

Writing and Tutorial Center

An Artist Statement That Reflects You

In art, unlike many other academic disciplines, writing is not the primary mode of communication—images, objects, and other alternative materials are. But, while artists may not be expected to publish journal articles or present conference papers, they often need to discuss their own work and the work of other artists, and many artists sit on discussion panels or give lectures on their own work. Becoming an articulate and effective writer can only benefit your art-making practice. An artist's statement is your opportunity to communicate in a direct way what you investigate, observe, or want to express with your art by informing the audience about your specific motives and processes. It can help you invite others into conversation about your own work, engage critical discourse about art history and theory, or comment on trends in contemporary art.

Statement writing can be a painstaking process. It involves using written language to express visual ideas and it often requires you to discuss aspects of your practice with which you are still grappling. It's also a process with no undisputed rules. There are plenty of helpful guidelines, however, and this resource gives an overview of those guidelines.

TAKE STOCK OF WHAT YOU KNOW

The main goal of writing an artist statement is to discuss your understanding of your process, ideas, and field. The statement also gives you an opportunity to define the critical conversation you want to engage through your art. In the early phases of the writing process, it's a good idea to be as honest with yourself as possible and take stock of what you know about your art, your process, and your ideas.

Writing is an organic, developmental process. Too many people work initially from a place of meaning and try to put it into language. This is often counter-intuitive. Write in the beginning, before you know your meaning at all, and encourage your words to change and evolve and grow. Only at the end will you know what you want to say and from there you can choose the words with which to say it. Meaning is what you end up with, not what you start with.

Try asking yourself these questions:

What am I doing? Describe the subjects of your work.

How am I doing it? What is my process in making the work? Is there a unique way in which I utilize the tools of my medium?

Why am I doing it? What are the motivations behind my work?

What influences/inspires me most? What do I respond to in others' work, in movies, writing, music, performance, etc.?

How does my art relate to the art of my contemporaries? What genre(s) does your work correspond with and why?

What do I want other people to understand about my art?

With whom do I want to have a conversation? Whom do I want to engage with my work?

What questions or ideas do I hope to provoke in the viewer?

Am I unwilling to discuss any aspects of my work? If so, why?

What are the most commonly asked questions about my art?

How do the individual works in my series/body of work contribute to the whole? What does a viewer need to know to better understand my work?

GETTING YOUR IDEAS DOWN ON PAPER

Freewriting and mind-mapping, two of the most prevalent brainstorming strategies, can help you work through your ideas. Freewriting is exactly what it sounds like: you let yourself write, pouring out as many ideas as you can. You might consider giving yourself a time-limit (15 minutes, for example) or making the process more active by writing on large sheets of butcher paper or incorporating drawings.

The second strategy, mind-mapping, can help you trace the relationships between different ideas. Mind-mappers usually use blank, unlined paper and start by writing a main idea in the center. Then using arrows or dotted lines, they connect that main idea to other relevant ideas.

No matter which strategy you use to help yourself begin writing, remember that the ideation process can take a long time, maybe even a few months. Don't procrastinate, but don't rush yourself either.

FOCUS ON THE "WHAT", "HOW", AND "WHY"

How you describe what you do is pivotal to your statement, but your description doesn't have to be drawn out. Give your readers a clear idea of what your artistic project really includes. Simple assertions can be enough, as long as they support your description of how and why you make what you make.

EXAMPLE

"I am making an Enlightenment Capsule for the audience to meditate inside—virtual reality in which people can experience ancient ideas from the East... But I'm not interested in using ancient things; rather I want to connect [audiences] with contemporary life through the technology we have now."
—Mariko Mori

Your statement should address method, since it is what fills the gap between your ideas and your product. Specifically, it should address how your process informs your practice. How do you work and what materials do you use? If you paint on the floor because it's more conducive to accidents and your work explores chance, you should say so. Or if you often cover already black surfaces with charcoal because you're interested in redundancy, mention that too. You could also describe how you went about making specific works, especially ones central to your thesis show. You don't, however, need to go into arduous detail about each aspect of your process. Just give a glimpse into the more unusual or important aspects.

EXAMPLE

"Promenade was totally driven by the context. The internal relationships of measurement and placement related to the central axis of the site. The placement of the rectangular plates followed a strict logic in that the plates tilted away and towards the center line in an asymmetrical counterpoint. However, the perception of the sculpture contradicts the logic of its relation to the site. As you walk in between the plates you see fragments, you see the work in part, you cannot grasp the whole."
—Richard Serra

In explaining the "why" behind your work, you are essentially defining a discourse for yourself. Some artists notoriously avoid discussing the content of their work, instead focusing on physical, compositional, and material choices. Why did you choose your particular subject matter or imagery? Strategize carefully in this section of your paper and self edit. If you want your work to be discussed in terms of feminism, for example, broach feminist issues. But if, while you have been influenced by feminist artists, feminism isn't crucial to your work's meaning, leave it out. Be clear—don't cloak your meaning in flowery language or "art speak."

EXAMPLE

"My new work deals with emptying my body: 'Boat emptying, stream entering.' This means that you have to empty the body/boat to the point where you can really be connected with the fields of energy around you. I think that men and women in our Western culture are completely disconnected from that energy, and in my new work I want to make this connection possible."
—Marina Abramovic