



Student Portfolio Guide

What are college admissions representatives and officers looking for in an art portfolio, exactly? That's a good question as portfolios are the most critical part of an application to an art school, particularly a competitive art school. Just like Rome wasn't built in a day, your art portfolio won't be and shouldn't be a slapdash affair, but rather an intense ongoing process of growth and reflection. Before you even begin to sift your work and select the pieces, there are steps you can take to help yourself.

Define your goal. Is your goal to get into a top ten art school? Or maybe you are not going to art school but are submitting an arts supplement. Most colleges, including all of the Ivy League Schools, Duke, MIT, Stanford, and the top liberal arts colleges, allow you to submit an optional arts supplement as an additional component to your college application. The purpose is to showcase creative or performance art, such as visual art, music, dance, theater, architecture, and creative writing by submitting samples of work. Colleges want their classes to be made up of students with a wide variety of interests and talents. Or maybe you are applying to an architecture program and wonder how focusing on a specialty may change the requirements.

Do your homework. After you know why you need a portfolio you then need to do your research. Learn the specific requirements each school you are applying to may require. For this article, our assumption will be your goal is to develop a portfolio for art school admission. In the end, we will address some alternative reasons for developing a portfolio.

Take your time and put in the time. Ideally, students begin thinking of portfolios years in advance. Students should take as many art classes as possible. Many of my students have benefited from summer programs and portfolio development classes. Successful students have been working towards a portfolio for several years. Too often I have been approached by seniors I didn't know to ask about creating a portfolio when they haven't taken an art class. In those instances, I encourage them to go to a good liberal art school with a good art program where they can explore art on the collegiate level to find out if that is their passion and desired area of study.

Get feedback and find a mentor. A mentor can be one of your high school teachers, an art tutor, or any artist who has the time and artistic sense to provide constructive help. Your guidance counselor can and should help you in the process of selecting a college, but they do not have the background to advise on portfolios. A mentor will give you honest feedback and help you channel your energies effectively. I also recommend going to National Portfolio Day. This year due there are virtual and in-person event options.

Keep all your artwork. I have sat down with a student to review their work. In the end, I will ask to see what is left in their portfolios. In the work they saw as unworthy, I have often found some hidden gems; unfinished work, warm-up sketches, gesture drawings, experiments, etc. Keep everything you do. Don't toss it, don't give it away, don't lose it. Most of all, don't overlook something just because it was quickly executed or not "polished" work. Buy or make an art portfolio and store all your artwork in it.

Get ready to talk about your art. Being able to articulate about your ideas is very important, particularly for in person art reviews. You can get practice through class critiques and learning the Elements of Art, Principles of Design, and art vocabulary. More than that, be able to speak about how you make your art and how you travel from idea to finished artwork.

There is no exact formula or singular way to create a portfolio. However, there are some pieces of advice that I hear repeatedly. Over my years of hosting art college admission representatives at my high school and in sitting in on reviews of my student's portfolios, these are the pieces of advice I have distilled and share with you now.

Observation Students need to show artwork created from direct observation. Examples could include a portrait, the human figure, landscape, wildlife, still life, or more. Do not use photographs. A photograph flattens and distorts the subject matter. It does not give the student-artist compositional control and it translates the values. These are the very skills that colleges are looking for the student to develop. My students were surprised when a college representative told students she could spot a piece of art created from a photograph most of the time. She went through students' portfolios and proved her point, guessing correctly every time!

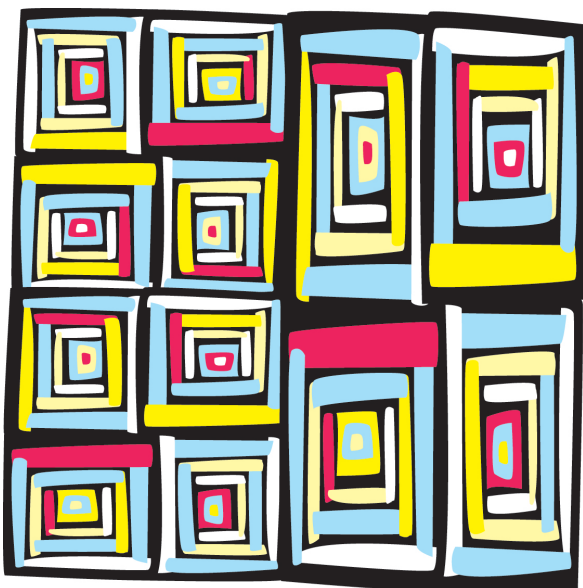
When I was applying to art school thirty years ago I needed to show drawings from life. Today, art schools still want to see drawing from life. Some things never change! When the portfolio review team looks at life drawings they are assessing your compositional choices and how accurately you can depict form, light, and shadow. These skills never go out of style and are a foundation you can build on no matter what art focus you select.



Student Voice and Originality Yet, it's not enough to be technically proficient. You can be an excellent draftsman and lack the creativity of an artist. Students should work to develop a personal style and leverage art's ability to communicate through their artwork. The Scholastic Art Awards define originality in art as "Work that breaks from convention, blurs the boundaries between genres, and challenges notions of how a particular concept or emotion can be expressed." Strive to stretch your imagination, make a statement, tell a story, or solve a problem.

My students who took Advanced Placement Studio Art Classes had the opportunity to develop a personal body of work for their Sustained Investigations. For students who don't have the opportunity to develop independent thematic work during school, make this a priority in work done at home. (You do create art on your own time, right?)

