



HOW TO WRITE A GREAT ARTIST'S STATEMENT

If you are submitting your artwork to an art contest — like the [Salt Spring National Art Prize](#) — you will probably be asked to include an artist's statement: a short, written piece about the artwork you are submitting. It helps the selection committee, jury, and viewers understand what your artwork is about.

A great artist's statement also helps your chances of being selected for an art exhibition. While not judged directly, a jury will review the artist's statement when they view the art, which helps in gathering further understanding of your work.

An artist's statement should be written for each artwork. Before writing your statement, check with the art competition you are entering to confirm the requirements. There will usually be requirements about the length. There may also be specific guidelines different from the general approach described here.

Here is a step-by-step process to help you craft a great artist's statement.

Step 1: Reflect on the purpose of the artist's statement

The artist's statement, like your artwork, is meant to **communicate**. The more clearly it can communicate your ideas, in as few words as possible, the more effective it will be. Your artist's statement is about your artwork, not about you or your career. Include biographical information only if it is critical to the viewer understanding your artwork. Ideally, every single piece of information you include in your artist's statement will have good a reason for being there. No fluff, no filler!

Here's the artist's statement writing mantra:

Clearly communicate my important ideas about this artwork.

Step 2: Consider the secondary goal

An artist's statement has one other important goal you should consider when writing it: to **persuade** the reader why your artwork is important.

This persuasion should happen naturally as a by-product of the ideas you present in your artist's statement. Avoid any display of hubris in your statement. **Show** why your work is important, don't tell that it is important.

So, our second mantra:

Is this sentence in my artist's statement helping to show why my work is important?

Step 3: Brainstorm major parts

TIP:

We recommend that when you start a new piece, you also create a notebook to write down all the ideas you have about your work as you work on it. It will be much easier to write your artist's statement with all those ideas already written down. If you've done this, you're off to a headstart. But even if you haven't, this section will help you to start to generate ideas.

It's time to get started. Have your artwork nearby to jog your memory.

The headings below are common elements of an artist's statement. They include question prompts to help you to generate ideas. You don't have to include information on each section, nor answer all these questions, in your artist's statement. Use what is relevant to you and your artwork.

Write the headings down that you feel are relevant, use the questions to prompt ideas, and jot your ideas down.

In this brainstorming stage, don't worry too much if you think what you're writing down is good or not. You just want to generate ideas that can be eliminated or refined later.

Often, you may need a few brainstorming sessions to generate ideas. Take a day or two in between each one. Coming up with starting ideas is a journey. Let yourself meander!

The common elements of a great artist's statement are below.

The general background or context of the artwork

1. What was the personal inspiration, source or origin of the piece?
2. What artistic or historical events or trends influenced your artwork?
3. What social, cultural, political or other issues influenced this art?
4. What is your philosophy of art, and how does it influence your art practice and this piece?
5. Is this work derivative from another work (of your own or another artist)? Be sure to name the other artist.
6. Is this work an homage? Be sure to name the artist and source artwork.

The artwork's place

1. How does this piece fit within your art practice? Is it part of a series?
2. How does this artwork reflect your evolution as an artist?
3. How does your work fit within the broader context of contemporary art?

The artist's goals and vision

1. What goals did you have for this piece?
2. What was your vision for this artwork?

Themes and meaning in the work

1. What themes does your piece explore?
2. Why do these themes matter to you and in the world?
3. How is meaning created in your work?

4. What is the viewer's experience?

Materials and technique used

1. What medium is the art?
2. What materials were used?
3. What techniques did you use to create the piece?
4. What is interesting and/or unique about the materials or technique?

Step 4. Write a rough draft

Take your ideas and write a rough first draft of your artist's statement. Aim to have the first draft about 20% longer than the maximum number of words allowed. We're going to be editing it down and it's easier to start with too many than too few words.

Step 5. Avoid these common mistakes

Before finishing your rough draft, make sure you aren't falling into any of these common mistakes.

1. Don't use complicated language if you can avoid it. Use the simplest words that can properly explain your idea. Sometimes a jargon word is required. That's fine — but be aware that the person reading the artist's statement may not have the same arts background as you, so the word may be unfamiliar. This could hurt their understanding.
2. Don't make the artist's statement about you. It's not a biography.
3. Don't write an arts manifesto or philosophy statement. Include information about your philosophy if you can show why the philosophy is important to the work.
4. Don't write about your art career unless you can clearly articulate why it must be included to understand your work.
5. Don't write to impress. Readers should be impressed with your ideas, not your fancy writing.

Step 6: Refine

Make sure you've had a day or two rest from writing your artist's statement, so you feel fresh when tackling this stage.

You want to begin to refine your statement. Your goals during the refining process are:

- Be more specific and precise with words used. Look up synonyms for words to see if you can find more specific, meaningful words to replace vague words.
- Explain your ideas more deeply. Ask yourself, is there more I can say about that? What questions might someone reading this have about what I am trying to say?
- Pack more meaning and detail into fewer words. Rewrite sentences so that they say the same thing — or more! — in fewer words.
- Make sure you finish with an appropriate word count.

