

Writing Letters of Intent for Grad School

Questions you should ask yourself before beginning to write:

You will have to ascertain whether the committee has asked for a “Statement of Purpose” or a “Letter of Intent.” Have you been asked to submit a “Statement of Purpose” and an “Artist’s Statement”? Are you required to submit a sample of your writing (as in an academic paper)? If you have to write a “Statement of Purpose” that is accompanied by “Artist’s Statement,” the “Statement of Purpose” will generally focus on what you intend to accomplish in graduate school. The “Artist’s Statement” will provide them with a sense of where you’re coming from, your philosophies, your current practice. A “Letter of Intent” usually provides your audience with a sense of what your practice is now, how it’s developed and where you see it going in the future — a sense of what you see yourself accomplishing in graduate school. Remember: A “Letter of Intent” and a “Statement of Purpose” are both types of proposals. Your audience does want to know what you propose to do! They want to know how you’ll fit into their program, whether you have an interest in teaching (if there are TAships available), who you’d like to work with (if that’s possible to determine), whether you want to be involved in an exchange (if that’s part of the program), your interest in curatorial work, academics, theory, and your influences.

Getting Started

If you haven’t got a clue where to start, try writing a very simple artist’s statement. Describe a piece or pieces you’re working on. Draw a map, or brain storm how this work has been influenced by what you’ve done in the past, theories and artists that have informed it — then start thinking about how you see this developing or changing in the future. Another way to begin is to ask yourself what you’d like to accomplish in grad school. No one can know exactly what it is they’re going to be doing, or how their work will evolve, but try to visualize possibilities. A proposal is simply a proposal — a piece of writing that is meant to convince the reader that you’ll fit into their program, that you’re a serious artist/academic, that you have ideas and a practice that you intend to explore and develop further. Don’t ever feel that what you say in the “Letter of Intent” is fixed in stone. It isn’t. It’s just a tool

that you'll use to convince your audience that you're capable of, and seriously pursuing, an artistic/academic career through graduate school.

PLEASE REMEMBER THAT THE FOLLOWING EXAMPLES ARE NOT MEANT TO BE PRESCRIPTIVE — you need to find a voice and words that will work for you. This handout is only meant to be read as a series of possibilities. Though there are certain conventions that you're expected to follow, it's also important that you stand out from the other applicants.

Addressing the letter

If you've been asked to write a "Statement of Purpose" you can determine whether it should be written in letter form or not by figuring out what else they're asking for. Do they want an artist's statement as well? Do you think you'll need to provide a covering letter to go along with it? When writing a "Letter of Intent," it is best to set it up as a formal letter. It should be easy to read. It must be typed on white paper. Anything less than 12 font and larger than 14 font will frustrate your readers. Stick to a simple font like Times New Roman, Courier or Verdana. Letters are usually single-spaced with a space between paragraphs. You should probably check a style guide if you want to attempt any other style than the one that requires all paragraphs, dates, signatures and addresses to be aligned with the left hand margin. Begin with a date, a proper address:

For example:

January 21st, 2008

Concordia University
Graduate Program Director MFA Studio Arts
1230 de la Montagne
Montreal, Quebec H3G 1Z2

To the Graduate Selection Committee (or Attention: Graduate Selection Committee)

Beginning the Letter

It may seem redundant to have to tell them you're applying to a particular program of study, or that you're completing a BFA in photography, but it's essential.

Sample:

I am applying to your MFA program in Studio Arts (Open Media) for the fall of 2003. Over the past six years I have been involved with art as a student, administrator, volunteer and curator. Currently, I am completing a BFA in photography at Emily Carr Institute of Art and Design.

Content

Often . . . to get started . . . and to give your audience a sense of who you are, it helps to tell them what you have been focussing on in your practice and/or your academics.

Over the past two years, I have come to understand some of the connections between my background in architecture and my art practice . . . For the past three years I have focused on both functional and sculptural ceramics, pushing the material and concept to a new personal level. . . In my final year of undergraduate studies, I focused on media history and Canadian and American contemporary art from the 60's through to the present. . . I have a BA in anthropology, and my interest in indigenous cultures continues to inform my work. . . I immigrated to Canada from Japan when I was a young adult. . . Whether I'm working in the medium digital photography or performance, I try to capture that feeling of being caught in the space 'in between' two cultures, two languages, and two histories.

