

your portfolio

how to prepare for bfa and ba applications

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research

Even if you know which art schools you are going to apply to, you need to get the specific guidelines and requirements for each school. To find links to art school websites you can begin with these:

www.npda.org (National Portfolio Day Association)

www.aicad.org (Association of Independent Colleges of Art and Design)

www.artschools.com (an art and design school directory)

Visit websites and request materials

All schools have websites with most if not all of the information you need to get started. Many schools have information request forms that can be submitted online or downloaded as pdfs; or you can e-mail or phone them to request materials. When you request materials, you may also receive invitations to events that the institution is hosting in your area.

Get your portfolio reviewed before you apply

It can be helpful to attend admission related events such as National Portfolio Days or preview events hosted by schools that interest you. Representatives of schools will review your portfolio before you apply, explain what they look for in a portfolio, and give you advice about how you can best present your work.

Visit schools

Contact schools and find out when they offer tours or have open house events. School visits are the best way to get a sense of the campus environment, facilities, faculty, and students. It will also give you a sense of how you and your interests will fit in. Be sure to look at the types of work students are making at the school, and how it compares to what you will be including in your portfolio. If it is not possible to visit a school because of distance, you can speak with a counselor or faculty representative over the phone or via e-mail.

Ask for feedback

Be open to suggestions from your high school faculty, friends, family, and college representatives. Ask for feedback regarding your work to date and educational goals. This will help you to find out more about yourself as an artist, student, and person. It is also important to remember that feedback comes from different points of view. Ask questions. Consider the answers. Ask more questions. Put it all together.

Ask yourself . . .

What type of education am I looking for? What type of program do I want? What am I going to do after I graduate? What are my interests and how can I combine them? The answers to these questions will help you in choosing which schools to apply to, what to include in your portfolio, how you talk about it, and what to write in your artist statement.

types of portfolios

Portfolios can take a variety of forms. It is crucial that you find out what a school's portfolio requirements are before you apply. Different schools have different requirements, and you may need to prepare several versions if you are applying to more than one school. Consider what types of programs and areas of study are offered at the school, and whether you are applying to a specific area.

Slides

This has traditionally been the most common format for portfolios; however, most schools are moving toward the digital format. The quality of your slides is important! It's best to shoot outdoors but not in direct sunlight (too many shadows and glare) and be sure to use daylight slide film. Use a white or neutral gray sheet of matboard as a background for smaller work. For large paintings and sculptures, an installation shot with a neutral background is preferable. If you have digital photographs, or your work is digitally based (video or web), you can get slides made from your digital files. Label each slide indicating which way is up, and include your name, the title of the work, and number each slide. A SLIDE INVENTORY SHEET should list each work by number corresponding to the number on the slide; and include the title, date completed, media, and dimensions for each work.

Original work

Original means the actual work of art, not a picture of it. If you have an interview you may be asked to bring in your actual work. Most schools do not require that original works be framed or matted. When possible, try to bring some original work when attending a portfolio day or similar event. Bringing a laptop or camcorder with a viewing lens (make sure your battery is fully charged) is also acceptable in most situations when showing digital work and film.

Sketchbook

Some schools require sketchbooks. When making personal visits to prospective schools, it is always a good idea for you to bring one of your sketchbooks. Sketchbooks tend to show work that is more personal and expressive of your interests, and is helpful when talking with counselors and faculty about your work process and ideas.

Film, video, sound, and interactive

Works in time-based media are usually submitted on CD and DVD. 10 minutes is usually the total length for all the work included, so you can include excerpts of longer pieces (consult admission guidelines for each school). You can also submit original scripts and scores, storyboards, and still images taken from the film or video.

Digital

The digital documentation of artwork is becoming the most common way to submit portfolios. Such portfolio formats can include: CD, Web/HTML, or DVD. Be sure that your disk and whatever you put on it is able to be viewed on both PC and Mac platforms. Use jpegs, not tiffs or psds. Be sure to check the guidelines for each school, which can usually be found in their catalogue or on their web site; or contact their Admission Office.

Alternative Portfolio

If your art is unconventional with respect to traditional art programs, you may want to seek out a school that supports this type of portfolio presentation. Some schools are interested in creative writing, poetry, scripts, blogs, spoken word, and documentation of conceptual projects.

content

A portfolio usually includes 15–20 examples of your best and most recent work (completed within the past year). It is important that you consider the specific requirements of each school, the area of study or program (for example, sculpture) you are applying to, as well as the overall focus of the school's curriculum. Some schools are looking for technical skill; others are more interested in creativity and ideas. Ask a representative of the school what they consider most important. Take advantage of opportunities to have your portfolio reviewed informally by the school(s) before you apply.

How you edit and arrange your portfolio for presentation is as important as what the portfolio contains. Begin and end with your best work. Organize the work in the middle in a way that makes sense both visually and in terms of the material. For example, you might include preparatory drawings with a painting or sculpture; several works from a series of photographs; drawings or photographs that were used in an animation or film sequence along with the film. Try arranging all the pieces as if you were going to put them in an exhibition. Which is the first work you would like a viewer to see? If could only show one thing, which would it be? This is a good choice for the last piece.

While you are choosing work and making decisions about the order, you should also be thinking about what you might say about each piece, and if there are any larger points or themes you will want to talk about. This will help you decide what to include and how to organize it, and also help you prepare to talk about your work during an interview; and to write your artist statement or essay.

Some schools have specific requirements for the portfolio's outer box or container, but others encourage creative expression in how you package your presentation. Check the requirements, and be as distinctive as possible within the guidelines. Don't forget to include your name and contact information as well as the required forms!

artist statement

Also known as “the essay” or “the statement of intent.” This is your opportunity to express your ideas about your work, your interests, and who you are as an artist. It should be personal and true, and provide context for the artwork in your portfolio. Work on your statement at the same time you are selecting the art—take notes about things you want reviewers to know about the work.

Practice talking about the work in your portfolio with someone, and ask them to take notes and give you feedback about what is most interesting and what needs clarification. The artist statement is also a demonstration of your ability to express your ideas and your writing skills. Once you have your ideas organized and written down, ask someone to read it for content and grammar.

Your statement should also include information or topics that a school may require. Be sure to check each school’s requirements.

Some Questions to Consider

What is your work about?

Why do you make art? (the real reason)

How have your life experiences influenced your art?

Which artists and writers (or others) have influenced you?
How and why?

What types of art or art movements have influenced your work?

What media do you like to use?

What areas are you interested in studying?

Why are you interested in this particular school?
(don’t forget to change this part if you are applying to more than one school!)

What are your goals?

