

## 4 Tips for Writing a Good Artist Statement

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[Mel Bochner](#), *Blah Blah Blah + Background Noise*, 2013

Writing an artist statement can be a daunting task. The prospect of composing a concise summary of your art practice to help others understand your work is understandably intimidating. However, having a clear, direct artist statement is essential, particularly on applications for grants, art schools, open-call exhibitions, residencies, and other career-advancing opportunities.

While some artists use this text to exercise their creative writing skills or to stretch their philosophical muscles, others take the opposite route, employing staid, generic formulas to guide their writing. However you go about it, it's important to set forth a statement that can be easily understood and does your work justice. To help, we spoke to two writing experts on steps you can take to develop a strong artist statement.

### 1. Map out your ideas

Often, artists are instructed to write a three-paragraph statement that begins with a broad overview of their ideas, then gives an explanation of their materials, and ends with a description of their personal philosophies. While there is nothing wrong with giving a formal description of your art, discussing your material choices, or offering context you deem important to your practice, a formulaic artist statement will not help you stand out from the competition.

“So many artist statements sound the same,” warns Jennifer Liese, director of the Rhode Island School of Design’s Center for Arts & Language, and editor of *Social Medium: Artists Writing, 2000–2015*. “My top tip would be to not follow a model or formula.” Instead, try brainstorming specific content that will help your audience—be it a viewer, juror, or critic—understand *your* work better.

If you’re not working from a traditional artist statement formula, however, getting started can be tricky. Instead of jumping straight into writing, Jeff Edwards, a writing instructor at the School of Visual Arts, recommends organizing your ideas before you begin. One way to do this is by jotting down keywords and concepts on index cards and spreading them out on a table, or by using a large sheet of drawing paper to create a diagram of what you’re planning to write about. Some subjects to get you started include your artistic influences, your process, the formal qualities of your work, an origin story, or a quote that connects to your work.

Similarly, Liese recommends giving yourself prompts to help yourself start writing. Some of her favorites to give students include “Write down five questions you would want an interviewer to ask you” and “Create a family tree of your artistic influences.”

## **2. Start with free writing**

Next, you can start free writing—getting your ideas on paper continuously, without fretting over things like grammar and style. When you begin, you might feel stuck or insecure about your ideas, but try to resist these impulses. “Don’t sit down and just expect to have the perfect sentences and prose come out,” Liese advises. If your artist statement needs to be around 200 words long (as some applications require), try writing three times that amount; you can cut it down later. The more you write, the more likely you are to raise pertinent questions and connections in your work.

If you have difficulty jumping into the writing process, try setting a timer for 15 minutes. The pressure of the clock may help you forgo anxieties that are holding you back, and can force you to work through the initial ideas that come to mind.

Another great way to start free writing is to use a prompt; Liese often starts writing workshops by asking participants to describe a memory that aligns with their work. One of her students, an artist who creates rooftop planters, found a connection between her art and the blueberry bush she would tend to outside of her childhood home. Another artist remembered the influential experience of seeing [Laurie Anderson](#)’s *O’Superman* (1981) as a child. This prompt encourages you to re-enter a moment when you first had a spark of discovery or inspiration; from there, you can work towards communicating that idea to your reader. “We all have this kind of authentic knowledge of who we are and how that comes into the work,” Liese says. “So when you share that with someone, they’re often very grateful to have heard from you.”

### **3. Edit your piece**

Free writing can often leave you with a long or messy draft; it's extremely important that you put as much energy into editing as you do writing. This process may seem intimidating, but Liese assures that "learning how to revise your own prose *is* accessible." A good place to start is by reading up on some simple editing techniques; Liese recommends learning about the [Paramedic Method](#), which helps people focus on editing one part of a sentence at a time.

In similar fashion, Edwards advises that you focus on removing cliches, art jargon, pointless repetitions, and irrelevant tangents. "When you first go back to edit it down, you'll find yourself eliminating a lot of material that seemed important initially, but is actually superfluous," he says. "Deciding what to cut can be painful at first, but it always improves the writing."

In addition to revising your own writing, ask someone who knows your work well to take a look at your statement. If you're not in an academic setting where you can ask a professor or writing advisor to read over your writing, try swapping statements with a fellow artist. When you're requesting feedback from someone, Liese recommends asking them "What isn't working?" as well as "What *is* working?" Asking these questions can help isolate the parts of your statement that are working, and those that aren't.

### **4. Write another draft**

When you break the process of writing an artist statement into small steps—brainstorming, free writing, and editing—the task becomes less daunting. But, as Liese explains, "the benefits of writing a single artist statement are limiting." If you tell yourself that the statement you're working on is going to be the sole, definitive statement for all of your art, you may well send yourself into an existential crisis.

Instead, it's best to acknowledge that artist statements are ephemeral texts; while the statement you write today may perfectly capture your artwork now, it may not work next week or next year. To help free yourself of the "single artist statement" mentality, Liese suggests putting a date on your statement and returning to it regularly; your artist statement should be a living document that you're consistently working on. In addition, Edwards suggests having multiple versions of your statement that can fit different parameters, like length and specificity to different bodies of work.

However, no matter the version you're working on, your writing skills, or the level of frustration you're experiencing, it's important to remember the benefits of an artist statement. As Edwards says, "Committing your ideas to paper helps you understand your artistic practice on a deeper level, and allows you to explain it to others more effectively."