

AMPLIFY ARTS

Documentation and Work Sample Resource Guide

Why is it important to document your work?

Carefully and systematically documenting your work is important for a lot of different reasons, a few are listed below:

1. **Creating an archive:** Documenting your work at different stages of development will allow you to create a visual archive of processes and techniques that yield different results. Systematically photographing or recording the process and results of experimentation can help you build an archive of some things that have worked well and others you'd rather not revisit or continue to pursue. Having that frame of reference is as important for performing artists as it is for visual artists, and although the method of documenting might differ, the same systematic approach can be used. In fact, for performing artists, documentation of the work will often appear in an exhibition context if there is no live component. If that's the case, documentation should be produced in a way that will make it exhibition ready. You will also be creating an archive of your work that, in the event your work is lost or damaged, will become a record of the evolution of your practice.
2. **Assembling a work sample:** The more faithfully you document, the more images you will have from which to select to create a work sample that represents your work in the most accurate and thoughtful way. Residency, grant, and open call exhibition opportunity applications, in addition to artist registries, will all ask for work samples of anywhere from 4 to 20 image, video, or sound files as part of your application packet. Staying current on documenting new work and being able to access older files easily will make the process of assembling a strong work sample much simpler.
3. **Refining your skills:** Practice makes perfect and the more you document your work, the better your documentation will become. Adjustments can be made using post production software like Photoshop or Lightroom to improve how your documentation looks, but there's always a trade off. The more you manipulate an image, the more that image's quality will degrade. Using good lighting and a steady hand to produce faithful documentation will give you the best results. High quality images and video can go a long way to promote your work on personal websites, social media, or as part of an application packet.

What are some general tips for documenting work?

There are a few simple rules of thumb to follow when documenting work that can help to portray a more accurate representation of what you make and how you make it.

1. **Use a tripod:** Camera shake, especially in indoor and low light environments can cause motion blur and detract from the overall quality of your documentation. A tripod will help to stabilize your camera prevent blur.
2. **Use proper lighting:** A tungsten household light bulb usually won't do the trick. White balance and color temperature in an image have a direct relationship to the type of lighting you use. Without proper lighting, your documentation images could appear too hot (yellow in color) or too cool (blueish cast). Investing in stand-alone lighting and good quality daylight flood bulbs can make a huge difference in the quality of your images.
3. **Know your camera:** Getting to know your camera and feeling comfortable manipulating its settings including ISO, aperture, and shutter speed will help you produce good quality documentation without much post production editing. A camera with manual settings, as opposed to a simple point and shoot model, allows for more control when documenting. Read your owner's manual and experiment with different camera settings until you feel comfortable adjusting your camera's settings and get the hang of reading your camera's internal light meter to produce a properly exposed image.
4. **Be straightforward:** Avoid using watermarks, stamps, additional text, or any other added information that could distract from the work you're representing in your documentation. Remember when submitting an application, the selection panel is evaluating the content of your work, not your branding or design skills.

How do you document different types of work?

1. **2D and wall work:** For most two-dimensional and wall work, you'll want to use a level to make sure the work is hanging straight before you begin documenting. Light the work from straight on and two sides to avoid shadows. When you're ready to photograph, be sure there are no distracting elements in the frame of the image. Remove any buckets, brushes, etc and be sure to establish a clear figure / ground relationship in at least one image to give a sense of scale. If your work is meant to be seen or exhibited in a frame, make sure your documentation reflects that by photographing the work framed as well.
2. **3D work and sculpture:** When documenting three-dimensional work and sculpture, consider things like lighting and eliminating any distractions, as you would when documenting 2D work, but also consider including detail images. Detail images can do a lot to communicate the nuance of a particular color, texture, or finish. They also allow the viewer to experience the work's intricacies close up, on a more intimate level. Combined with a well-lit overview shot, one or two detail images can convey essential information about your work that will help viewers or selection panelists better understand your process.
3. **Performance based work or sound:** For live performance, consider producing both photo and video documentation. If the performance includes sound, make sure your video camera has a good quality microphone. You may want to run a few tests beforehand to ascertain how effective the sound quality will be. If it's too muddled or distorted, an external microphone could be a good solution. Also think about documenting the performance at different stages of completion during practices and rehearsals. For more experimental and less traditional performances, you may only get one chance to document. Make sure you're prepared and ask someone with a photo / video background to help, if possible.

