

WRITING YOUR ARTIST'S STATEMENT

STEP ONE:

1. Take five minutes and think about why you do what you do. How did you get into this work? How do you feel when work is going well? What are your favorite things about your work? Jot down short phrases that capture your thoughts. Don't worry about making sense or connections.

2. Make a list of words and phrases that communicate your feelings about your work and your values. Include words you like, words that make you feel good, words that communicate your values or fascinations. Be loose. Be happy. Be real. 3. Answer these questions as simply as you can. Let them be raw and uncut for now.

What is your favorite tool? Why?

What is your favorite material? Why?

What do you like best about what you do?

What do you mean when you say that a piece has turned out really well?

What patterns emerge in your work? Is there a pattern in the way you select materials? In the way you use color, texture or light?

What do you do differently from the way you were taught? Why?

What is your favorite color? List three qualities of the color. Consider that these qualities apply to your work.

4. Look at your word list. Add new words suggested by your answers to the questions above.

5. Choose two key words from your word list. They can be related or entirely different. Look them up in a dictionary. Read all the definitions listed for your words. Copy the definitions, thinking about what notions they have in common. Look your words up in a Thesaurus. Read the entries related to your words. Are there any new words that should be added to your word list?

6. Write five sentences that tell the truth about your connection to your work. If you are stuck, start by filling in the blanks below.

When I work with _____ I am reminded that _____.

I begin a piece by _____.

I know a piece is done when _____.

When my work is going well, I am filled with a sense of _____.

When people see my work, I'd like them to _____.

STEP TWO:

Write a three paragraph artist's statement. Keep your sentences authentic and direct. Use the present tense ("I am," not "I was," "I do," not "I did.") Be brave: say nice things about yourself. If you find that you falter, write three paragraphs about an artist whose work you admire. Then write about yourself as though you were an admiring colleague. As a rule, your artist's statement should be written in the first person. Refer to yourself with the pronouns "I, me, my." If this blocks you, write in the third person, then go back and change the pronouns as needed when you get to Step Four. Use the suggestions below to structure your statement. Write three to five sentences per paragraph.

First paragraph. Begin with a simple statement of why you do the work you do. Support that statement, telling the reader more about your goals and aspirations.

Second paragraph. Tell the reader how you make decisions in the course of your work. How and why do you select materials, techniques, themes? Keep it simple and tell the truth.

Third paragraph. Tell the reader a little more about your current work. How it grew out of prior work or life experiences. What are you exploring, attempting, challenging by doing this work.

STEP THREE:

Your artist's statement is a piece of very personal writing. Let it simmer overnight before you reread it. This incubation period will help give you the detachment necessary to polish the writing without violating your sense of integrity and safety. While your statement simmers, let your mind wander over the ingredients you assembled in Step One. Allow yourself to experience the truth of your creative experience. If you think of things you might have left out of your statement, jot them down, but leave the statement alone.

STEP FOUR:

Read your statement out loud. Listen to the way the sounds and rhythms seem to invite pauses. Notice places where you'd like the sound or rhythm to be different. Experiment with sounding out the beats of words that seem to be missing until they come to mind. Do this several times until you have a sense of the musical potential of your statement. As you read your statement, some phrases will ring true and others false. Think about the ones that aren't on the mark and find the true statement lurking behind the false one. You may find that the truth is a simpler statement than the one you made. Or your internal censors may have kept you from making a wholehearted statement of your truth lest it sound self-important. Risk puffing yourself up as long as your claims are in line with your goals and values.

Keep reading and revising your statement until you hear a musical, simple, authentic voice that is making clear and honest statements about your work. Refer to your word list and other Step One exercises as needed. By now your taste buds are saturated. You need a second opinion. Choose a trusted friend or professional to read your statement. Make it clear that you are satisfied on the whole, but you'd like an opinion. In other words, you alone are the authority for what is true about your work, but you'd like feedback on clarity, tone, and such technical matters as spelling and punctuation. Once you've incorporated such suggestions as make sense to you, make a crisp, clear original of your artist's statement. Sign and date it. Make lots of copies, you will have lots of people to serve it to!

STEP FIVE:

Save all the notes and drafts that you've made. You'll want to revise and update your artist's statement from time to time to reflect changes in your work.

What Should an Artist's Statement Say? An artist's statement should be an explanation of your painting style and subjects or themes. Add a bit about your approach or philosophy if you wish. Mention your education, specifically if you've studied art (the closer you are to the date you left art college, the more relevant this is). Consider mentioning which artists (living and dead) have influenced or inspired you. Mention any significant awards you have won, exhibitions you have participated in, collections your paintings appear in or significant sales you may have made, and painting organisations or societies you belong to. Remember, though, you're aiming to create professional credibility by highlighting your achievements, not providing a full resume. If you don't have a formal art qualification, don't worry, it's your paintings that make you an artist, not your qualifications.

Help, I Find It Impossible to Describe My Work in Words!

It can often be difficult to explain something visual in words – and after all, you're an artist not a writer! But, as with painting, practise makes it easier and perseverance is essential. You're unlikely to produce a polished artist's statement the first time you try, so be prepared to rework it several times.

Think about how you would describe your work to someone who didn't know you, what other people have said about your work, what you are aiming to achieve in your paintings, your outlook on life. Ask a friend for comments on what you've written (but pick someone you know will give you an honest answer, this is no time for "that's lovely" comments). Write your artist's statement in first person ("I work ..."), not third person ("Mary works ...").

Can an Artist's Statement Change?

Certainly, because you and your work will change. In fact you, should review your artist's statement whenever you need to use it to make sure it's suitable for a particular exhibition, event, or market, not simply print it out again time and again.

Additional considerations:

* Artists are artists, not writers, so think seriously about hiring a professional writer or editor, preferably one with an art background, to help you convey what you want your statement to convey in language that people can understand.

* Make "I" statements, rather than "you" statements. Talk about what your art does for you, not what it's supposed to do for the readers. This doesn't mean that you start every sentence with "I," but rather that you respect people's autonomy and allow them to respond to your art as they wish.

* At all times, give readers the option to agree or disagree with you. Never pressure them or dictate outcomes.

* Avoid comparative or evaluative comments that have been made about your art by third parties such as gallery owners, critics, collectors, or curators. These belong in your curriculum vitae. In your statement, they're name-dropping; in your curriculum vitae, they're testimonials.

* Connect what your art expresses with the medium that you're expressing it in. For example, if your art is about world peace, and it consists of twigs protruding from pieces of clay, explain the connection. Arbitrarily stating that twig/clay protrusions represent world peace leaves people wondering. If, of course, the object of your art or your statement is to leave people wondering, then that's O.K. In art, everything is O.K., but in order to succeed as an artist, someone beside yourself generally has to get the point of what you're doing.

* 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.

* Avoid obscure references to music, art, literature, history, or anything else that requires detailed explanation. If you have to make such a reference, explain it fast so that people know what you're talking about. If you can't do it fast, do it later.

* 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.

* 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 go see a therapist and get rid of your angst.

Before you go public with your statement, get feedback. Show your art and statement to friends, friends' friends, and maybe even a stranger or two. Make sure they understand what you want them to understand. When they don't, or you have to explain yourself, do a rewrite and eliminate the confusion. If you need help, find someone who writes or edits and have them fix the problem. Many times, a little rearranging is all that's necessary to make your statement a clean clear read.

No matter how good your statement is, know up front that most people will read it and move on; only a few will want to know more, and fewer yet will ultimately progress to the point where they buy your art. That's simply the nature of art and personal taste. Having said that, never underestimate the power of an effective statement to intensify and enhance the experience of your art.