



Student Performance Q&A: 2002 AP[®] Studio Art Portfolios

The following comments are provided by the Chief Reader regarding the 2002 portfolios for AP Studio Art. *They are intended to assist AP readers as they develop training sessions to help teachers better prepare their students for submitting an AP Portfolio.* An “examination” overview assesses this year’s student performance. Following that is a synopsis of common problems, issues and successes encountered throughout the Reading, section by section. Readers are encouraged to use their expertise to create strategies for teachers to improve student performance in specific areas.

Examination Overview

This was the first year of the new portfolio structure designed to mirror the most commonly used structure of college foundation programs. AP students could choose from three exams: Drawing, 2-D Design, and 3-D Design. The change in portfolio structure was a major factor in this reading both operationally and in terms of the overall quality of student work.

In general, the readers thought that students did pretty well on the test. Though the quality of work did not appear to have maintained the steady progression that we have observed in years past, it also did not take a dip in quality. Though improvement in overall quality was flat, we also did not notice as many really poor portfolios as we expected given the new requirements. Though this generalization is challenged somewhat in the individual tests (see below) it does give a sense of the big picture. I take this all to mean that in most cases the changes in the portfolio were well understood by high school teachers and that they were able to help students focus their work in the ways outlined in the new program. It also seems clear that the students who attempt to earn advanced placement through this program gain at least some knowledge of art and use the program to develop their abilities.

The Drawing Portfolio has traditionally yielded higher quality work overall, in part at least because of its clarity and focus. Possibly also a contributor to this success is the fact that drawing can be taught very well with a minimum of tools and equipment. Further, most high school teachers understand that drawing is a fundamental art skill, and it is usually a keystone in art programs. This year's Drawing Portfolios continued the trends we have noted in the past – many strong to excellent portfolios compared to the numbers of weak and poor.

The 2-D Design portfolio quality was not terrible, but was definitely not as strong as the Drawing or 3-D Design portfolios. The central problem for everyone (teachers, students, readers and leaders) seemed to be the struggle to define 2-D Design in relationship to drawing. We looked for a clear-cut division, but could find none. In my opinion, it is impossible to completely separate the two in any meaningful and pedagogically responsible way. A single mark made on

paper is simultaneously drawing and design. Typically the readers solved this potential confusion by using a 2-D design “lens” to evaluate the work with questions such as: *Is understanding of the principles of design evident in the work? Are the principles used intelligently and sensitively to contribute to the meaning of the work? Were the elements created and used in purposeful and imaginative ways? How and what does the interaction of the elements and principles of design contribute to the quality of the work?* High school teachers can help students with the 2-D design portfolio by incorporating questions such as these into critique sessions and by encouraging students to use knowledge of the elements and principles of design to solve problems in their work.

Another aspect of the 2-D Design portfolio that was challenging was the range of media that can be used to demonstrate competence in two-dimensional design. There was the expected increase in photography and digital image making along with concurrent difficulties. Many of the photography portfolios did well in the quality and concentration sections but suffered in breadth. My impression was that photography students might not be receiving enough encouragement to experiment with a variety of approaches or methods of expressing themselves to do well in the breadth section of the portfolio. Digital image-makers showed us a different set of concerns. Generally we saw a laudable degree of experimentation with hardware and software and lots of working back and forth between various digital and analogue media in these portfolios. However, we did notice a significant amount of what in drawing might be termed “copy work” that we would like to heartily discourage. There were some instances, for example, of thinly veiled theft of *Adobe Photoshop Classroom in a Book* exercises presented as original works in portfolios. We were also discouraged by the number of students who were working with digital media in a fairly shallow way – rather than plumbing the depths of potential that exist in digital forms. As with all the other students who worked on the 2-D Design portfolio, digital and photo students must be reminded that regardless of the technology used in the portfolio, the work must communicate mastery of two-dimensional design elements and principles.

The work in the 3-D Design portfolios was, overall, very strong – an unlooked for bonus of this reading. It seemed that the hunch that we had that there were many 3-D programs that were not served by the old portfolio structure was accurate. Though there is still some work to do in relation to composing effective concentrations (see below) it appears that the high school students who are working in 3-D are being effectively taught the elements and principles of spatial composition.