Sound artists and musicians should also consider creating documentation of live performances in addition to audio files, especially those who incorporate a visual component, to give viewers the most comprehensive overview possible of how all aspects of the work come together in an exhibition or presentation context. If you're applying to a specific opportunity and want to highlight multiple works or projects, consider creating an edited reel with several one or two minute clips from multiple performances. Keep in mind, most applications will limit the length of the video documentation you submit to five minutes or less, usually.

4. **Video and new media:** Documentation of video and new media relies heavily on editing skills. FinalCut, iMovie, Premiere and AfterEffects all have editing workflows that will allow you to export video for uploading to sites like Vimeo and YouTube, create short clips from longer works that can be submitted to an application as standalone files or compiled into a reel (depending on the application's instructions), or export video files to include in your archive. Always be sure to backup files on an external hard drive or upload to the cloud after exporting. For new media / web-based work, be sure to keep an archive folders for each page that include screencaps and video of how the work functions on the web in real time. Properly documenting new media and web-based work can be a challenge because the technology evolves quickly. Keep in mind, web and net aesthetics represent an important evolution in art practice and production and merit careful and considerate documentation like any other work.

5. **Installation work:** Many of the same considerations for documenting sculpture and 3D work come into play when documenting installation. You want to communicate a sense of space, scale, and time through your images. Consider creating both photo and video documentation here too, especially if the installation is interactive or responsive. Try to document at high traffic and low traffic times to better represent how the installation effects not only the space but also those traveling through the space. Documenting from different angles, including detail shots, and capturing moments when the installation is being activated will help create a more robust and lasting impression of the work for those who couldn't experience it in person.

How do you assemble a strong work sample?

Putting together a strong work sample often resembles the process of putting together a solid portfolio. Your most recent work isn't always necessarily the most important to include in your work sample. Think of ways to make your work sample feel cohesive and complete. You can do this by including multiple works from the same series or body of work, making connections through formal elements like color, value, line, shape, or texture, or including works that are linked through similarities in subject matter, medium, or style. Honestly evaluating the quality of your work sample could mean leaving out documentation of work you feel strongly about if that documentation isn't communicating effectively or if it feels disjointed from the other images / video included in your work sample.

Also, try to tailor your work sample to each specific opportunity. If, for example, you're applying to an exhibition opportunity at an alternative space that includes mostly new media and performance-based work as part of its program, you may not want to submit documentation of figurative oil painting as part of your application. Research each opportunity and assemble your work sample accordingly to give yourself the greatest advantage possible. Always follow directions when it comes to the number of images you submit, their dimensions, how they're titled, and the length of video and sound documentation. Not following instructions is the quickest way to give a selection panel an excuse to bypass your application without even looking at your work sample.

Finally, ask your friends and community of peers to review your work sample and be open to feedback. Look at other contemporary artists' websites, particularly those who you admire, and pay special attention to how they document their work. If you know other artists who are accepted to residencies or curated into exhibitions often, ask to take a look at their work sample. Learning from others is sometimes the best resource.

Additional Resources

1. <https://www.gyst-ink.com/documentation/> (Getting Your Sh*t Together-Documentation)
2. <http://www.saic.edu/media/saic/pdfs/lifesaic/careerco-opcenter/Documenting-Your-Work.pdf> (School of the Art Institute of Chicago-Camera settings and lighting)
3. <http://visualartists.ie/the-manual-a-survival-guide-for-visual-artists/presenting-your-work/documenting-your-work/> (Visual Artists Ireland)
4. <http://www.dynamicmediainstitute.org/projects/documentation-live-performance-and-variable-media-works> (Dynamic Media Institute at Massachusetts College of Art and Design)
5. <http://www.mitpressjournals.org/doi/pdf/10.1162/pajj.2006.28.3.1> (MIT Press Journals)
6. <https://www.khanacademy.org/partner-content/moma/artist-interview-performance/v/moma-abramovic-documenting-performance> (Khan Academy)
7. <https://www.khanacademy.org/partner-content/tate/archives-memory/what-is-an-archive/v/live-art-salon> (Khan Academy)
8. <http://artiststudioarchives.org/2016/03/07/research-reflections-preservation-of-new-media-artworks-in-the-care-of-the-artist/> (Artist Studio Archives)
9. <https://www.guggenheim.org/conservation/time-based-media> (Guggenheim-Conservation)