

6

Objectives

Understand why an artist statement is important.

Understand what makes a great artist statement.

Create a clear and effective one-page artist statement—a key component to an artist's success.

Things to Consider

1. Where are artist statements used and why do we have to write one?

Most everyone you ask for anything will require an artist statement, including galleries, grants, applications, arts related jobs, teaching, press releases, exhibitions, critics, reviewers, etc. Artist statements are fairly important for emerging artists, while established artists no longer need to use them unless they are applying for a grant or similar support.

A clear and concise artist statement will operate as a stand-in for your own voice during those times you can't be there to share or talk about your work in person, such as when you send a portfolio to an institution, or your dealer needs to talk to buyers about your work, or a reviewer needs some information about your work.

2. What goes into an artist statement?

Things To Do

Write a one-page, single-spaced draft of your artist statement. If you are having trouble getting started, use the writers block ideas at the end of this section. You may want to get someone else to read it and then continue drafting after getting their feedback. Writing an artist statement is an ongoing process and will need to be rewritten with each new body of work you produce.

Writing an Artist Statement

An artist statement is an invaluable tool artists use to better understand how and why they do what they do. It is an ever-changing document that is revisited, often after a new body of work or project is completed, concisely outlining the artist's practice, ideas, intent, materials, and methods. Almost every institution, gallery, critic, curator, funding resource, and collector will ask for or require an artist statement at some point, so it's good to have an updated artist statement ready at all times.

Keep in mind that while everyone can read your statement, most people won't, or they will just scan it. The people who HAVE TO read your statement do so because it's part of their job. These people are curators, gallery workers, critics, people on grant panels (which can be almost anyone), historians, teachers, employers, colleagues, and students. Remember, you should always consider your audience when writing your statements, as a statement for a gallery show might be very different from a statement to a grant panel or a tenure committee.

FAQs

Why should I write an artist statement?

- Writing an artist statement can be a good way to clarify your own ideas about your work.
- A gallery dealer, curator, docent, or the public can have access to your description of your work, in your own words.
- A statement can be useful when writing a proposal for an exhibition or project.
- Statements, or some permutation of them, are often required when applying for funding.
- Most graduate schools ask that you submit a statement.
- Referring to your past statements can help you prepare for a visiting artist lecture.
- An artist statement and a teaching statement are often required when applying for a teaching position. You can use your artist statement to help you write your Teaching Philosophy, which is different from an artist statement. See section on creating a Teaching Philosophy.
- A well-written statement can help you or someone else write a kick-ass press release.
- A good statement can help you write a bio for a program brochure. This can avoid anyone misinterpreting your work.
- An honest and investigative statement can help art writers, reviewers, curators, and critics write more informed texts about your work.
- Your statement is an influential way to introduce your work to a buying public. Often the more a buyer knows about your work the more she/he becomes interested in what you do, which can lead her/him to purchase your work.
- A collection of artist statements over the course of an artist's career can be one of the only written keys to understanding how an artist's ideas about her/his practice has changed over time.

Will one statement do, or will I need different kinds of statements?

You will have to write all kinds of artist statements during the course of your career. Your statement should change as your practice matures and you gain perspective on older work.

Usually you rework your statement after finishing a new body of work. If you make many different kinds of works you might find it helpful to have a separate statement to correspond with each kind of work. That said, here are a few different kinds of statements you will certainly need handy:

Full-Page Statement

This is the statement you will use most often. It speaks generally about your work, your intent, the methods you have used, the history of your work, and where you see your work going. It may also include specific examples of your current work or project. Usually it is around 300 - 350 words long.

Short Statement

A one - to three - sentence statement that includes the most important aspects of your practice to talk about the specific project at hand.

Short Project Statement

This is a very short statement about the specific project you are presenting.

Bio

A bio is a short description of your career as an artist and your major accomplishments. It is usually no longer than a

paragraph. A Bio is not an artist statement. Instead, this short text summarizes your resume in paragraph form. Basically, it is a short version of your résumé or CV.

Your bio should include the following:

- A sentence about you and where you base your practice.
- Your general interests or what your work investigates.
- Your academic background, a selection of where you have exhibited work, and in what notable publications reviews of your work have appeared.
- List important awards, fellowships, and residencies you have secured.

Make sure to include your artist website.

How should I structure my statement?

The first paragraph should be a general introduction to your work, a body of work or a specific project. It should open with a basic overview of the work, in two or three sentences or a short paragraph.

The following paragraphs should go into detail about how issues or ideas are presented in the work. If writing a full-page statement, you can include some of the following points:

- Why you have created the work, and its history.
- Your overall vision.
- What you expect from your audience and how they will react.
- How your current work relates to your previous work.
- Where your work fits in with current contemporary art.
- How your work fits in with the history of art.
- How your work fits into a group exhibition, or a series of projects you have done.
- Sources and inspiration for your images or texts.
- Artists you have been influenced by, or how your work relates to other artists' work. (Be careful how you include these references because you don't want your work to appear derivative.)
- How this work fits into a series or larger body of work.
- How a certain technique is important to the work.