Always avoid the commonplace, the cliché, and the copyrighted. No photographs of movie stars, no peace symbols, no Pokemon, etc. You want to listen to your teachers who have been exposed to enough student work to know what is commonplace with teen artists. I often tell people if I never saw another painting of a sunset silhouetting a person (or boat or building) I'd be perfectly content as I have had my fill and I find these paintings as formulaic. I bet college admission counselors have their list of things they see repeatedly in portfolios. Your goal should be to create work that they have never seen before.



Technical Skills and Range Your portfolio work should display a range of media, styles, techniques, and topics. Having a portfolio that contains a lot of variety shows that you possess multiple skill sets. The college admissions officer will be looking for your technical skills. Do you have strong compositions? Do you handle the media effectively? Are your drawings accurate (show an understanding of form, proportion, anatomy, etc.)? I had a student who did an excellent job on a still life in class, and one college told her that one piece of observational drawing showed such excellent technical skills they would admit her on the strength of that one image alone.

Sketchbook and Process Work Process work has increased in importance in recent years. Some art schools (California Institute of the Arts and Cooper Union, for example) will require that you submit your sketchbook along with your portfolio to give further insight into how you think and ideate. Keep a sketchbook, use it and bring it with you to in-person portfolio reviews. If a sketchbook is not required, consider sketchbook pages or spreads as potential images for your portfolio.

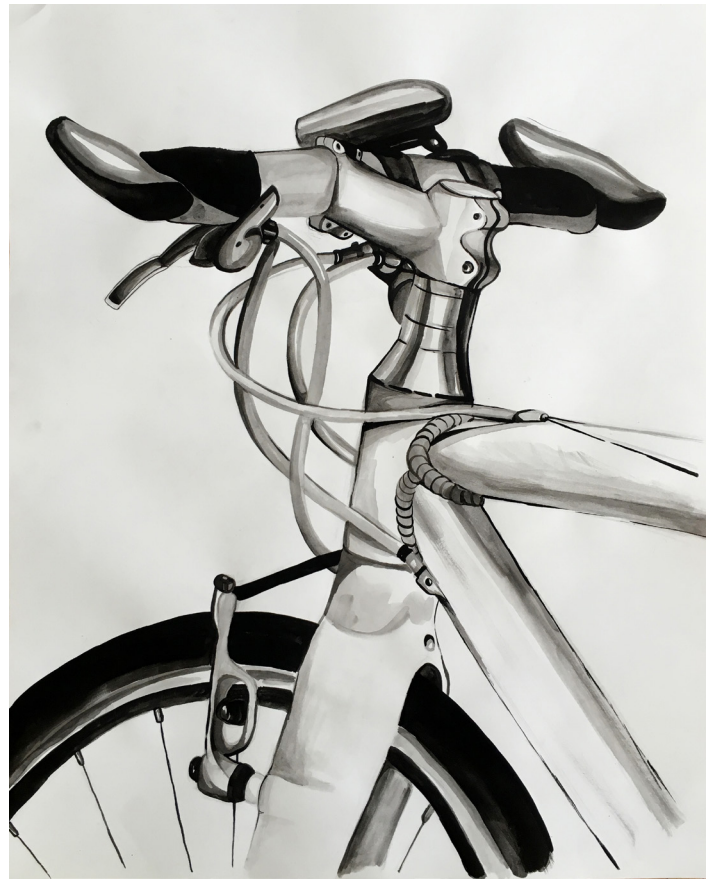
Not all work needs to be labored over and polished. I had a colleague who convinced a student to include a black ink wash drawing warm-up from a figure drawing class. They matted two together and -wow- anyone would have loved to have these hanging on their wall!



to **The Assignment** Some art schools require you to complete an assignment of your choice. Rhode Island School of Art and Design in the past required each student to submit a drawing of a bike. (RISD now gives a few choices to select from but was still including the bike as an option). Parsons School of Design requires the “Parson Challenge” as part of their requirements. The challenge involves creating a piece of artwork from a prompt they provide, a written response, and the option to include process work images. I think this helps assure that their candidates are serious and committed.

But wait! There’s More! As if it’s not enough, after you have selected your 10-20 pieces that go into your portfolio YOU STILL HAVE WORK TO DO. It’s never-ending, right? Now you must photograph, edit, label, and upload at the correct dpi. On the topic of photographs, in the days of slides, occasionally my students would hire a photographer. Once things went digital, we all took a sigh of relief. Yet, there are still things to be aware of when photographing your artwork. Blurry, dark, or blown-out photographs will not suffice. I will say, if you have a lot of three-dimensional artwork, it’s not a bad investment to hire a professional photographer. Either way, you might benefit from the **Student Guide to Photographing Artwork** at **My Art Lesson** (myartlesson.com).

You may get to the end and breath a sigh of relief. Be aware it is the start of a lifelong pursuit to push yourself to create better art. Congratulations and good luck!



Tips for Architecture Portfolios

- Consider including work that addresses spatial issues such as perspective drawings
- Strong observational work
- Visual / graphical communication
- Three dimensional work that addresses space, volume, and materials

Tips for the Graphic Design Portfolios

- You can follow all the good advice in this article for art school for a graphic design major
- Include problem solving and creative thinking skills
- Pay close attention to craftsmanship

Tips for the Fashion Design Portfolios

- You can follow all the good advice in this article for art school for a fashion design major
- Figure drawing
- Pattern/texture work
- Three dimensional work
- Pay close attention to craftsmanship