Free Response Questions:

This exam **is** a free response question - but it is divided into parts that allow the graders to focus on a particular aspect of art making and assess the student's relative ability in each area. The following instructions were noted on the 2001-02 AP Studio Art Poster.

Section 1: Quality - Excellence demonstrated in original artworks - (5 actual works in the Drawing and 2-D Design portfolios, slides of 5 works, 2 views each in the 3-D Design portfolio).

Quality is evident in the concept, composition, and technical skills of your work. It can be found in very simple works as well as in elaborate ones. You are asked to demonstrate quality through carefully selected examples of your work: work that succeeds in developing your intentions, in terms of both concept and execution.

Section II Concentration - An in-depth, personal commitment to a particular artistic concern - (12 slides).

In this section, you are asked to demonstrate your personal commitment to a specific visual idea or mode of working. To do this, you should present an aspect of your work or a specific project in which you have invested considerable time, effort, and thought...

A concentration is a body of related works that:

- are based on your individual interest in a particular idea expressed visually;
- are focused on a process of investigation, growth, and discovery;
- show the development of a visual language appropriate for your subject;
- are unified by an underlying idea that has visual coherence; and
- grow out of a coherent plan of action or investigation.

A concentration is NOT:

- a variety of works produced as solutions to class projects;
- a collection of works with differing intents;
- a group project or collaboration;
- a collection of works derived solely from other people's photographs;
- a body of work that simply investigates a medium, without a strong underlying visual idea; or
- a project that merely takes a long time to complete.

Section III Breadth – a variety of experiences in using the formal, technical, and expressive means available to an artist – (12 slides, Drawing & 2-D Design, 16 slides (8 works, 2 views each) 3-D Design)).

Drawing: *In the Breadth section you are asked to demonstrate the range of your drawing experiences and accomplishments in a variety of art forms, concepts, and techniques...you must submit 12 slides of 12 different works. Detail slides may not be included. You are asked to demonstrate your ability to work on a wide variety of drawing problems. The work you submit should demonstrate that you are able to pursue advanced drawing concepts, including observation of three-dimensional subjects and work with invented or non-objective forms.*

2-D Design: *Breadth in this portfolio refers to your experiences and accomplishments in a variety of two dimensional art forms, concepts, and techniques. Successful works of art require the integrations of the elements and principles of design; you are asked to demonstrate that you are actively working with these concepts while thoughtfully composing your art....you must submit 12 slides of 12 different works. Detail slides may not be included. The work you submit should demonstrate exploration in a variety of media and approaches, inventiveness and the expressive manipulation of form, as well as a knowledge of color issues and compositional organization. You must write on each slide mount the principle or problem that each work addresses.*

3-D Design: *In this section, you are asked to demonstrate your experience and accomplishments in a variety of three-dimensional forms and techniques. Your work in this section may be additive, subtractive, and /or fabricated; may include studies of relationships among three-dimensional forms; and may include figurative, nonfigurative, or expressive objects.*

Commentary on the Free-Response Questions:

1. STANDARDS & CRITERIA

Two to three different readers using a six-point grading scale grade each section of the portfolio. Each section counts for one third of the final score. The grades are averaged and recalculated by statisticians at ETS and translated into the AP five-point scale. This system gives a balanced look at the student's work and provides an accurate assessment of his or her overall performance in art. Colleges use this score to help decide if a new student is ready to "pass out" of some foundation requirements.

The scoring rubric is a set of criteria that the graders use to guide them in assigning grades to the work. The rubric evolves from year to year, based on the experience of the Chief Reader and Table Leaders, but is not changed during the actual reading. Current rubrics can be viewed on AP Central. These rubrics give teachers a very clear picture of the standards used to evaluate students' work.

2. CRITIQUE, COMMENTS AND RECOMMENDATIONS

Section I Quality:

This section of the portfolio is an opportunity for students to show their very best, most developed work. The best work in the quality section demonstrates intentional manipulation of media in the service of a visual idea. In this work, there is a sense of confidence, visual intelligence, informed risk taking, imagination, and "voice". The student has obviously developed both their technical art skills and their creative thinking / problem solving skills. The work shows a high level of engagement with the process of making art as well as commitment and challenge. The degree to which the work demonstrates these qualities determines the grade that the student earns on this section. In less successful portfolios, the work may show strong technical competence, but lack a sense of invention or imagination. Or vice versa. It might seem purposeful and have verve, but be less resolved than one might hope to see in a student's very best work.