- Your philosophy of art-making or of the work's origin.

The final paragraph should recapitulate the most important points in the statement and leave the reader wanting to experience the work, and learn more. This is also where you might want to talk about any long-term goals you have with your practice.

What shouldn't go in an artist statement?

- Pompous or arrogant language, exclaiming your artistic genius. Leave that up to other people.
- Empty and cliché expressions about your work. The phrase "feast for the eyes" is trite and unimaginative. Use your own words, and make them count. Remember, if you think you've heard it said before, it probably has been used often, so take it out.
- Technical jargon. You want to keep them reading, so find a way to connect without sounding like a robot.
- A long dissertation or explanation. Short and sweet is the key. Don't linger on one thought for too long. Leave your reader room to form her/his own opinions.
- Discourses on the materials and techniques you have employed. OK, if you're using the nectar of a rare Siberian orchid to make drawings on endangered palm fronds, then mention that, but don't bore the reader with your inventive use of materials. If you paint, mention if it's in oils, acrylics, etc, but don't go on and on about your masterful glazing techniques. As always, get to what the work is actually about.
- Poems or prosy writing. Great artist statements are not cute haikus. Write about your art.
- Folksy anecdotes, autobiographies, or stories about your life. Don't include anything about your childhood or family life. Leave these stories out unless they are directly related to the work or integral to the content and meaning of the work, in a way anyone reading will understand.
- Bragging language, a list of accomplishments or something like a boring press release. Don't mention where you've shown, awards you've won, or pieces you've sold in your statement. Save this for your bio.
- Indecipherable text. Now, if it's for an exhibition and it conceptually relates to the work, you might have cause to use this sort of a statement. But in general, obtuse, rambling statements, statements consisting of one sentence, or state-

ments that are artworks themselves, may risk coming off as condescending, disingenuous, or just plain stupid.

How should I write my statement?

This most often depends on the context where it will appear. The most important thing to keep in mind is who will read your statement and where she/he will be when they read it. What assumptions can you make about your reader's knowledge of your work, art and art history, and any references you mention? It is important to remember that an artist should have many variations of an artist statement, one that will fit to any occasion.

Depending on your reader you might want to alter your:

- Emotional tone. Some readers will respond to the urgency of your ideas and convictions in different ways. A grant panel may want to know about your emotional investment in your work, while some critics might dismiss it. The choice is up to you.
- Theoretical context and academic tone. There's nothing wrong with being able to situate yourself within a theoretical context. But some readers may not want to read about or begin to understand your desire to create "works that speak to the subaltern impulse as informed by Deleuze's relationship to Derridian archiving impulses prevalent in post-industrial American hegemonic centers of cultural production." There are publications where this kind of writing is appropriate, but only write this way for these publications.
- Analytic approach. Some people might want you to write about your work from a formal standpoint. Others may want you to discuss how your work functions socially. There are readers who are interested in how a work operates politically. Some readers may want to know how a work navigates the marketplace. How you analyze your work can say a lot about your stance as an artist, and can help readers understand how you want your work to function.
- Humor. Two artists walk into a bar. There. That's the end of the joke. Get it? A poorly written, pushy joke can ruin any statement. If your work is humorous it might be a good idea to let it stand on its own. Use your statement to speak about the ideas that inform the work. If you want to be funny, then try this: Have five people you don't know, who don't know your work, read your statement. If four out of five of them laugh, out loud, where they should when reading it, then you're probably safe. Remember, you can try to be Jon Stewart, but you risk coming off like Carrot Top. (Bad jokes can ruin writing!)
- Antagonistic approach. "I dare you to even try to understand my work." "Thanks, but no thanks." You want your statement to be readable, understandable, and written out of a genuine desire to connect.
- Political assertiveness. There is nothing wrong with having political beliefs and there is nothing wrong with making work that attests to these beliefs. However, you don't want your statement to get in the way of your reader coming to her/his own conclusions about the work.
- Professional appearance. A statement for a job review will demand a certain level of professionalism that you might not want to employ in a statement for a publication, exhibition, or lecture. Picture how other artists, colleagues, and superiors will read your statement, not just now, but in the future.

Other Points

- Ask yourself pointed questions: "What am I trying to say in the work?"; "What influences my work?"; "How do my methods of working (techniques, style, formal decisions) support the content of my work?"; "What are specific examples of this in my work?"; "Does this statement conjure up any images?" Answer these questions using specific examples in the work itself.
- Make sure the statement matches up with the work. There is nothing worse than a statement that seems completely contrary to an artist's work. If you say your work addresses questions of environmental destruction, then this should be backed up in the work. Some artists create many bodies of work and find synthesizing this pluralistic practice into one statement to be difficult. Don't worry. Just find the common themes that unite these projects and write about them. When presenting each project you can have a totally different statement.
- Be honest. Don't try and force some external set of ideas on the work if that's not what the work is about. Don't try and construct a false narrative for the work or lie about its origins. Don't linger on what the work is not. Stay positive and use an informed voice.
- Try to capture your own speaking voice. One way to do this is to talk to a friend about your work and record the conversation. Sometimes we are much better at communicating our ideas when we speak versus when we write. Another way to ensure your statement reads well is to actually read it aloud. Doing this will help you to see the hiccups and confusions in your writing.

