

The Language of Artist Statements



In this guide, artist, writer, curator, and Revolú Gallery founding director Allicette Torres explains how to write a successful artist statement, with some lessons from David Foster Wallace.

August 2, 2026 -

As told to Allicette Torres, 2288 words.

Tags: [Writing](#), [Art](#), [Inspiration](#), [Process](#).

I have read statements for open calls, residencies, and exhibitions, including for programs I run myself, where selection decisions have to be made quickly and with clarity, and I have watched good work lose its chance because no one in the room could explain what the artist was actually doing. This guide arises from that reality. It focuses on the gap between intention and expression, using David Foster Wallace as a lens, less for his literary reputation than for his precise thinking about clarity, communication, and the ways language can appear to say something before it actually commits to meaning it, to think through how writing can either carry the work forward or quietly prevent it from being seen at all.

After a while, you stop reading artist statements for what they say. Instead, you start reading them for what they are trying not to say. This is the kind of thing [David Foster Wallace](#) was very good at noticing. He noticed it not just in literature but in language itself, the moment a sentence begins to perform intelligence, rather than risk meaning it. Once you see the pattern, it becomes hard to unsee. Here, seriousness is often treated as a tone before it is earned as a thought.

"Let's be honest: writing about your art feels like a trap."

Let's be honest: writing about your art feels like a trap. If you try to sound smart, you end up abstract, which sounds clever until you actually read it back. If you try to be clear, you worry you are being somewhat basic. If you are a fine artist, especially one without a formal writing background, you have probably been told, directly or indirectly, that you are not supposed to get the language institutions want, even as those same institutions still to demand it in statements, proposals, grants, residencies, fellowships, open calls, and every other doorway through which work is supposed to pass.

What follows is not an argument for flattening the work. It is an argument against letting the writing bury it. David Foster Wallace, the American novelist and essayist, is useful here not because he has anything to do with the art world in any obvious way, but because he spent an unusual amount of time thinking about what happens between intention and expression, and about how often language can sound like it is saying something before it has actually committed to saying anything at all.

In a 2006 conversation with Bryan A. Garner, later published as [Quack This Way](#), Wallace offered a series of observations about writing that become unexpectedly practical the minute you apply them to artist statements,

project proposals, and applications. Not for novelists. For artists. Real ones. The ones who cannot stand writing about their work but know they have to.



The first problem usually appears immediately. Wallace said a good opener should not repel. It should orient, interest, and imply the stakes. That sounds obvious until you read enough statements to realize how few of them manage it. Most begin as if the reader has already agreed to climb into the artist's head. They open in atmosphere, in abstraction, in a tone of importance that has not yet been attached to anything. "My practice exists at the intersection of memory, fragmentation, and the poetics of absence." "This work interrogates the liminal space between embodiment and sociopolitical inscription." Nothing in those sentences is illegal. None of it is technically false. It is just very difficult to hold.

Your opener is not a pedestal. It is a threshold. If someone cannot tell, within the first few lines, what you make, what you are doing with it, and why it matters, they are already negotiating with the sentence instead of receiving the work. In most contexts, that negotiation will not last very long. Not because the reader is stupid, not because the ideas are too complex, but because attention is finite, and the art world asks people to process a punishing amount of material under less-than-ideal conditions.

A better opening is often almost embarrassingly direct. I make large-scale paintings that distort the human face to explore how memory breaks down over time. I build sculptures from industrial fabric and steel to think through pressure, damage, and the body's capacity to hold history. Those sentences do not diminish the work. They locate it. They give it edges. They make it repeatable. They give another person something to say in a room you are not in.

"David Foster Wallace was not writing for fine artists. But he understood, with

unusual precision, the gap between what a person means and what their language actually delivers."

That last part matters more than artists tend to admit. I have sat with other jurors where decisions are made quickly, sometimes brutally. Not because anyone is careless, but because there is no time not to be. I have watched strong work lose momentum in a single paragraph. Not on the wall, but on the page. A proposal that felt vivid in the images went dull in the statement. A project that might have survived real discussion never got there because no one in the room could explain, cleanly, what the artist was actually doing. The comments people make in those moments are almost always softer than the truth. "I'm not sure what this is." "I don't understand what they're proposing." "It feels underdeveloped." What they mean is simpler and harsher: we could not access it in time.

Time is the actual medium you are working in when you submit anything to an open call, a residency, or a grant. The question becomes less philosophical than artists often want it to be. It becomes procedural. Can someone understand what you are doing before they get tired? That is the threshold. Most statements fail it early.

Wallace had a term for some of the language that produces this problem. He called it "pretty, empty," which is both brutal and accurate. This is language that sounds elegant, intelligent, or refined but remains strangely uncommitted to the idea of meaning as something definite. You see this constantly in artist writing. The sentence gestures and signals. It arranges a tone and remains serious. But it never quite lands. It never risks contact.



A common version looks like this: "This work explores the liminal spaces between identity, memory, and materiality, engaging a dialogic relationship with the body and its sociopolitical inscriptions." Now compare it

to this: "I make sculptures using industrial fabric that mimic the way skin stretches and tears under pressure. I am trying to show how the body holds memory, especially under stress." Same territory. Completely different outcome. The second version risks being understood. The first avoids that risk by staying general.

