

Writing an Effective Artist's Statement: Some Practical Tips

If you are a visual artist, the prospect of writing a written statement that encapsulates your work may seem a little strange and/or gratuitous. After all, you are not a writer—shouldn't your work speak for itself? And how exactly are you supposed to distill and “translate” the message behind your visual works into a (often very) short, written statement? This article will walk you through a few key considerations to keep in mind during the process of drafting your artist's statement, and will hopefully demystify the process a little bit. By utilizing some of the tips offered herein and, most importantly, thinking critically about your visual works and philosophy as an artist, you should be one step closer towards creating an artist's statement which effectively communicates to your reader(s) both the contribution of your works and the kind of artist you are.

I believe the process of writing a successful artist's statement closely parallels with another activity most, if not all of us, are well-familiar with: *applying for jobs*. Think of writing an artist's statement like writing a cover letter. Wouldn't it be great if all our work could “speak for itself!” If this were the case, there would be no need for cover letters. However, as it stands a cover letter is often touted as the most important component of a job application. Sure, your former employer likely knows all your strengths and weaknesses in great detail, but this does

nothing the way of assisting potential employers you are attempting to build a relationship with.

Though in some sense a resume or CV can “speak for itself” (much in the way a work of visual art can), a cover letter truly synthesizes a bigger picture behind each of your experiences, and presents an account of how the sum of all these experience has shaped you as a worker. The writing of an effective artist’s statement is, in many respects, a very similar project. A successful artist’s statement should clearly convey to the reader the overall meaning behind your works, your overall vision as an artist, and the purpose of, intended meaning of, and situated role of your art in grander overarching disciplines and schools of thought in the visual arts as a whole.

General Principles:

DO:

- Be concise, coherent, and clear
 - Avoid technical art jargon. Ideally, you should write your artist’s statement with the goal of not excluding any type of reader. The goal is to allow people to easily grasp how you work as an artist and entice them to *want* to view your art. Everyday language is likely to be most effective to this end. There is a time and place for jargon, but the artist’s statement is not it.
- Focus on topics *not* apparent from precursory glances at your work
 - Undeniably, people having access to samples of your work is important, but the artist’s statement is your opportunity to dive a little deeper (and should not be

wasted). Use the statement to delve into concepts you feel are the most important takeaways for your audience. Discuss any metaphors, symbolism, materials, issues, inspiration, intentions, significance, context etc. that may not be obvious from merely viewing your work, but that are nonetheless highly relevant to who you are as an artist.

- Consider the ultimate takeaway
 - You will not always be physically able to have a discussion with an individual concerning your art. Your artist's statement, however will be. Think carefully about the ultimate takeaway you would like someone to have concerning your vision as an artist, as well as any interpretation concerning your work. It should be clear to someone who has read your artist's statement what the overall meaning and purpose behind your art is, for *you*. Moreover, you should strive to address these points in an honest and compelling way.

DON'T:

- Try to impress with extensive background knowledge/make unnecessary artistic comparisons
 - The focus of the artist's statement should be on *your* work. Conversations about various artists/movement of art can unfold naturally at a later date, during in-person conversations. Further, comparisons to other artists should be avoided. You want readers to come to their own unbiased beliefs towards your art; comparing yourself to Picasso is not likely to do you any favors. Listing artists as inspiration may be okay, but such name-dropping should be kept to a minimum.

Remember to list other artists as inspiration, not *compare yourself* to them. You would be better off to list concepts as inspiration, rather than people. For example, instead of saying: “I am influenced by Jackson Pollock”, you could say, “I am influenced by the idea that life is seemingly random, but patterns reveal themselves the longer we look”

- Tell people what to feel, experience, think, behave, or otherwise relate to your art in any way
 - The point of your artist’s statement is to relay how *you* feel about your art, and to provide insight to you as an artist. Ideally, you want people to come to their own conclusions about your art and have an experience which, although can be informed by your statement, is completely novel and wholly “theirs”. Being told how to respond to your art has the potential of being taken by readers as presumptuous, controlling, and/or vain.
- **Stray** from discussing your art and your vision as an artist
 - Again, the focus of your artist’s statement is solely your *art*, or, your vision as an *artist*. You should not launch into grandiose statements about how great your impact is on the world. Nor should you discuss unnecessary anecdotes about your life. Your artist statement is just that: a statement about your *art*. It is neither a press release, nor biography. Do not turn your statement into a “brag-fest”.

The 3 Typical Forms:

Typically, you will be asked to provide an artist's statement of 3 varying lengths depending on the purpose: one page, one or two paragraphs, or a ~25 word concise statement. A helpful strategy is to get the one page version of your artist's statement down pat, and then simply remove information as needed to form the shorter versions. The basic idea is the difference between the one pager and 1-2 paragraph versions is detail. One page allows you to get into *some* detail, elaborating on the works, whereas the 1-2 paragraph version only will have the most essential information. In contrast, the ~25 word format should be thought of as a verbal business card. For those familiar, you can compare it to the idea of an "elevator speech": a statement that encapsulates the essence of who you are and what you do and can be given at a moment's notice, and within a short timeframe.

No matter which form of an artist's statement you are required to write, hopefully the tips covered in this article will assist you in getting the ball rolling and demystifying the process a bit. Remember that, overall, the key function of an artist's statement is to speak for you and your art in cases when no one else can. Also remember that you will be best served if your artist's statement does so in a relatable, engaging, and honest way. It is perhaps one of the few times when it is actually encouraged to solely focus on yourself as the subject. Cherish this moment, and be sure to focus on *your* art, rather than your influences. By following and expanding upon the tips outlined here, I am confident you will be well on your way towards crafting a brilliant and effective artist's statement.¹²³⁴

¹ http://www.artspartner.org/files/all/artists_statement_bio_info.pdf

² <http://www.gyst-ink.com/artist-statement-guidelines/>

³ <https://www.lightspacetime.com/how-to-write-the-perfect-artist-statement/>

⁴ <http://www.artbusiness.com/artstate.html>

