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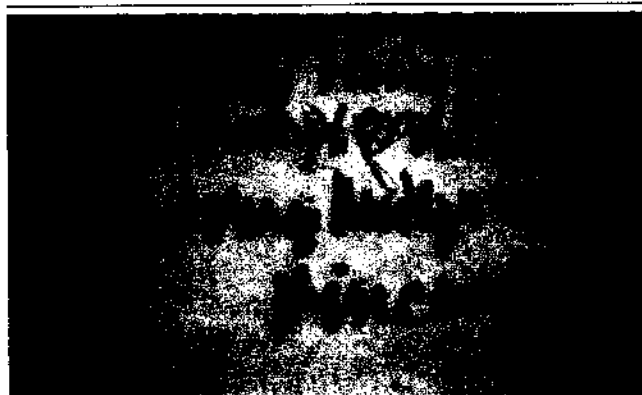
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## Culture Professionals Network

Creative thinking advice and connections for the arts and heritage community

# Writing an artist statement? First ask yourself these four questions

Academia is only one part of the art world, says **Daniel Blight**. To reach wider audiences, let's find an alternative to artspeak



The signature of Dutch artist Vincent Van Gogh, who would need to think about audience, sentence structure and adverbial phrases if writing his statement today. Photograph: Oli Scarff/Getty Images

*"Combining radical notions of performativity and the body as liminal space, my practice interrogates the theoretical limitations of altermodernism. My work, which traverses disparate realms of object-making such as painting and performance, investigates the space between metabolism and metaphysics and the aporia inherent to such a discourse."*

Are you impressed yet? These forms of writing are scattered across the contemporary art world. You can find preposterously complex, jargon-laden artist statements on the websites of galleries and pop-up project spaces all over the English-speaking world. If you don't believe me, [join the e-flux mailing list](#). I regularly visit such exhibition spaces in London and beyond, and read – with total, dulling indifference – the often pompous ramblings of what Alix Rule and David Levine call [International Art English](#).

This is a dialect of the privileged; the elite university educated. If you can't write it effectively, you're not part of the art world. If you're already inside but don't understand it, you're not allowed to admit it, or ask for further explanation. This kind of rhetoric relies on everyone participating without question. To speak up would mean dissolving the space between inside and outside: quite literally, the growing boundary between the art world and the rest of society.

The funny thing is, the chat you actually hear at a gallery opening rarely uses this language. You are much more likely to hear someone say "his work has really developed since the last show" or "I really like the way that length of rope dipped into avocado green acrylic paint casts a shadow on the wall above that piece".

What is the alternative to artspeak? I want to suggest some simple things to consider when writing an artist statement. I'll do this by answering some questions.

## Where does this artspeak come from?

Believe it or not, it does come from somewhere and that place is often very interesting, if you're into art theory. In the 1970s, an increasing quantity of French philosophy was being translated into English, and a number of American and English universities incorporated this material into their research, reading lists and bibliographies.

What came to be referred to as poststructuralism overtook the more formal, modernist forms of art theory and criticism that scholars such as Clement Greenberg had been writing. As a result, a way of writing about art emerged which read the way French philosophy (translated into English) does.

## Who are you really writing for?

Consider your audience. If you're writing a university application to undertake an MA or a practice-based PhD, you want to be writing in a different manner than if you're applying for a residency at a publicly funded institution. Likewise, if you're writing for a commercial gallery and their audience, you'll write differently than for a museum.

You must consider the remit of these different places. Some intend to encourage visual literacy, accessibility and open interpretations of artistic meaning, and some want cutting-edge conceptual performance art and the lingo to go with it.

## Which words do you use?

Words like ontology, epistemology and metaphysics have a meaning and a long and complicated history within philosophy. Likewise, prefixes such as meta-, post- and hyper- all mean something or other. But are they really necessary in your artist statement? Be modest about what you are trying to achieve: it is unlikely that your work really "radicalises the ontology of art" so why say it does?

It is okay to use adjectives that are less common in everyday conversation. Mellifluous is a good adjective and it means flowing, which is how your artist statement should read. A thesaurus is your friend. As Evelyn Waugh once said: "One forgets words as one forgets names. One's vocabulary needs constant fertilising or it will die."

## How do you structure your sentences?

Keep your sentences short and learn how to punctuate them. Think carefully about adverbial phrases such as "radically questioned". Questioning something already implies a sense of curiosity and intellectual confidence, so why describe it as radical?

The vocabulary of artspeak is not without meaning, but it has a specific place. Academia is only one part of the art world. My dislike is not for the language of artspeak, more the effect it has on the art industry in its ability to engage with a wider audience. Not to mention what such language does to the reputation of writing in the arts, as well as the wider practice of writing itself. Writing about your work should be an open and compelling activity, not a labyrinthine chore.

*Daniel Blight is a [writer and curator](#) who works in the education department at [the Photographers' Gallery](#) – follow him on Twitter [@DanielCBlight](#) and the gallery*

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