk, with a yellow streak of paint through it. The leaves in the center are a bright green with hints of blue, whereas the other leaves in the painting are a deeper green, about the color of an actual sunflower leaf. The brush stroke is also different than the other leaves in the painting. The center leaves are painting with a wavy, lyrical stroke. The painter used the same size brush with the other leaves, but a shorter, straighter stroke.

As I previously mentioned, this piece was painted using a wet on wet technique. The painter applied color on top of color, while all were still wet. He used the base colors to blend new colors on the canvas, instead of on a palette. I believe he also used some type of liquin base to enhance the wet look. By painting wet on wet, the artist not only blends colors, but edges also bleed into each other, creating a very loose, painterly composition. The entire painting is thick, accentuated by many especially gloppy areas.

The painter used a very large brush throughout the painting, with various brush strokes. He used long, continuous strokes to depict the stalks, for example. He also used short strokes, cross weaves, and waves. All appeared to be applied with a loose, relaxed hand.

All of the aforementioned elements, create an image of nature and tranquility. The use of a wood base, instead of typical weaved canvas, accentuates the ties to the natural world that are seen throughout this piece. The colors are warm, and the piece is fluid and flowing. Nolde used wet paint and a loose hand to capture a feeling of relaxation and an image of unprocessed beauty.

**Topic sentences:** First, underline the topic sentences. Do they form a clear outline? Does the first sentence tell you what the paper will be about? Here they are:

For my analysis, I chose a painting by Emil Nolde, *Large Sunflowers 1.*

The composition is of eight sunflowers, some of them cropped, allowing us a partial view of their blooms.

The focal point of this composition is the biggest sunflower, in the center/left side and a pocket of leaves in the center itself.

As I previously mentioned, this piece was painted using a wet on wet technique. The painter used a very large brush throughout the painting, with various brush strokes. All of the aforementioned elements, create an image of nature and tranquility.

**Comments:** The first sentence does identify the artist, and the title and medium of the work, although not the collection or the museum number. It indicates that the paper will be an "analysis," although we are not told of what. Then, in order, the paper will discuss the composition of the subject (sunflowers), the most important part visually of the composition, the technique, the brush and brush strokes, and a sense of its meaning or emotional mood. Although it would seem that the discussion of brushes and brush strokes should come before the technique,
the topics in and of themselves seem reasonable. Is there anything that seems to be missing?

ORIGINAL FIRST PARAGRAPH:

For my analysis, I chose a painting by Emil Nolde, *Large Sunflowers I*. This piece is rather large, about a yard in each direction and is encased in a gold frame. The medium is oil paint on a wood base. The paint is thick, wet on wet, using a big brush. **Comments:** "Analysis" is not as precise a description of the paper as it could be, because it doesn't answer the question of what kind of analysis it will be. "Painting" can be made more specific by adding the information from the third sentence. Many art historians object to describing art as a "piece" because it seems too casual and, perhaps, commercial. There are lots of other possibilities, such as "work" and "object." "Rather large" is vague, and unnecessary when it is followed by actual dimensions. The measurement given, however, suggests that canvas is a square, which it is not. This has to be changed. Unless the gold frame is going to be mentioned again, it should be eliminated because it is not part of Nolde's painting. "Wet on wet" is a specific technique of painting that should be explained, and its relation to the paint explained. The description "big brush" is vague. Solving each of those problems produces something like this:

Possible revised first paragraph:

For my visual description, I chose to write about an oil painting on wood by Emil Nolde, *Large Sunflowers I* (Metropolitan Museum of Art, 2002.386). The work is about two and a half feet high and three feet wide. The paint has been applied thickly with a big brush, using the technique of "wet-on-wet," in which new strokes are put over others that are still wet. **Comments:** The information about the technique wet-on-wet seems very specific for a first paragraph, while the reader has not been told anything more about what the painting shows then is indicated by the title. Perhaps the second paragraph, introduced by a topic sentence about the composition, should be incorporated in whole or part into the first paragraph.

