



Student Performance

2006 AP® Studio Art

The following comments on the 2006 portfolios for AP® Studio Art were written by the Chief Reader, Raúl Acero of Sage College of Albany in Albany, New York, based on the 2005 report written by the previous Chief Reader, Penny McElroy of the University of Redlands in Redlands, California. They are intended to help teachers better prepare their students to submit an AP portfolio in 2-D Design, 3-D Design, or Drawing. This document describes what should be included in each portfolio and what the Readers who evaluate the portfolios look for when they are assessing a student's work. This is followed by comments on the 2006 portfolios and suggestions for helping students submit their work.

Exam Overview

In the AP Studio Art Exam, students attempt to earn college credit and possibly advanced placement in college classes by completing a portfolio of high-quality artwork. The student selects which portfolio to submit: 2-D Design, 3-D Design, or Drawing. These correspond to foundation courses commonly found in a college curriculum. In June 2006, 102 experienced college and high school teachers gathered at the AP Reading to determine how well the students addressed this task.

The entire Studio Art Exam is a “free-response question,” but it is divided into parts that allow the Readers to focus on a particular aspect of art making and assess the student's relative ability in each area.

Composition of the Portfolios

Section I. Quality: For 2-D Design and Drawing, students submit five actual works that demonstrate their mastery of design or drawing. For 3-D Design, they provide 10 slides of five works (two views of each).

Section II. Concentration: Students submit 12 slides of works that, as a group, present an in-depth exploration of a particular artistic concern and also demonstrate growth and discovery. Some of these may be details or second views.

Section III. Breadth: This section consists of a variety of works demonstrating students' understanding of the principles of drawing or design. The submissions should display a range of

different approaches. The 2-D Design and Drawing Portfolios require 12 slides of 12 different works; the 3-D Design Portfolio consists of 16 slides of 8 different works (two views of each).

Scoring Standards

Two or three different Readers using a 6-point scale score each section of the portfolio. Each section counts for one-third of the final score. The resulting scores are then recalculated by statisticians and translated into the AP 5-point grading 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.

The "cut points" that divide each score point are set by the Chief Reader to correspond with grades the work would be likely to receive in a college foundation class (AP 5 = A and so on). Colleges use the AP grade to help decide if a new student is ready to "pass out" of some foundation requirements or if the student has done well enough to earn college credit in art. It is advisable for students who wish to earn credit or pass out of a requirement to take their portfolios with them when they leave for college. Often college faculty will withhold judgment about a student's readiness until they view the actual work in the portfolio.

The scoring guidelines are a set of criteria that the Readers use to help them in assigning scores to the work. These evolve from year to year, based on the experience of the Chief Reader and Table Leaders, but they remain constant during any particular Reading. Current scoring guidelines can be downloaded from AP Central (<http://apcentral.collegeboard.com>). Go to "The Exams," and then navigate to "Exam Questions." Select an exam (Studio Art: 2-D Design, Studio Art: 3-D Design, or Studio Art: Drawing), then scroll down to "Scoring Guidelines." Clicking on that link will cause Adobe Acrobat to launch and the PDF version of the guidelines will appear. Note: No matter which exam you select to navigate from, all of the scoring guidelines for Studio Art will be downloaded, not just for the particular portfolio you selected.

Section Assessment

Section I: Quality

This section of the portfolio is an opportunity for students to show their very best, most developed work. The strongest work in the quality section demonstrates intentional manipulation of media in the service of a visual idea; there is a sense of confidence, visual intelligence, informed risk taking, imagination, and "voice." The student has obviously developed both technical art skills and 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 score 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. Conversely, 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 collection, with 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.

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 score the student earns.

Teachers should spend as much effort and time helping students to develop creative and original concentration ideas as they do in teaching and evaluating the manual skills in their students' work. Too often Readers see facile manipulation of art materials in service to tired, clichéd ideas. It is a disservice to students to neglect the conceptual aspects of art in deference to the physical. One way to promote creative thinking is to make sure that students see and discuss artwork made by professional artists. When professional art is a touchstone of excellence in the classroom, students are less likely to fall back on well-worn ideas. Another way to promote superior conceptualization is to make this aspect of the art an important part of regular, rigorous, yet supportive class critiques.

Strong to excellent concentrations show a clear and focused idea that remains at the heart of the work even as the idea develops. The sense of transformation in the progression of the slides is evident. These works are engaging in both form and content. They are evocative, eliciting an aesthetic response in the viewer.

Average concentrations often convey a sense that they have not been completely well handled or very effectively explored. Sometimes the idea is so broad that it is difficult for the student to do much with it (for example, "faces" or "nature" or "pencil drawing"). Although it is also possible to be too narrow, it seems that more students have trouble focusing their ideas than broadening them. It is often productive to ask students with expansive ideas for concentrations the following kinds of questions: "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, students 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, however, perceptibly benefited by this questioning. They generally demonstrate limited investigation (perhaps these students were not as interested in their topics as they thought); there is little growth in the work; or although the work might be technically well handled, it is not really a concentration.

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

In this section, students are given the opportunity to illuminate their work with a concentration statement. Although these statements are not scored, they provide invaluable assistance to Readers looking at the work. A good concentration statement gives a clear and concise verbal

accompaniment to the visual work in the portfolio. It conveys a sense of the direction of the investigation and provides insights into what the student learned in the process of doing the work. It is fruitful for students to write a concentration statement at the beginning of their work and then revise it when the portfolio is due. This reflection over time can provide students with excellent insight into the process that goes into the creation of their work and can ensure that the statement actually helps the Readers to look at the work. (It is advisable to type the statement to assure readability.)