At this stage, reading the statement aloud to yourself or trusted artist friend may help.

You may want to refine in a couple of sittings.

Step 7: Make sure it meets requirements

Before finalizing, review the requirements for the artist’s statement again and make sure you meet them. Don’t get rejected because you have a few too many words or didn’t meet some other requirement.

If you are submitting to SSNAP 2025/26, here are the submission requirements related to the artist’s statement:

- An artist statement must be submitted for each artwork entered
- The artist’s statement must be a maximum of 100 words
- To ensure anonymity during judging, the artist’s statement must not include the artist’s name, nor include information that may identify the artist, including resume or education information or previous exhibition
- Acknowledge if the artwork is an homage, a repurposed work, or uses source materials from another artist

You can find complete submission requirements on our [Submissions Info](#) page.

Remember that an artist’s statement should:

Clearly communicate my important ideas about this artwork.

And while you're working on your statement, ask yourself:

Is this sentence in my artist's statement helping to show why my work is important?

We're now going to analyze and re-write a fictitious example of an artist's statement. The goal is to help you learn to deepen your written ideas so you can consistently produce great artists' statements. We'll also review and discuss five actual artist's statements taken from recent Salt Spring National Art Prize entries.

Re-write Example #1

Artwork title: "Hydrangea and Alice"

"I have been making art since I was 12. My parents loved flowers, and always had a large garden. I became fascinated by the colour of my parent's Hydrangea, so I wanted to capture this memory of my childhood. Growing up with this flower affected me a lot. It taught me a lot about relationships. It was done with water colour. It shows the pink-red Hydrangea blooms that happen with certain soils. My childhood friend, Alice, stands next to it. Alice grew up in poverty."

Let's pull this statement apart. We're going to analyze each sentence and try to understand what the artist is wanting to say.

- **"I have been making art since I was 12."**

How is this relevant to the artwork? If the artist can't explain why this fact is important and relevant to the work, remove it to make space for more important information.

- **"My parents loved flowers, and always had a large garden. I became fascinated by the colour of my parent's Hydrangea, so I wanted to capture this memory of my childhood."**

This is an explanation of context for the work, and context is valuable. But doesn't this vague statement create questions in your mind that you would really like the artist to answer? For example:

- What was it about the colour of the Hydrangea blooms that the artist found fascinating?
- What emotions did the artist experience along with the fascination?
- Many things in life are fascinating. What made this so fascinating that the artist wanted to capture it?

Wouldn't it help us to understand this work better if the artist went a bit deeper to answer these kinds of questions?

- **“Growing up with this flower affected me a lot. It taught me a lot about relationships.”**

Here we are starting to get into the heart of what this artwork is really about: the young artist's growth and learning about relationships, through her experience with the Hydrangea. But we're going to want to get way more specific and explain how the experience affected the artist, and what she learned from the experience, and what the artist's insight offers the viewer as well.

- **“It was done with watercolour.”**

Great. It's often appropriate to include the medium. Ideally, though, try to go further when talking about medium. Consider, for example:

- Why did the artist choose this medium?
- How does the medium add meaning to the piece?

- **“It shows the pink-red Hydrangea blooms that happen with certain soils.”**

Interesting — but why is this fact important to the work?

- **“My childhood friend, Alice, stands next to it. Alice grew up in poverty.”**

Oh, wait! Why is Alice involved in this story? Including Alice in the painting can't be accidental! And what does Alice growing up in poverty have to do with this?

Stating that Alice grew up in poverty may be really helpful to the viewer if that fact may not be clear from looking at the painting itself.

TIP: Take notes about the work for your artist's statement as you create the work.

Re-write

“Hydrangea and Alice” elucidates a childhood epiphany about my poverty-stricken friend, Alice, triggered by my parents’ hydrangea bush. The hydrangea is extremely sensitive to soil acidity. Vastly different blossom colours — in this case, pink-red — result depending on the conditions in which it grows. Was Alice’s poverty a personal or familial failing, or caused by a broader context so ubiquitous as to be overlooked? The watercolour is temperamental upon the canvas substrate. Just as I experienced at the age of 13, Hydrangea and Alice evokes empathy towards “the other” and yields insight about our collective agency to influence flourishing.

Let’s break this down.

- **“Hydrangea and Alice” elucidates a childhood epiphany about my poverty-stricken friend, Alice, triggered by my parents’ hydrangea bush.**

The first sentence introduces the context for the work (childhood epiphany) and the major elements (Alice and the hydrangea) that contributed to this epiphany and are depicted in the artwork.

- **The hydrangea is extremely sensitive to soil acidity. Vastly different blossom colours — in this case, pink-red — result depending on the conditions in which it grows.**

The second and third sentences explain important details about the hydrangea that are necessary for the reader to begin to understand the nature of the young artist’s epiphany.