ORIGINAL SECOND PARAGRAPH:

The composition is of eight sunflowers, some of them cropped, allowing us a partial view of their blooms. The colors of the flowers range from yellow, yellow-orange, light red, to dark red. All but one of the yellow toned flowers have deep brown centers. The artist used deep reds and browns to represent the centers of the red toned flowers. Their size range from about the size of a melon to the size of an orange. They are surrounded by large green leaves and stalks, suggesting a bush. The painting is of an outdoor space. Through the pockets of leaves, there are
hints of dark blues and greens, suggesting shadow and depth, possibly a large garden or field. Towards the bottom of the painting, there are dashes of red visible through the leaves, alluding to more sunflowers in the depth of the bush. The sunflowers and leaves take up most of the composition, except for a few inches on the top of the painting. This space is a horizon line, an awesome sunset using reds, oranges, yellows, and browns; with an orb of the deepest red and orange depicting the sun itself.

Comments: The number of flowers, the range of colors and sizes, and the presence of leaves, seem like information the reader needs to form the most fundamental idea of the painting. The ideas of space and a sunset, however, seem secondary and might be developed in another paragraph. If this reasoning is followed, a new first paragraph made from the revised first and parts of the second might be this:

Possible revised first paragraph:

For my visual description, I chose to write about an oil painting on wood by Emil Nolde, Large Sunflowers I, in the collection of the Metropolitan Museum of Art (2002.386). The work, which is about two and a half feet high and three feet wide, shows eight sunflowers. Some of them are cropped, allowing us a partial view of their blooms. The colors of the flowers range from yellow, yellow-orange, light red, to dark red. All but one of the yellow toned flowers have deep brown centers. The artist used deep reds and browns to represent the centers of the red toned flowers. Their size range from about the size of a melon to the size of an orange. They are surrounded by large green leaves and stalks, suggesting a bush. The paint has been applied thickly with a big brush, using the technique of "wet-on-wet," in which new strokes are put over others that are still wet.

Grammar: "Their size range from about the size of a melon to the size of an orange." "Their size" is singular, so the verb "range" should be "ranges," except that the point of the sentence is that there are multiple sizes, so it would make more sense to make "size" plural - "Their sizes range." Strictly speaking, "their" refers to the last noun, which would be "the centers," because "of the red toned flowers" only modifies "centers." In any case, the sentence is awkward, because of the unclear reference, and the word "size" is used three times. A number of small changes can be made to some of the other sentences too, to make it all read more smoothly. As always, there is not a single way to revise it, but here's one possibility:

REVISED FIRST PARAGRAPH:

For my visual description, I chose to write about an oil painting on wood by Emil Nolde, Large Sunflowers I, in the collection of the Metropolitan Museum of Art (2002.386). The work, which is about two and a half feet high and three feet wide, shows eight sunflowers with their
leaves, seen from close up. Some of them are cropped by the edges of the canvas, so we have only a partial view of their blooms. They vary from about the size of a cantaloupe melon to about the size of an orange, which might be the actual dimensions of these flowers. The colors range from yellow, yellow-orange, and light red, to dark red. All but one of the yellow-toned flowers have deep brown centers, while the red ones have deep reds and browns at their centers. The sunflowers are surrounded by large green leaves and stalks. The brilliantly colored paint is thick, and has been applied in big, visible brush strokes.

Rest of original second paragraph:

The painting is of an outdoor space. Through the pockets of leaves, there are hints of dark blues and greens, suggesting shadow and depth, possibly a large garden or field. Towards the bottom of the painting, there are dashes of red visible through the leaves, alluding to more sunflowers in the depth of the bush. The sunflowers and leaves take up most of the composition, except for a few inches on the top of the painting. This space is a horizon line, an awesome sunset using reds, oranges, yellows, and browns; with an orb of the deepest red and orange depicting the sun itself.

Comments: The first sentence can function as a topic sentence for what follows. It seems that the most striking visual element, however, is the top of the painting, the "awesome sunset," which is mentioned last. Perhaps the paragraph should begin with that area. The sentence before locates it, so it has to be included. The "few inches" are "at" the top of the painting though, not "on." "On" the top of the painting means on the surface of the top layer of the paint on the canvas, rather than at the top of the composition. The rest of the sentences can be made simpler by using fewer words. This is one way to reorganize and revise the paragraph:

REVISED SECOND PARAGRAPH:

The sunflowers and leaves take up most of the composition, but there are indications of an outdoor space around them. A strip a few inches high at the top of the painting forms a horizon line, filled with an awesome sunset of reds, oranges, yellows, and browns. An orb of the deepest red and orange toward the center depicts the sun itself. Between the leaves, hints of dark blues and greens suggest shadow and depth, possibly in a large garden or field. Towards the bottom of the painting, dashes of red suggest more sunflowers behind the ones we see.

