

How to Write an Artist Statement

Special Projects Digital Photography I PHO 2453
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Quoted content is courtesy of the Emily Carr Institute, Writing Centre

Artist statements are generally very difficult for an artist to write. Often, it is difficult to know where to begin, or what topics to cover. Depending on the situation, you may need an artist statement that is only a few paragraphs, or several pages. I have assembled some of the best tips and topics for writing your statements and compiled them below.

Write in the first person.

It is generally best to write these in the first person because it is *your* interpretation of *your own work*. **For the book, you are required to write this in first person.**

Who are you and what is your background (relevant to this work)?

“How did your ideas develop? What did you initially set out to explore, investigate and discover? How did this perspective change as your work took shape?”

Be careful not to let this turn into your Artist Bio! Any info you list should all be relevant to **this specific photography series**. Think of it as an introduction to your work, but not an introduction to you as a photographer. You must keep it specifically relevant to the work displayed. Your Artist Bio will be displayed in a different section of the book, but your Artist Statement immediately precedes your photo series.

Audience, occasion or situation:

“What prompted you to write this statement? Is this a fifty-word statement for the foundation show, a three hundred word statement that's meant to accompany a grant proposal, or a 1500 word statement that will accompany a catalogue or book?”

In our example, you are writing an approximately 250-350 word statement to explain your artistic process as it reflects your experiences in the Special Projects program. Keep in mind that you are also one of a dozen people who will also be published in the book with the same theme and occasion. Therefore, you will mostly want to focus on your own personal perspective, your own process of exploration, and/or the methodologies and theories that have influenced you the most. Your viewer/reader will already be aware of who you are and the occasion.

What is your purpose or motive?

“The reasons why you have produced a work or art can be extremely varied.”

In our case motive is introduced to the viewer with the format (a book), title (includes the selected theme) and also in the written forward for the book. The purpose for your series is to interpret the theme that was selected. **Again, it is absolutely vital that you mention the theme and discuss how you are interpreting it with your photography series.**

In general, however, it is worth discussing your motive if the statement is part of a grant application, a proposal for a show, etc.

“Whether it is obvious or not, your purpose, or reason for producing a work of art is usually reflected in the process. If you were interested in presenting an image or an idea in a particular way, then you may want to explain how the work grew out of that interest, what you became aware of through the process of putting the show or work together. Your interests, your ideas, your creations, your intentions, your ex-

expectations may often be thwarted, challenged, or limited in ways you never thought of. Your audience may be just as interested in what motivated you in the first place as they are in the shifts and changes that took place in the process of the work coming together."

The materials and medium and how you make your work:

"As long as it isn't too obvious, your audience will almost always want to know why you chose to work in film, sculpture, paint, wood, mixed media, etc. They'll want to know how the materials reflect your purpose, the occasion, your process, and your theoretical interests."

In our instance, we are working with a digital photography course. Is your entire process digital? Do you begin with film, then scan? Have you used Photoshop for retouching or compositing? Any other use of tools that might be interesting to a person viewing your work?

"Your audience might be interested in the tools you used, whether you made them yourself, and how you applied or challenged certain techniques. Most importantly, they will want to know how your technique, process, materials, contribute to the overall theme, meaning or subject of the work -- in other words, what your work is about."

Historical, critical, theoretical framework

"What kind of research did you conduct while engaged in this work? What did you read? Did the work of other artists, visits to galleries, or travel to other countries contribute to your ideas, your process, the finished work? What are the historical precedents for your work? Does your work make a statement about the future, does it challenge the theories of others, and/or does it provide a new way of looking at an "old" idea? However you go about introducing this information into your artist statement, it is often necessary to use framing when you place your work within a larger context."

For more information on using framing to cite sources: <http://www.eciad.ca/wc/writingcentreframe.htm>

Tips

From artbusiness.com

- Make "I" statements rather than "you" statements. Talk about what your art does for you, not what it's supposed to do for viewers.
- Avoid mentioning comparative comments that have been made about your work by others. That belongs in your bio or CV.
- Be specific, not vague. For example, if your art is "inspired by assessments of the fundamentals of the natural world," tell which fundamentals you're assessing and how they inspire you.
- Tell the story about what led up to your art ONLY if it's short, compelling, and really really relevant. People are generally not interested in progressions of antecedent events. Something leads up to everything; we all know that.
- Avoid comparing yourself to other artists. If other artists influence you, fine, but don't say, "Like Picasso, I do this" or "Like Judd, I do that." Instead, say something like "Picasso's Blue and Rose paintings influence how I use yellow." Better yet, leave other artists out of your statement altogether. Let the critics decide who you're like. Plus you don't want to invite comparisons between yourself and the greatest artists who've ever lived. We all know who the victor's gonna be there.
- Don't instruct people on how to see, feel, behave, respond, or otherwise relate to your art. Nobody likes being told what to do. Instead of saying "You will experience angst when you see my art," say "This art expresses my angst" or "I express my angst through my art." Or see a therapist and work it all out.

Web Links for Artist Statements

Here are a few links to get you started with good advice, guidelines and also samples:

- Emily Car Institute, Writing Centre - Example of Artist Statements:
<http://blogs.eciad.ca/wc/professional-writing/examples-of-artists-statements/>
- ArtBusiness.com - <http://www.artbusiness.com/artstate.html>
- NAIA - <http://www.naia-artists.org/work/statement.htm>
- Molly Gordon.com -
<http://www.mollygordon.com/resources/marketingresources/artstatemt/index.html>