

Writing Your Artist's Statement

An artist's statement is a written piece that introduces your artistic work to the reader. It is written by you about your work. You should have a primary statement that covers your overall body of work. In addition to the primary statement, you might also have statements for specific projects and/or individual bodies of work.

WHY IS THE ARTIST'S STATEMENT IMPORTANT?

Visual artists are typically aware of the need for an artist's statement. Artists from disciplines outside the visual arts often have not heard of the concept. Artists working in disciplines that are primarily interpretive rather than generative, such as acting or musical performance, often have extra difficulty approaching this task. That being the case, why is it so important for artists of all disciplines to have an artist statement?

There are several reasons:

- Visual art is at the forefront of the arts services and granting world. Many of these organizations or opportunities began with a visual art orientation and are often staffed by people with a visual art background. As some of the earliest applications for grants were written by individuals with the visual arts in mind, they frequently request an artist statement or something comparable as a part of the grant.
- An artist statement is a concise written description of your art. Whether or not you are asked specifically for an artist statement, you still should have a concise written description of what you do readily available. You'll need this for your website, your social media, interactions with the press, and more. Having written this description, even if you don't share it in a written format, you will find yourself referring to the words you have carefully chosen for your statement in many situations where you are discussing your work. It acts as a pre-prepared mental script.
- The act of writing an artist statement is a powerful self-learning activity. In determining how to describe your work in a concise written way, you learn what your art actually is. Having to put words around the work to describe it clarifies for yourself what you are actually doing. It focuses the attention and clarifies the intent. Many a performing artist has found writing an artist statement to be one of the most difficult and most rewarding activities of the Artist INC seminar.

THE MECHANICS OF WRITING AN ARTIST'S STATEMENT

An artist's statement should be written in first person (i.e., I instead of you or he/she/they). It should never be more than one full page and generally less than 250 words. A good, general, all-purpose size for your primary statement is 150 words. Some people effectively use a primary statement and then add a second paragraph for particular bodies of work in a building blocks-type of mix and match. Use an active voice.

What content does an artist statement typically incorporate? The best statements focus on the questions *what*, *how*, and *why*. What do you do? How do you do it? And why do you do it?

Simple is Stronger. There is a desire when writing about your work to overcomplicate it, to use fancy art words and a complex sentence structure. Rarely is a piece of artist writing not improved by simplification, using layperson terminology and short, active sentences. Visual artist and writer Sarah Hotchkiss in her piece "[How to write an artist statement](#)" identifies a series of several complicated writing red flags:

- **Extreme binaries.** Representing your work as examining polar opposites—comedy and tragedy, night and day, light and dark, contemporary and traditional.
- **Lazy cliches.** Read a number of artist statements and you'll find some words and phrases used over, and over, and over again. A fun way to identify some of these words and phrases is by playing with the Artybollocks Artist Statement Generator at <https://www.artbollocks.com/generator>.
- **International Art English.** Hotchkiss's notes you will know "International Art English" when you see it. As she describes it "This muddled and imprecise language seeks to elevate what it describes through nonspecific word choices, invented "spaces" (the space of the real, the space of the dialectical), and the complicated grammatical structures."¹
- **False range.** It is extremely common in contemporary artist statements to see practice ranges that go from jazz to flamenco to folk or influence ranges that move from crime docuseries to Shakespeare to hip hop. Do you really have a range that is that diverse?

¹ Hotchkiss, Sarah. "How to write an artist statement." *The Creative Independent*. Accessed on 2-2-21 at <https://thecreativeindependent.com/guides/how-to-write-an-artist-statement/#avoid>

- **Theory.** Art theory from your discipline should stay in the classroom and textbooks. Your writing should make your work accessible to everyone, not exclude them.²

Less is More. Not only should your writing about your work be easily read and understood by the general public, it should also be short. The overwhelming majority of people who will be reading this writing will be doing it in a context that may allow them to only read a paragraph or two: They may be reviewing multiple grant applications, browsing your website, or flipping through a program pre-performance. In those contexts, people are likely to only fully read one or two paragraphs. Information after that will likely be skimmed, if it is read at all. Beyond reader attention span the writing is usually stronger and more powerful when it is shorter. A powerful exercise is to create a 50- or 100-word statement and/or bio. The shorter version is almost always better. It requires the artist to focus on the most important elements of their work. One very carefully prepared paragraph that covers everything you want your reader to know is much better than three paragraphs in which the reader will only read the first and miss most if not all of the information from the remaining two paragraphs.