ORIGINAL THIRD PARAGRAPh:

The focal point of this composition is the biggest sunflower, in the center/left side and a pocket of leaves in the center itself. The flower is deep yellow with a muddy, yellow-brown center. Some of the petals are bending, possibly wilting or swaying in the wind. It has a bright
green stalk, with a yellow streak of paint through it. The leaves in the center are a bright green with hints of blue, whereas the other leaves in the painting are a deeper green, about the color of an actual sunflower leaf. The brush stroke is also different than the other leaves in the painting. The center leaves are painting with a wavy, lyrical stroke. The painter used the same size brush with the other leaves, but a shorter, straighter stroke.

**Grammar:** The phrase "center/left side" in the first sentence needs to be set off by commas at its beginning and end to make clear that it refers to the sunflower, and "focal point" is confusing since the end of the sentence reveals that there are two areas of visual interest - the sunflower and the pocket of leaves. "The brush stroke is also different than the other leaves" is not correct. It is not the brush stroke compared to the other leaves, but the brush stroke used for these leaves that is "different from that used for the other leaves in the painting." In the next sentence, the center leaves definitely are not "painting," which obviously should be "painted." It should be "for" the other leaves, not with.

**Comments:** Giving the reader a sense of what is most important in the composition is a reasonable subject now that the entire composition has been outlined. Note that the order in which the "focal points" are first mentioned is the order in which they are discussed. It is important to maintain the same order of information at all times, so the reader knows what to expect. Since "lyrical" is not a visual quality, but an emotional or, perhaps, a poetic one (check the dictionary!), a more visually descriptive word should be selected or the idea left out. Finally, the size of the brush has nothing to do with the composition. A few changes make the paragraph a little shorter and the writing read more smoothly.

**REVISED THIRD PARAGRAPH:**

The focal points of this composition are the biggest sunflower, to the left of center, and a pocket of leaves in the center itself. The flower is deep yellow with a muddy, yellow-brown center. Some of its petals are bending, possibly wilting or swaying in a wind. It has a bright green stalk, with a streak of yellow paint through it. The leaves in the center are a bright green with hints of blue, whereas the other leaves in the painting are a deeper green, more like the color of an actual sunflower leaf. They also are distinguished by the wavy brush stroke that appears here, which is different from the shorter, straighter stroke used for the other leaves in the painting.

**ORIGINAL FOURTH PARAGRAPH:**

As I previously mentioned, this piece was painted using a wet on wet technique. The painter applied color on top of color, while all were still wet. He used the base colors to blend new colors on the canvas, instead of on a palette. I believe he also used some type of liquin base
to enhance the wet look. By painting wet on wet, the artist not only blends colors, but edges also bleed into each other, creating a very loose, painterly composition. The entire painting is thick, accentuated by many especially gloppy areas.

Comments: "As I previously mentioned" is never a compelling opening for a paragraph and, as the order of the topic sentences revealed, discussing the brush strokes first seems to make more sense. If the paragraphs are reversed, then the fourth one would be this:

ORIGINAL FIFTH PARAGRAPH:

The painter used a very large brush throughout the painting, with various brush strokes. He used long, continuous strokes to depict the stalks, for example. He also used short strokes, cross weaves, and waves. All appeared to be applied with a loose, relaxed hand.

Comments: Distinguishing between the brush used and the various types of brush strokes made with it is a good idea. “Very large” is vague, however – compared to what? Substitute a more precise measurement. In addition, these two paragraphs raise similar issues, so perhaps the information can be better organized. The subjects can be defined as the brush (apparently a single “very large” one), the handling of the brush, including strokes (“long, continuous,” “short,” “cross weaves,” “waves”) and the more general “applied with a loose, relaxed hand,” which perhaps relates to the "very loose, painterly composition." Other terms relating to specific techniques of paint application include "wet-on-wet," with its blended edges, "thick" paint, and "many especially gloppy areas." Finally, there is the character of the color, mixed on the canvas instead of a palette. “Liquin base,” which most readers probably would take to be a typing mistake for “liquid base,” actually is a technical term referring to a particular kind of medium for paint, which enhances drying time and increases glossiness. Unless you know that your audience will understand such specific technical terms, it is better to avoid them. One way to reorganize this information is:

REVISED FOURTH PARAGRAPH:

The artist seems to have used the same large brush throughout the picture, although the paint was applied in different ways. Long, continuous strokes appear in some of the stalks, for example, while the flowers have been made with short strokes, cross weaves, and waves. In many places, the paint was applied thickly and wet on wet, color on top of color before any of it had dried. The result is that the edges of the strokes bleed into each other. In some areas, new colors were made by blending colors directly on the canvas.

