

WRITING AN ARTIST'S STATEMENT

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WHAT IS AN ARTIST'S STATEMENT?

An artist's statement is a short written piece accompanying your artwork that describes what you do as an artist. Artist's statements are used to help communicate the artist's ideas, concepts and motivations to the viewer. Writing an artist's statement can be very difficult and can be as much of a learning experience for the artist as it is an informative experience for the viewer. They are an important aspect of an artist's professional life because they are used to promote their work to gallery owners, museum curators, photo editors, publications and the general public. A clear and intelligent artist's statement will make you stand out and will show people that you are a thoughtful and deliberate artist.

As visual artists we rely on our art to communicate our ideas, but visual art communicates much differently than written language. By this token, it is not expected that the artist's statement explain every detail and nuance of the artwork. If it did, we wouldn't need the artwork. Instead, it should provide insight into the artist's concept and motivation behind making the work.

FORMAT

Your artist's statement should be one to two paragraphs and no longer than a page. Brevity and efficiency of language are key. Your statement should deal primarily with the ideas and concepts you are concerned with as an artist.

Begin your statement with one or two sentences that broadly describe your concept. Think of it as a thesis statement. Use the rest of the statement to fill in the details and background information as needed. Do not begin the statement with background info or detailed explanations, and definitely do not wax philosophical in your first sentence. Be direct and confident with your lead-in, get the viewer interested, then back up your idea with details and background information. A wishy washy intro will give the impression that you don't really know what you're doing.

Statements should be written in the **PRESENT TENSE**. A proposal is written in the future tense because you are talking about what you will do in the future. A statement accompanies existing work so the present tense must be used.

THINGS TO CONSIDER

Here are some questions to ask yourself when developing the concepts to include in your artist's statement (you do not need to address all of these issues to have a successful statement):

- What is your motivation for making the work? (personal connection, social/political awareness, etc.)
- What issues or ideas are most important to you (be specific)?
- What do you want the viewer to learn or come away with after viewing your images?
- How are you different from other photographers dealing with similar subject matter (be specific)?
- What kinds of questions does your work raise?
- Who is your audience? This idea may be important to you but is it interesting to the audience and why?
- How do your techniques work to best communicate your ideas?
- What photographers have inspired or influenced your work?

THINGS TO WATCH OUT FOR

LONG LEAD-INS: Get to the point in the first sentence or two. Don't begin your statement with background information and detail or people will lose interest before they get to your ideas. Get them interested from the start so they will want to read the details and background information that back up your ideas.

CONCEPT VS STYLE: Terms like abstraction, documentary, fashion and landscape describe your style or approach to photography rather than the ideas or concepts you are interested in. It is okay to use these terms but they need to be followed up with ideas. For instance, you may be a *documentary photographer* (style) who is interested in issues of *gentrification in the Pilsen neighborhood of Chicago* (concept).

GENERALIZATIONS: Be as specific as possible and avoid all-encompassing terms that could be applied to many photographers. "Capturing a moment in time," "documenting the world" and "exploring issues that are important to me" are statements that apply to most photographers. What specifically makes you different?

ROMANTICISATION: Avoid getting nostalgic or glorifying photography in your statement. It isn't necessary to tell us how you got your first camera for your ninth birthday or how you always loved to look at old family pictures, unless these concepts are present in your work.

Keep a realistic perspective on photography and its limitations by avoiding terms like 'truth.' Truth is a very loaded word in photography and can sound very naïve if not used carefully. Try not to put photography on a pedestal. Instead show that you have a realistic understanding of photography's strengths and weaknesses.

FLOWERY LANGUAGE: Big fancy words with vague meanings can kill an artist's statement. Don't try to impress people with your vocabulary because it will come off as pretentious and won't sound genuine. Write in a style you are comfortable with and be straight. Often, large words are a way to cover up a lack of understanding about what you are doing.

QUOTATIONS: Lots of people like to quote philosophers, writers or artists in their statements. Some of them do it very well but most of the time the quotations end up getting in the way. If you insist on using a quotation, make it short and don't lead with it. Never use more than one quotation. If you quote a famous philosopher, make sure you really know what that philosopher is talking about. Misinterpreting well known thinkers can create very embarrassing situations and may hurt your credibility.

TECH TALK: Your statement is intended to accompany your work, not stand in for it. You do not need to explain the technical details of your work that people can see for themselves in your pictures. It is important to address technical issues only if they have unusual conceptual significance or if they dramatically affect the way people interact with your work. For example: if you are creating a book, if there is a specific style of installation, if your images are particularly large or small, or it may be important to say what kind of camera you are using (view camera, Holga). Regardless, be brief and put it in layman's terms or you will put people to sleep.