- Use descriptive language so that the reader can better “see” the work. One way to do this is to start by just describing the work, “It’s X big, made with X materials, it’s X color, it sits in X place in relation to the floor, etc.” Really get down to details. Don’t include this long description in your statement, but use key sections as descriptive elements in your statement.

- Avoid using passive voice. Don’t use phrases like “I hope to,” “I attempt to,” or “I am aiming at.” This will only put the reader in doubt of you and your practice. An active voice is extremely important to the strength of your statement. Have confidence in what your work is doing and avoid speculation.

- Write your statement on a word processor so that you can make changes and update it often. Consider using a program where other people can make edits you can see and approve or reject. You should keep older copies so that you can refer to them if you should need to write or talk about your older work, or if you have a retrospective.

- Refer to yourself in the first person, not as “the artist.” Write it like, “In my work I explore X.” This way, there is no doubt the ideas are yours.

- Make it clear and direct, concise and to the point. Go over your statement and see if you have repeated yourself. Look out for redundant words and sloppy grammar. In general, each sentence should take up no more than three lines and be very easy to read. The length of a sentence should relate to the complexity of the idea it intends to convey.

- Use no smaller than 10 – 12 point type. Some people have trouble reading very small type. Watch out for your font style choice when selecting a font size. Although you selected your favorite font at 10-12 point type it might look huge or tiny in comparison to a more standard selection.

- Artist statements are usually single-spaced.

- Do not use fancy fonts or tricky formatting. The information, not the graphic design, should wow your reader. Remember to be consistent with your other written content such as your bio, CV, teaching philosophy, etc. You will not appear professional to a curator, grant panel, or job interviewer if you have different sized fonts, various font styles, and irregular formatting. This will only look sloppy.

- Make sure to include your name at the top as well as the date. This will help people know whose artist statement it is and when it was written. Depending on your reader, it is customary to include at the top left corner of all written mate-

rial your name, address, phone number (optional), email address, and website.

- Always keep copies of all your artist statements. Don’t write over a previous one. You might have a retrospective one day, and you may be asked to talk about what you were thinking a long time ago.

Writer’s Block

Writing can be difficult, especially for artists who have not had to write about their work before. It’s best to keep things in perspective and realize that it will take many, many rewrites before you’ve come up with an effective, well-written statement. So don’t panic if your first attempts are wrought with false starts and half-constructed ideas. Remember, you have to start somewhere. The most important thing is to start writing! Once the momentum kicks in things tend to fall into place.

Warm up with short writing exercises. Find a place where you will not be interrupted for about two hours. Start by setting a timer for three minutes, and then, without worrying about punctuation, spelling or grammar, begin writing down words and short phrases that describe your work and your process. Work fast and do not edit or erase anything. When the timer goes off, put this piece of paper aside, or save your work on the computer. Writing in short spurts gets you past the overly self-critical hump, reduces stress, and cuts to the chase.

Without looking at what you have previously written, set the timer again for three minutes and begin by writing about your work in the way you would tell your Aunt Florence or a friend about your work. Do not do any editing at this point. Silence your inner critic and let it ride.

If you are having trouble with writing anything at all, write down why you should NOT write an artist statement, and what is getting in the way. Do you fear your writing style or the fact that you never learned the rules of grammar? Do you have lousy spelling? Are you unsure that you can write what you know about your work? Give yourself three minutes, and then set this writing aside.

Then, write down every reason that you should and will write an artist’s statement. Again, you have three minutes. Set this aside. Go back to the three-minute writing exercise about your work.

Only when you have collected a pile of three-minute quotations and jottings should you then begin to put them into some kind of order and start to edit.

Sometimes you can find great inspiration in past notes you have taken in your sketchbook. Or you may want to refer to pieces others have written about your work. Think back to critiques and conversations you have had and consider using those ideas if they are relevant.

Still stuck? Record a conversation with a friend about your work. Chose someone you trust who is knowledgeable about your history and your larger body of work. It's best if this person isn't a spouse or family member, as they will probably not give you the critical feedback you need. Find someone who knows a little about art but is also willing to give visceral, gut-instinct feedback. Record the conversation, then go back and transcribe the parts you find most relevant to your work.

You should always be keeping notes and references about other artists making work similar to yours or dealing with similar ideas. Research articles written about these artists. How have critics, curators, and writers described their work? What key phrases keep cropping up? Think about borrowing some of this descriptive language when describing your own work. Just remember not to plagiarize.

Listen to how other artists describe their work, and go to a number of visiting artist lectures. Read interviews in art magazines and consider how these writers and artists talk about work.

When reading relevant literature that might speak to your work and/or your practice, try to keep a separate notebook for pertinent quotes or ideas. This notebook will come in handy when you need that perfect sentence to bridge your thoughts together.