An average portfolio will often be a mixed portfolio - some works much stronger than others, demonstrating some technical competence, and some manipulation of ideas without the two qualities necessarily working well together. If the work addresses ideas, the student may not have the technical skills to depict them. Or vice versa.

The poorest work shows little if any evidence of thinking - solutions tend to be trite. This work often exhibits very weak command of composition and technique - the student may not have had enough experience to understand how to develop and express a visual idea.

This year, the Quality submissions in the Drawing and 3-D Design portfolios were very strong overall. We have come to expect fairly strong work in the Drawing portfolio, but truly had no idea what the quality of work might be like in the 3-D section 1 portfolios. So, it is a happy duty to report that the work here was very strong as well. The 2-D design portfolio was another story. We saw fewer 5 & 6 raw scores than we had expected to. Compared with the Drawing and 3-D Design quality sections, the 2-D Design quality work was less accomplished.

Section II Concentration:

This section of the portfolios is intended to provide students with the opportunity to work in the way that most professional artists do: on a body of work that is "unified by an underlying idea that has visual coherence." This is intended to be a prolonged and focused investigation. It should be something that is of vital interest to the student and that lends itself to the student's way of working. Perhaps obviously, the quality of the artwork and the evidence in it of the quality of the student's investigation and development play an important part in the grade the student earns.

The strong to excellent concentrations showed a clear and focused idea that remained at the heart of the work even as the idea developed. The sense of transformation in the progression of the slides is evident. These works are engaging in both form and content. They are evocative - bringing forth an aesthetic response in the viewer.

In the average concentrations, there was often a sense of a concentration that was not completely well handled or very effectively explored. Sometimes the idea of the concentration was so broad that it made it difficult for the student to do much with it. (For example: "faces" or "nature" or "pencil drawing") Though it is possible to be too narrow also, it seems that more students have trouble focusing their ideas than broadening them. It is often productive to ask students with these broad ideas for concentrations "What is it specifically about faces that interests you?" "Why choose a topic that is so well traveled in the art world, so prone to cliché?" "What do you have to say about faces that is unique?" With this kind of supportive yet challenging questioning, a student can move beyond their first ("and worst" some might say) idea to a concentration topic that is individual and engaging on many levels. Average concentrations have not perceptibly benefited by this questioning. They generally demonstrate limited investigation (translation: they weren't as interested in the topic as they thought), there is little growth in the work, or though the work might be technically well handled it's not really a concentration.

The weakest concentrations are frequently not convincing as a concentration - there is often a real sense that the student did a bunch of work in art class then made up a concentration statement to try to fit it all together. The evidence of thinking in these concentrations is generally not easy to see, and the pieces may not be very technically adept as well. It might be a good start, but just not enough work to be an effective investigation.

The concentrations in the Drawing portfolios retained the strengths that were demonstrated in the quality section. Even the weakest work we saw here was what might be termed a "high one" - i.e. though it had serious deficits, it revealed some level of investigation and comprehension of drawing issues and technique.

The 2-D and 3-D concentrations were somewhat less successful than those in the Drawing portfolio, but were also not extremely weak. We noticed less development of both idea and technique, as well as somewhat less evidence of thought. The investment of time and energy in the concentrations appeared to be lower than expected.

In the concentration section, students have an opportunity to illuminate the work with a concentration statement. Though these statements are not graded, they provide invaluable assistance to readers in looking at the work. A good concentration statement gives a clear and concise verbal accompaniment to the visual work in the portfolio. It will convey a sense of the direction of investigation in the concentration and provide insights into what the student learned in the process of doing the work. I think that it would be fruitful for students to write a concentration statement at the beginning of their work on the concentration, and then revise it

when the portfolio is due. This type of reflection over time can provide excellent insight for the student in understanding the process of their work, and can assure that the statement actually helps the readers look at the work. Further, it is advisable to type the statement whenever possible to assure readability.

The order of slides can also be illuminating to the readers. One of the qualities readers are looking for is development of skill and idea. If slides are placed to effectively demonstrate this it works to the student's benefit. Readers generally read the slides left to right, top to bottom, and a common assumption is that the more recent (well-developed) work is at the bottom. Readers adjust when this is obviously not the order the student used, but in general it is a good idea to place the slides to go with the grader's natural reading preferences.