ORIGINAL FINAL PARAGRAPH:
All of the aforementioned elements, create an image of nature and tranquility. The use of a wood base, instead of typical weaved canvas, accents the ties to the natural world that are seen throughout this piece. The colors are warm, and the piece is fluid and flowing. Nolde used wet paint and a loose hand to capture a feeling of relaxation and an image of unprocessed beauty.

Grammar: There shouldn't be a comma after "elements" in the first sentence. The base is made of wood, but it is a "wooden" base, and the typical canvas is "woven" not "weaved."

Comments: "All of the aforementioned elements" is a very awkward beginning for any paragraph, especially the last one in the paper. The rest of the sentence is obvious - a picture of sunflowers certainly is an "image of nature" - and contradictory - intensely colored, thickly painted sunflowers in front of a brilliant sunset doesn't seem likely to create an image of tranquility. The point about the wooden base is not relevant if this is information given by the museum label instead of something that can be seen, and the paper contains no evidence that it is visually apparent. The rest of the characterization reads like something thrown together to end a paper. The colors are warm (although the comment wasn't made above), but that has nothing to do with nature or tranquility. Surely it isn't the work itself, but the composition that is "fluid and flowing" (although that wasn't exactly said above either). Of course Nolde used wet paint - any painter has to! - but neither that nor the "loose hand" lead to a "feeling of relaxation," at least without explanation. Finally, all the ways in which this painting has been constructed demonstrates that it is not at all "an image of unprocessed beauty." All of this can be reduced to one sentence.

REVISED PAPER:

For my visual description, I chose to write about an oil painting on wood by Emil Nolde, Large Sunflowers I, in the collection of the Metropolitan Museum of Art (2002.386). The work, which is about two and a half feet high and three feet wide, shows eight sunflowers with their leaves, seen from close up. Some of them are cropped by the edges of the canvas, so we have only a partial view of their blooms. They vary from about the size of a cantaloupe melon to about the size of an orange, which might be the actual dimensions of these flowers. The colors range from yellow, yellow-orange, and light red, to dark red. All but one of the yellow-toned flowers have deep brown centers, while the red ones have deep reds and browns at their centers. The sunflowers are surrounded by large green leaves and stalks. The brilliantly colored paint is thick, and has been applied in big, visible brush strokes.

The sunflowers and leaves take up most of the composition, but there are indications of an outdoor space around them. A strip a few inches high at the top of the painting forms a horizon.
line, filled with an awesome sunset of reds, oranges, yellows, and browns. An orb of the deepest red and orange toward the center depicts the sun itself. Between the leaves, hints of dark blues and greens suggest shadow and depth, possibly in a large garden or field. Towards the bottom of the painting, dashes of red suggest more sunflowers behind the ones we see.

The focal points of this composition are the biggest sunflower, to the left of center, and a pocket of leaves in the center itself. The flower is deep yellow with a muddy, yellow-brown center. Some of its petals are bending, possibly wilting or swaying in a wind. It has a bright green stalk, with a streak of yellow paint through it. The leaves in the center are a bright green with hints of blue, whereas the other leaves in the painting are a deeper green, more like the color of an actual sunflower leaf. They also are distinguished by the wavy brush stroke that appears here, which is different from the shorter, straighter stroke used for the other leaves in the painting.

The artist seems to have used the same large brush throughout the picture, although the paint was applied in different ways. Long, continuous strokes appear in some of the stalks, for example, while the flowers have been made with short strokes, cross weaves, and waves. In many places, the paint was applied thickly and wet on wet, color on top of color before any of it had dried. The result is that the edges of the strokes bleed into each other. In some areas, new colors were made by blending colors directly on the canvas. These techniques combine to make this painting a vivid image of nature.

THREE-DIMENSIONAL WORKS:
Works of art that occupy space instead of being flat present additional elements to describe. In addition to size, medium, and subject, the writer must indicate what it looks like from different points of view and how it engages the space around it. The shape may be complicated to describe, especially if it does not correspond to a representation of the natural world. A sample paper follows. Treat it exactly like the ones above. Underline the topic sentences and see if they make sense and if the order seems logical. Look at the first sentence and see if it tells the reader what the paper will be about. Then look at the organization of each paragraph and see if it makes sense. Each sentence should lead logically to the next one, and they all should be about the topic introduced in the first sentence of the paragraph. Can you draw the work? Do certain parts of the paper seem more successful than others? Why?