Do Not Go it Alone. You shouldn't be the only person reading your writing. You must have other (preferably many other) people read the pieces and give you feedback. Your readers do not have to be experts in your discipline. Ideally, your list of readers will include many lay people. Have your mother read your pieces. If she doesn't understand what you are saying, there are going to be other people who do not understand it either. Beyond content, these pieces also ultimately need to be flawless from a mechanical standpoint. No typos at all. That only happens with a diligent set of readers. No one can copy edit their own work. No one.

What You Write is Not Set in Stone. Your writing can be changed and updated as many times as you choose to do so. Not only does it never have to be a finished product; it really never should be completely finished. Writing about your work is truly an iterative process. It is also something you get better at each time you approach the work.

Keep your Drafts. Not only should you be revisiting these pieces over and over again, you should be keeping a good archive of your drafts. You may find something you

² Hotchkiss, Sarah. "How to write an artist statement." *The Creative Independent*. Accessed on 2-2-21 at <https://thecreativeindependent.com/guides/how-to-write-an-artist-statement/#avoid>

used three drafts ago to be useful today. Keep a document in your computer where you add each new version of your artist statement and bio at the bottom with a date of revision. That way, when you need something to meet a specific content or word count or page number requirement, you can easily access pieces you've previously written. It is also an excellent personal exercise in seeing how you, your work, and your writing have changed over time.

Example Artist's Statements

Chris Dahlquist

My photographs are works of fiction based on true stories - a distillation of collective memories and inner dialogues - islands of solitude with fewer fireworks but more daydreams.

I work at the nexus of analog processes and digital technology, employing unconventional materials to expand the story the photographs tell. I utilize layers, textures, shadows, and viewing angles to elevate photographs from static images to transformative objects and the audience's encounter from visual to experiential. Each photographic object is singular; the materials, handwork, and image combine to form an original object that lives outside the world of reproduction. (98 words)

José Faus

I am an interdisciplinary artist working at the margins of creative exploration, whether visual, literary, or performative, coupled with civic engagement. I create from personal and communal impulses adhering to the philosopher's creed "the only true work of art we create is our lives." I embrace formal and instinctive tendencies that can be expressed as abstract or narrative work, visual, literary, or performative. At the same time, I execute public mural projects and participate in public conversations as part of my civic responsibilities to contribute to the creation of communities I would be comfortable living in. Metaphorically, I want to be able to sit in my studio and gaze at my navel and yet also pick the lint from my belly button and throw it out to the public. (129 words)

Sarah Hearn

I am an interdisciplinary visual artist who studies and reveals invisible worlds both real and imagined.

Through earnest investigations of geology, biological life, and natural phenomena I make work that navigates the ever-shifting boundaries between science and science fiction.

My practice is firmly rooted in drawing, photography and installation and at times incorporates the scientific method, collaboration and public reciprocity. Riddled with

intrigue and discovery, this work questions what it means to visualize life and matter that are often invisible to us at first glance.

“Above,” “In Between,” “Below,” “Out There,” and “Everywhere” are ongoing, interconnected bodies of work exploring the limits of our current scientific knowledge and asking what else might exist among us? (115 words)

Kholoud Sawaf

As a theatre artist, I’m deeply invested in creating and curating work that investigates cultural depth, authenticity, and representation. I am drawn to an aesthetic driven by movement, music, and visual storytelling. My work is inspired by the desire to have conversations about complex and intricate topics in tangible and accessible ways. I greatly believe that as people we have many more opportunities to travel together than drift apart. Through my artistic practice, I am constantly asking what is familiar and what is unfamiliar, and looking for opportunities to bridge the gap between the two. I strive in my artistic journey to listen with an open mind and heart, and to understand the difference between presentation versus representation. I aim to create inclusive, joyous, and inspiring collaborations, where the art we create is a reflection of the society we live in –building towards a future society we want to inhabit. I lead with resilience, strength, and unapologetic joy. (158 words)