- **Was Alice’s poverty a personal or familial failing, or caused by a broader context so ubiquitous as to be overlooked?**

The fourth sentence explains Alice’s role in this epiphany.

- **The watercolour is temperamental upon the canvas substrate.**

The fifth sentence provides detail on the medium. “Temperamental” is a carefully chosen word.

- **Just as I experienced at the age of 13, Hydrangea and Alice evokes empathy towards “the other” and yields insight about our collective agency in influencing flourishing.**

The final sentence provides some details about the work’s impact upon the viewer.

You don't have to use this exact structure in an artist's statement for it to work well. This is one way of organizing the different pieces. This example does show, however, a few of the major common parts of an artist's statement we talked about in Part 1:

- *The general background or context of the artwork*
- *Themes and meaning in the work*
- *Materials and technique used*

When editing your artist's statement, you should of course take care to fix grammar and spelling. The larger goal, though, is to try to **deepen** the content by making it more meaningful and insightful.

A lot of writing an artist's statement is actually about thinking: thinking about why you wanted to undertake the piece, what it meant to you at the time, how you see it now, what you hope viewers will take away from it. Thinking about these things may take longer than actually writing! That's okay. This is hard work!

TIP: Make the words work.

Artists' statements are usually relatively short. This means that a few well-chosen words can add a big positive improvement. Look for opportunities to substitute common and somewhat vague words or short phrases with a single, highly specific word. Dig out the dictionary and thesaurus!

Five Examples of good artist's statements

“The Listener” - Liljana Mead Martin, Salt Spring Island, BC

The Parallel Art Show The Matt Steffich Jurors' Choice Award winner 2021

<https://saltspringartprize.ca/artwork/the-listener/>

“The Listener’ draws upon subjects in ecology and speculative fiction to synthesize a carnivorous plant with a deep listener. The work consists of a tree trunk: although charred by fire, it acts as a nurse log for new growths and small sculptures cast from the artist’s ear. Blue-green fluorescent petals sprout forth from brass stems, and glass bead droplets spill out of the growths to replicate perspiring nectar. Through magical realism, “The Listener” speculates on our current environmental conditions and the potential for learned exchanges with other forms of life.”

“Between Rock and a Hard Place” - Anna Belleforte, Amersfoort, Netherlands

Salt Spring National Art Prize finalist 2021/22

<https://saltspringartprize.ca/artwork/between-rock-and-a-hard-place/>

“My ‘Places’ series looks at vernacular architecture in transition. All architecture, whether vernacular or monumental, echoes the society that built it. Fissures in communities eventually find their way into buildings. Decisions to uphold a structure or let it deteriorate are owned collectively. There is a deeper story than simply neglect. By capturing these moments of vulnerability, I want to express something about common human struggles. These works are built with pieces of paper: maps (of the east coast) transparently painted in acrylic, natural textures from magazine pages, and additional media.”

“For Your Own Good” - Christine De Vuono, Guelph, On

Salt Spring National Art Prize finalist 2021/22

<https://saltspringartprize.ca/artwork/for-your-own-good/>

“For Your Own Good’ (2020) is a sculpture inspired by our reaction to the threat of Covid to our elderly population, specifically in long-term care. Although the lockdown rules aimed to keep senior residents safe from the virus, the emotional toll of being denied any visits from family, friends, or volunteers is devastating. This piece, made of 100 carved figures from identical bars of soap, was then placed in mason jars, which in turn are placed on shelves. The sculpture allows us to look in on the miniature elderly figures, who look out at us, protected from sickness but denied human contact.”

“Self” - Tammy Salzl, Edmonton, Ab

Salt Spring National Art Prize finalist 2019/20

<https://saltspringartprize.ca/artwork/self/>

“Self links the collective turmoil of our interior lives to the changing global realities of the present. Inside a comically surprised floating toxic cloud lies an idyllic forest grove, one world within another. A pair of worn hands wring and twist within the centre of the glade. A haunting folk song begins to play as the viewer nears, embellishing the contrasting worlds with meaning and emotion. This work holds the fears and worries of being, the wonder and beauty of our troubled world and the combined strength and vulnerability of mortality.”

“Sambuza After School” - Sarah-Mecca Abdourahman, Ottawa, On

Salt Spring National Art Prize 2023/24 Salt Spring Prize – The Joan McConnell Award

<https://saltspringartprize.ca/artwork/sambuza-after-school/>

“Exploring the concept of being chased away by home, as defined by Warsan Shire in her poem titled “Home,” the artist demonstrates the dangers of residing in a country where diasporic communities face discrimination, consequently producing the second chase that initiates a longing to return to the homeland, and eliciting a need to connect to community, family, and country. The artist illustrates her reconnection to home: family archives are used to demonstrate the visual storytelling of her Somali and Indian communities.”