SAMPLE VISUAL DESCRIPTION #3
FINAL PAPER:
Auguste Rodin created *The Burgers of Calais* (Metropolitan Museum of Art, 1989.407) between 1885 and 1897. The bronze sculpture consists of six life-size male figures standing on a low rectangular base, arranged as if they are within an invisible cube. One figure, who seems to be the leader of the group, is placed almost in the middle of one of the long sides. Otherwise, there is no obvious organization in their positions. Furthermore, there is no point of view from which the six figures can be seen at once. For this reason the monument is visually interesting from all sides and, as the viewer walks it, additional details appear.

Even though the burghers do not have much contact with each other, not even eye contact, they create a sense of a group by sharing many things. They are about the same height (around 75”), wear similar long robes, and are barefoot. Although there are differences in the design of the clothes (some are sleeveless, some slit on the side), the deep folds of the simple robes create a strong vertical rhythm throughout the composition. Their disproportionately large hands and feet seem to weigh the men down. Two of them carry large keys. There are pieces of ropes hanging or twisted on some of the figures.

Looking at the work from the front (the longer side, with two figures facing towards us), the viewer first sees the man who seems to be the leader of the group, emphasized by an empty space in front of him. He is leaning forward with his shoulders hunched, his arms hanging by his sides, standing on a diagonal that runs from the front right corner towards the back left corner of the base. He is not facing us but turned about 30 degrees towards our left, with his head down. He has a beard, long hair, and he looks concerned.

A second burgher is lined up on the same diagonal, with his large bare left foot placed almost on the right corner of the base. Also turned toward the left, he looks straight forward with a grim expression. He holds a giant key in front of his body. These two burghers are connected by their position within the sculpture and they seem older than the others.

On the left front corner of the base is a younger man who has turned his back to the group and seems to be walking away from the leader. While his body is facing the left side of the invisible cube of the composition, his head is turned towards the back and he is looking down. He holds his heavily muscled right arm in front of him at a 90 degree angle. His fingers are spread apart as if he is questioning the situation. If we move to the short side of the monument and face this figure, we see that he is leaning to his right side. His movement creates a curving line that defines that edge of the composition.

From this point of view we can see the fourth burgher, who had been mostly hidden before. He is positioned right next to the previously mentioned man. The fourth burgher is facing the center of the composition. He is in the midst of stepping forward, with his arms out and hands
open. His mouth is open, suggesting that he is asking something. Seen from the short side of the sculpture, the two figures overlap, creating dynamic lines as they lean towards one another. These two burghers seem joined, not only because of their interlocking movements but because they are both young and seem to be questioning the situation.

There are two more burghers in the composition, who cannot be paired with any of the others. Looking at the other long side of the monument, we have a side view of the fifth burgher. He is an older bearded man who seems to be stepping from the right side towards the left. His face looks blank as he stares straight forward. He holds a large key with his left fingertips. His facial expression and posture seem to express resignation. From this point of view we also see the back of the last burgher, who is placed in the corner to the left. He is slightly leaning away from the group. Moving to the short side, we can see that this older burger has the most dramatic position. He is bent over with his hands covering his lowered head, so that his face is hidden. He seems to be in total despair. From this point of view, we also discover that thick ropes hang around the neck of the second burgher.

Although the size, the bronze material, and the seriousness of the expressions of the men make you realize that this is a monument, the composition makes you feel as if the figures are part of the world in which you are standing. Walking around the work, you discover that the figures also are walking in something like a circle, except for the central man. As might be true in real life, each step reveals new details and hides others. A head or an arm of an invisible figure appears above the other men, or an elbow or hand blocks the view of something that normally would be more important. For this reason, Burghers of Calais has a much more immediate emotional impact on the viewer than a formal grouping on a high base would have had.

Comments: The first test of any description is whether the reader can visualize the work of art. Is this description clear? Could you draw Rodin's sculpture? Do you know what it contains? Do you know all of the facts about it as a physical object - size, material, shape? The next question is whether you are left feeling confused, or if there are things you still want to know. Are there issues that are raised but not answered? Look at a reproduction of it (unless you can see the real sculpture!). Do you find aspects that seem essential but have been left out? Are there things you would have emphasized that have been minimized? Again, there is never only one way to write a description.