At this point in the letter it is often useful to focus in on what you've paid particular attention to (either in your practice or in your courses)

Surface colour, scale and space are aspects I have been paying attention to, but the bulk of my work relies on the energy of the process, as I combine the techniques of traditional sculpture, pottery, and industrial production. . . The paper I have submitted entitled "Jeff Wall/Stan Douglas: Reviews of Photos That Lie" will outline my interest in how art critics speak from the "urban space" in which they write . . .

It is probably best **not** to spend too much time focussing on the past. Move to the present quickly, so that you can get to the point of the letter (which is what you **intend** to do).

Presently, my work pivots on . . . reflects . . . I deal with a state of . . . I purposely . . .
.I sift through
In most of my work I draw attention to the phenomenological, to time and space, both physical and psychological. Tracks, or records of presence, fascinate me . . .
As for the methodology I follow . . . I experiment . . . I am currently working on installations that rely on the everyday traffic or flow of people through space . .

By half way to two thirds of the way through the letter, you should be moving on to what you intend to do in graduate school.

While in graduate school, I would like to investigate the concept of dwelling by focusing on the symbolic language of architectural ornament in relation to our identity. . . If I am accepted into UBC's Interdisciplinary program, I will continue to focus on . . . Because of my interest in research, the thesis option appeals to me. . .
Through historical research, I intend to create a series of sculptures by reconstructing the strength and vitality of a symbolic language that has been abandoned by modernism and replaced by the chaotic reality of technology. . . Given that experience and memory are formed through all our senses, I hope to extend this "sensual" awareness beyond the visual — to examine how touch, smell, sound and taste register our environment and play major roles in the way we perceive and process the information received.

If you have a clear sense of how you will incorporate certain theories into your work, what courses are of interest to you or why the studio space, the technology, the faculty will enhance your studies, it may be important to let them know. If you are interested in teaching, and that is a possibility, say so.

The contemporary focus of the Ceramic faculty, the spacious facilities and the dynamic atmosphere of an art department within a larger university, such as the University of Regina, will provide a stimulating environment to conduct further critical research into architectural theory and ornamentation. . . Currently, I am enrolled in an Art education class with the hope of having the opportunity to partake in a Teaching Assistantship. . . I would also like the opportunity to utilize my Arts Administration and curatorial experience by working in the university gallery.

Find a way to conclude the letter that gives them a sense of commitment, or interest.

If selected to your program, I wouldI look forward to working with . . .

Sign the letter formally:

Yours sincerely, James Renbourn

Other Things to Consider when Applying to Grad School:

- **Make sure your letter of intent makes sense in relation to the slides and the cv you are submitting:** For example, if your work is very small in scale, it might be useful to mention that in the letter. If you work in many different types of mediums, but are applying to a sculpture program, it would probably be a good idea to explain why that program will serve your interests and practice best.
- **Submitting an academic paper:** Students often decide that a fourth year paper that they've received an "A" on will be a sufficient sample of written work. This may be true, but in most cases it's a really good idea to get the instructor who marked it to go over it again and make further suggestions for development. Don't be afraid to ask if it needs work, how it could be improved, and whether it will meet the writing expectations of the committee. It's sometimes a good idea to talk to the graduate chair of the program you're applying to. Ask them what kind of sample they're looking for. They may even have samples on file.
- **Research:** Many students actually research the schools they wish to attend by going there and introducing themselves to faculty, checking out the facilities, speaking to students in the program, etc. If you can afford to do this, great. If not, it's not uncommon for applicants to e-mail or phone grad chairs, grad secretaries, and faculty members. You have to be careful — find out if this is appropriate by contacting the grad secretary first (if there is one!). Read as much as you can about the programs and make sure they will offer you what you want in terms of space and time, courses (both academic and studio), supervision (faculty you'd like to work with), etc. Most of this is

available on the internet, but it's also useful to ask for catalogues, brochures, or any other publications that might be of use. If you're applying to a school that emphasizes critical theory or art history, you might explain how you think the academic courses offered will inform your work (building perhaps on how they have done so in the past). If you have previous degrees, this is usually important to mention.

- **Get Someone to Go Over Your Letter at the Draft Stage and Before You Submit it:** It doesn't matter how good a writer you are, it is crucial that you have someone — a family member, a friend, a colleague, a faculty member, or someone in the Writing Centre — go over your application. The best writers overlook simple mistakes and omissions. Anyone who has worked on something closely will have difficulty catching their own grammatical and syntactical errors. If you can, try to get input from others right from the beginning. Having to write several drafts is not uncommon, and another reader can usually help you with content and provide you with direction. Finally, run it through a spell check. Make sure you don't have any overly long convoluted sentences. It should be clear written, succinct, and easy to read and understand.