And that is the unspoken part. This kind of language persists because it serves a protective function. If you say exactly what you mean, you make yourself available to be disagreed with in a precise way. You make the work easier to enter, but also easier to reject. Vagueness, on the other hand, distributes the meaning just enough that nothing can quite be pinned down. It creates a surface that reads as thoughtful without requiring the writer to commit to a position that can be tested. For a moment, that can feel like control. Until you realize no one can actually get inside the work.

This is where Wallace's so-called bromide becomes useful. He kept returning to the most basic rule of all: the reader is not inside your head. "The most important thing for [students] to remember," he told Garner, "is that someone who is not them cannot read their mind... You never forget that what you're engaged in is a communication to another human being." That sounds elementary. It is also one of the most consistently ignored principles in artist writing. Artists assume the reader knows their references, their process, the private logic of the studio, and the years of thought behind a single material decision. The writer fills in the gaps automatically because they already live with the work. The reader does not.

"The point is not to sound smarter. The point is to say what you mean clearly enough that the work can arrive with its force intact."

That is why statements so often feel incomplete even when they appear finished. "This project continues my exploration of material instability." To the artist, that may contain years of accumulated thinking. To the reader, it contains almost nothing. Add one layer of clarity and the sentence changes function: "This project uses melting wax sculptures to explore how physical forms break down over time." The difference is not stylistic. It is structural. The second sentence can survive outside the mind that produced it.

The same principle applies to punctuation, which Wallace treated less as ornament than as engineering. Most people punctuate according to how something sounds in their head. Wallace points out that punctuation marks are "cues to the reader for how quickly to organize the various phrases and clauses of the sentence so the sentence as a whole makes sense." That is an unglamorous way of thinking about commas and clauses. It is also the correct one. If your sentence collapses halfway through or needs to be reread several times just to be understood, the problem is not that the reader lacks sophistication. The problem is that the sentence is unresolved.

Artists should understand this instinctively. You already know composition, tension, negative space, timing, weight, and sequence. Language is not different. A sentence is a structure moving through time. The eye has to know where to go. The thought has to know where to land. If you write as though you are talking only to yourself, the reader will feel excluded from the sentence before they have even had a chance to reach the work.

Length creates its own version of the same problem. Wallace knew the issue was rarely length itself. It was energy. "Writing well means to communicate clearly and interestingly and in a way that feels alive to the reader." Some artist statements are too short because they are avoiding commitment. "My work explores identity, memory, and transformation." Others are too long because they are smothering the central idea under layers of framing. In both cases, the writer has deferred the same decision: what is the work actually doing?

A useful internal check is almost insultingly simple. After every paragraph, ask: What did I actually say? Not what I imply. Not what did I evoke. Not what atmosphere did I establish? What did I say? If the answer is unclear, the reader's experience will be worse, not better.

There are a few basic things this all comes down to, and none of them are complicated. You should be able to say what you are doing, why you are doing it, and what is actually at risk in the work. Not in theory. Not in the atmosphere. In reality. If those things are not somewhere in the first few paragraphs, something has gone wrong.



This does not mean the writing has to be stripped of style. It means style cannot outrun meaning. You earn complexity by first establishing orientation. You give the reader a place to stand, and then, if you want, you destabilize it. Without that first move, everything reads as equally unstable, which is to say forgettable.

Wallace also insisted on tools. He recommended a usage dictionary, and not out of pedantry. "A usage dictionary is likely a linguistic hard drive," he said. Artists often swing between two bad options: sounding too scholarly or dumbing everything down to avoid sounding academic. A usage dictionary interrupts both impulses. It helps you find the word that fits instead of the word that performs intelligence on your behalf. No one expects you to know everything. But if you are guessing, it shows.

Reading, Wallace reminds us, takes work. "If you think about what's going on when you read," he said, "You're processing information at an incredible rate... One measure of how good the writing is is how little effort it requires for the reader to track what's going on." That does not mean making the work simplistic. It means removing unnecessary friction. Your reader is already doing work. They are trying to understand something new. You can either build a path or drop them into the woods without a compass.

"Time is the actual medium you are working in..."

And this, finally, is why writing about your art is not a side job. It is part of the work's movement through the

world. If you treat it like an afterthought, the people reviewing you will feel it. If the language gets heavy while the meaning gets lighter, the work starts to disappear behind the effort required to reach it. You are not just making work. You are trying to get it across.

David Foster Wallace was not writing for fine artists. But he understood, with unusual precision, the gap between what a person means and what their language actually delivers. That gap matters in every field. In art, it can decide whether the work is seen, discussed, selected, misread, or lost before it ever gets a real chance to speak. Use what he gives you, not to sound like him, but to stop hiding behind the kind of language he would have spotted immediately. The point is not to sound smarter. The point is to say what you mean clearly enough that the work can arrive with its force intact.

Name

Allicette Torres

Vocation

artist, writer, curator, and founding Director of Revolú Gallery

□