Section III Breadth:

The breadth section of the portfolios is just what you would think it would mean - demonstration of a range of abilities with technique, problem solving and ideation.

Work that scored highest in this section showed a wide range of abilities and approaches. These students' work persuaded readers that they had an excellent command of the tools and concepts of art and thus could use them to create imaginative and engaging pieces. These works moved beyond class exercises to show assimilation of the concepts and maturity in handling them. Average portfolios were frequently varied. They might contain a few strong pieces mixed with some less successful works. They might also be of good quality, but so similar in form and content that they would be mistaken for a concentration rather than a breadth portfolio. Sometimes portfolios that were generally of good quality but were dominantly classroom exercises without evidence of individual thinking would receive average scores.

The very weakest work showed a lack of understanding of the tools and concepts of art. Sometimes the portfolios in this score range were incomplete.

The Drawing and 3-D Design breadth portfolios were generally very good. They demonstrated a range of understanding of manipulation of form and content as well as showing a variety of approaches to making art. The 2-D Design portfolios were somewhat weaker in this section – possibly attributable to the confusion and questions referenced above.

In all three portfolios, the debate continues about breadth in media or materials vs. breadth in content and approach. It must be emphasized that readers look for and honor both kinds of breadth, even though the content/approach breadth is sometimes less easy to spot. The breadth section offers a set of criteria that balance those of the concentration. In one, the student is urged to focus on a single compelling topic or mode of working, and in the other the student is urged to experiment and show versatility in idea and technique. And of course, it is impossible to completely divide breadth skills from concentration skills, for shouldn't an effective concentration show a number of approaches to the topic? And wouldn't the best work in breadth show commitment to an idea or mode of working? We are dedicated to working within this Venn diagram of overlapping concerns, trying to tease out the distinctions between them. This is not the easy way, but it is the way that is congruent with contemporary art practice and with promotion of the view that high school student artists are in fact artists and should be given as much autonomy in the structuring of their study of art as possible.

Final Thoughts & Comments:

As a first run through with the new portfolios, this year was a big success. Students and teachers obviously took to the redefinition of the AP Studio art course, and submitted overall very successful works. Having said that, there is more work to do in helping students and teachers understand the differences and similarities between the Drawing and 2-D Design portfolios. Clarity here will help more students succeed.

I can't stress enough the importance of good quality slides. At the reading, the slides are not projected; they are viewed with magnifiers on a light box. That means that if the slides look dark when projected, they will be very difficult to make out on the light box. Graders cannot fairly evaluate what they cannot see. It also means that work that fills the whole frame of the slide and is appropriately exposed is slightly advantaged because it is easier to see. I would recommend that students shoot slides over the course of the year rather than waiting until the portfolio deadline approaches to shoot them all. If slides are shot early, then those that are too dark or out of focus can be re-taken. To evaluate the slides, look at them as the readers do, with a magnifier over a light box. If you can't see the work, we can't see it either. The *AP Studio Art Teacher's Guide* has a complete description of effective slide shooting procedures. Other helpful resources include:

- *Photographing Your Artwork*, 2nd edition, by Russell Hart; Buffalo, NY: Amherst Media, 2001
- *Photographing Your Craftwork: A Hands-On Guide for Craftspeople*, by Steve Meltzer; Wilmington, DE: Crafts Report, 1997

Various tricks to “fatten up” a portfolio seldom work (and are bad karma to boot). Inclusion of un-requested, unnecessary or un-illuminating details merely annoys the readers and wastes an opportunity to include other work to help “make the case”. “Sharing” of work between students is prohibited and is often discovered. Readers have amazingly good visual memories, and we do make the effort to track down possible occurrences of this kind of cheating. Copying work or claiming someone else's work as your own also falls into this category. Don't do it.

Following the directions on the poster is vital to doing one's best on the test. For example, 2-D Design Breadth portfolios are required to note on the slide mount what problem is being addressed in the work. Surprisingly few students actually did this, but those that did benefited from increased reader understanding of their intentions for their work. Putting slides in the proper place, and putting them in right side up, avoiding shiny coverings on actual work, using neutral colored mats, etc. are all requests made of students by the program, and we really appreciate those that follow the guidelines. It makes accurate assessment of the strengths of the work easier to accomplish.