

Writing an Artist's Statement

When it comes to writing an artist's statement, there are no simple formulas. Artists' statements vary in length, form, and substance. Depending on the situation that prompted your need to write, you may have to take all or most of the following elements into account: your audience, your purpose or motive, the materials and medium in which you work, the subject of your work, the theories and methodologies that influenced your work, your own personal perspective or background. It is usually impossible to break this information down into separate categories, as it is all somewhat interrelated. Because artists' statements vary so much, it will probably help to look at examples written by other students and artists. The Writing Centre (434 SB) has a number of examples, as does [these links](#) to artists' statements on the web. You can also peruse the statements provided in exhibition catalogues (the library has shelves full of these). As you will notice, most artists' statements are written in the present tense, but the voices vary significantly. Some are playful, some are extremely scholarly, and some play with the visual form that words take on the page.

Please remember that your artist's statement must reflect what it is you want to emphasize. The following breakdown is only meant to provide you with questions and strategies that may help you get started. The order in which you present this information (and how much you include) will depend on the purpose, occasion, audience, etc. These questions should also prove to be useful if you're writing a proposal for a show, a grant application, or a letter of intent.

Who are you? What is your background?

Are you a student, a practicing artist, or both? What is your educational background? Is this your first show, or one of many? What are your interests? How did your ideas develop? Are you a collector, an observer, a traveller, an adventurer? Are you curious about other cultures? Are you interested in exploring gender issues, theories, memories, questions of identity, the relationships between form and function, certain shapes, brush strokes, shots, etc? How does your background influence your work? Are you haunted by various forms of painting, photography, sculpture, film? What is it you like to explore? What medium do you prefer to work in? What did you initially

set out to explore, investigate and discover? How did this perspective change as your work took shape?

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? Obviously, if you are writing a fifty word statement and you're having to explain your artistic process as it reflects your experiences in the foundation program, you will mostly want to focus on your 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, your purpose and the occasion. But this certainly will not be the case when you're applying to the Canada Council, writing for a catalogue, or providing information that will be used on a didactic panel that's part of a larger exhibition. You might also mention who your intended audience is — in other words, who you make your work for. This is often integrally related to your choice of venue, and you might consider mentioning this in light of the work's presentation in a specific context (size of gallery, shape, space, etc.).

What is your purpose or motive? The reasons why you have produced a work or art can be extremely varied. Were you motivated simply by your own interest? Was your work motivated by the requirements of a course, a call for submissions, a discussion among friends, fellow artists, colleagues? This may or may not be important information to include. It may, in fact, be implicit given the type of show, but it is worth considering, especially 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 expectations may often be thwarted, challenged, or limited in ways you never thought of. For example, you may have set out to tell the stories and share the memories of others only to find you faced issues concerning the private and public domain, censorship, etc. 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. You might want to mention how you handle the camera, the clay, the brush, the wood, how the materials create or set a certain mood, and how they reflect a certain culture, history, attitude. 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. Your choice of materials will usually be integrally related the space in which it is presented, and you might consider discussing this relationship as well.

Historical, critical, theoretical framework: What kind of research did you conduct while engaged in this work? Were you influenced by certain ideologies or theories of gender, identity or culture? 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? How does it fit in a space/time continuum? 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. The handout on [using frames and reporting expressions](#) might prove useful.