

AMPLIFY ARTS

Artist Talk Resource Guide

An artist talk, or lecture, is a great opportunity for an artist to talk in depth about their work, process, and influences in front of a captive audience. They can take a lot of different forms and there's no one "right" way to go about scripting and delivering an artist talk. The most engaging talks are coupled with a hefty amount of visual material. They are also often highly individualized and veer away from set formulas and restrictions, other than a predetermined length, usually set by the gallery or institution at which the talk takes place. If more than one artist is speaking, talks might only be 10 minutes or less. In more formal settings, an artist talk or lecture might last an hour, or more, with time set aside at the end for audience Q & A.

The suggestions and recommendations below are only guidelines. You are the authority on your work and understand how best to communicate the why's and how's of what you do. Practice your talk often and remain open to feedback and constructive criticism from your peers and other artists, but make sure not to lose your "voice" when making revisions and adjustments to your talk. A general organizational structure for an artist talk might look something like this:

1. **Introduction:** Talk about yourself and the broad, overarching concepts that influence your work. Personal anecdotes, images of recent exhibitions, or video highlighting performance work can all be effective ways of introducing your work. Thinking about your talk as a story can also be useful. How does your story begin and how will the narrative evolve over the course of your talk?
2. **Body:** The body of your artist talk should dive into examples of specific works or bodies of work that contextualize and support the "big ideas" you discuss during your introduction. This is the bulk of your story and the rising action of your narrative. You can build the body of your talk with images and other visual information that serve as cues to trigger talking

points and keep your talk moving. Here you can discuss *how* you make the work, in addition to *why*, and highlight a specific process or processes that help build and support content. Consider including a discussion about works in progress, or work that has yet to be resolved, as a way to keep your audience invested in what you're saying and where your work is going. Give them a reason to follow your career and development as an artist.

3. **Conclusion:** Wrap up your talk with some final thoughts that will encourage questions from the audience. Leave space for your listeners to gather their thoughts and formulate their questions and stay calm if there's a pause or a little bit of silence before the first one comes. Speaking in public is a vulnerable position for both speaker and listener.

Tips for writing an artist talk:

Every artist approaches writing their talk differently. Some prefer to stick to a script, while others are more comfortable speaking off the cuff. Regardless of your style and approach, take some time to think about the following points when pulling your talk together:

1. **You're the principle authority on your work.** You are your own resident expert when it comes to your work. No one knows more about your process, background, or subject matter than you. Write a talk that reflects that. Some artists look at lectures and talks as an extension of their creative practice and turn them into performances in and of themselves. Individualize your talk; incorporate performative elements if you want to; make it as serious or casual as you like and remember you know more about your work than anyone else.
2. **Know your audience.** Figure out the one thing that is most important for people to know about your work; the thing that if it was left out, or misinterpreted, you'd feel you hadn't delivered a successful talk or gotten your point across. Once you've articulated that point for yourself, think of how you'd explain it to five different people: a non-artist friend, an artist friend, a curator, a neighbor, and your grandma. If you're talking to your non-artist friend or grandma using the same language you'd use with a curator, you're likely not considering your audience.
3. **Use direct language.** To help you reach the most people possible, and keep them invested, use clear language that doesn't include too much art-speak or jargon. Even if you're speaking at a gallery or academic / art institution, make sure your language will be accessible to everyone in attendance and consider you will probably be talking to learners of different levels from all kinds of backgrounds .

4. **Avoid literal descriptions.** If you find yourself getting stuck or are at a loss of what to say, it's tempting to retreat to the obvious or what is already visually apparent in the work. That doesn't help your audience understand the bigger picture. Instead, ask yourself how you can bring new associations, familial links, or unexpected insights to the work that might not be immediately recognizable. Think about things that aren't self-evident, like process, and how you can use those as touchstones to refocus your talk if you get stuck.

Tips for delivering an artist talk:

Artist talk presentation styles will vary as widely as the artists who deliver them. Again, this is an opportunity for your individual personality to shine. Tone, pacing, and what type of visual material you chose to include can all work together in a way that will make your talk a genuine reflection of what you do and why you do it.

1. **Practice.** Practice, practice, and practice some more. Deliver your talk alone, in front of the mirror, with friends or acquaintances, while recording yourself, and under whatever other circumstances are necessary for you to feel comfortable giving it, no matter where you are. Ask for honest feedback, make revisions or adjustments and practice some more.
2. **Know your talking points.** Structuring the images, or other visual materials in your talk, in a way that triggers specific talking points can help your talk, and the narrative associated with it, flow smoothly. If you find speaking in public a little intimidating, like most people, knowing your talking points and being able to recall them as soon as you see the next slide in your presentation, can be a great security blanket and extremely reassuring.
3. **Resolve technical problems beforehand.** If possible, practice your talk in advance at the actual space where it's scheduled to take place. If you have included audio or video components, make sure you have access to speakers and that they'll be loud enough to reach the entire audience. Check computer and projector connections and have your talk backed up in more than one place. Addressing any potential technical hiccups well in advance of your talk will give you peace of mind and help you feel more at ease.
4. **Prepare for questions.** Don't get caught off guard. Anticipate and practice your responses to questions about process, subject matter, or influences that audience members might ask. On the day, limit your questions from the audience to about five or so. Tell them this beforehand and then let them know that you would be happy to answer any other questions in person after the talk. This way your talk drag and you'll leave plenty of time to address more involved questions face-to-face.

5. **Make yourself accessible.** After the questions conclude at the end of your talk, make yourself accessible to the people in attendance. Introduce yourself to people and try to make sure that everyone who wants to talk with you gets to. Be aware of the people in the room, and if one encounter begins to take too much time, offer to continue the conversation over email or coffee another time.

Additional Resources

1. <https://art21.org/> (Art 21)
2. https://www.ted.com/playlists/3/the_artist_is_in (Ted Talks)
3. <https://www.artforum.com/interviews> (Art Forum)
4. <http://www.whatartschooldidntteachyou.com/2017/06/preparing-your-artist-talk-or-presentation/> (What Art School Didn't Teach You)