The order of slides can also be illuminating. One of the qualities Readers are looking for is development of skill and idea. If slides are placed to demonstrate this effectively, it works to the student's benefit. Readers generally examine the slides from 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 structure that the student used, but in general it is a good idea to arrange the slides to follow the Reader's natural tendencies. If students use a different scheme to present the slides, it would be helpful to have a brief description of this order included in the concentration statement.

Section III: Breadth

This section of the portfolios should demonstrate a significant range of abilities in terms of technique, problem solving, and ideation. Work that scores the highest in this section displays a broad range of approaches. It persuades Readers that the artist has an excellent command of the tools and concepts of art and can use them to create a wide variety of imaginative and engaging pieces. These works move beyond class exercises to show assimilation of the concepts and maturity in handling them.

Average portfolios are frequently varied, containing a few strong pieces mixed with some less successful works; or the submissions might be of good quality but so similar in form and content that they could be mistaken for a concentration rather than a breadth portfolio. Portfolios that generally are of good quality but are predominantly classroom exercises without evidence of individual thinking are likely to receive average scores.

The very poorest work shows a lack of understanding of the tools and concepts of art. Some of the weakest portfolios show no breadth whatsoever—betraying a lack of understanding of the concept of breadth and possibly a lack of variety in the students' experience of art thus far. Some portfolios in this score range are incomplete.

A persistent debate continues about the definition of breadth: media or materials versus content and approach. It must be emphasized that Readers look for and honor both kinds of breadth, even though the scope of content and approach 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 encouraged to experiment and show versatility in idea and technique. Of course, it is impossible to completely divide breadth skills from concentration skills; an effective concentration should show a number of approaches to the topic, and the best work in breadth demonstrates commitment to an idea or mode of working. AP Studio Art Readers 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 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.

Portfolio Assessment—2006

The 2-D Design Portfolio once more showed signs of students' and teachers' struggle to clearly distinguish between 2-D Design and Drawing. It is important to note again that AP Readers evaluate work in this section based on its design qualities. Everything that happens on a two-dimensional surface is designed. How well the work uses the principles of design will determine its score. The question arises as to how Readers score work that is both a drawing and a design. In the Drawing Portfolio, Readers evaluate the submissions from a drawing perspective, with emphasis on drawing issues and qualities. In the 2-D Design Portfolio, the design qualities of the work are considered foremost. Active engagement with the principles of design is the characteristic that is assessed. Readers noted that the work in this portfolio was quite good, even though, as in the other portfolios, it was hard to find many "upper 6" scores.

- **2-D Design Quality**

The 2-D Design quality section remained strong. Photography and digital work was commendable, with some excellent examples of design-based student work.

It is in this section that the controversy about technique versus design often arises. It is possible to create a beautifully made, technically proficient photograph and yet have this work be less than successful as an example of effective two-dimensional design. The converse is also true—a work may be a very effective design but show only rudimentary command of the medium. It is important to emphasize that the Readers are instructed to evaluate all works submitted in the 2-D Design Portfolio based primarily on successful manipulation of the *principles of design*. Most of the high-scoring work shows technical mastery as well as excellent command of the principles of design. However excellent technique alone is not sufficient to earn a high score on the 2-D Design Portfolio.

- **2-D Design Concentration**

The concentration section of this portfolio suffered from uneven understanding of the concept of concentration, as well as inconsistent development of visual ideas. Teachers might look to bodies of work by famous artists to help students understand what is meant by the phrase *development of a visual idea*. Refer to Richard Diebenkorn's *Ocean Park* series, Joseph Cornell's *Medici* series of assemblage boxes, Deborah Butterfield's horses, and Faith Ringgold's story quilts as examples.

- **2-D Design Breadth**

Last year it seemed that the students were really struggling with the concept of breadth. This year Readers reported the same thing—they saw many portfolios that defined breadth as simply many works in different media, without any breadth of approach evident. 2-D Design also receives the most portfolios that use a single medium (frequently photography) to demonstrate breadth. Though it is possible to articulate a variety of design issues in a single medium, often the students who attempt this are not really focusing on a breadth of design issues. Those who wish to execute this section in a single medium should select works in which the breadth of their approach is obvious. It is important to note that active engagement with the principles of design is a necessary component of works submitted in this section.

The 3-D Design Portfolio, although accounting for only a small percentage of the total number of exams, has in recent years been AP Studio Art's "star" portfolio. This year, however, Readers reported a drop in the quality of the work. Fewer submissions earned the top score of 6, and overall the work seemed not as focused or as engaged with design principles as in previous years. As pointed out last year, there is a consistent problem with detail slides and second views that is most obvious in this portfolio. Students often include details that are not very informative and second views that do not display much more information than the first view. This is a wasted opportunity. Second views and details that truly deliver more information help the Readers understand the work better and score accurately.

- **3-D Design Quality**

Scores in the quality section dropped somewhat this year. Ceramics remains the most popular medium, but there were some inventive pieces using different materials as well.

- **3-D Design Concentration**

Unlike concentrations in the other portfolios, the three-dimensional concentrations were generally more successful.

- **3-D Design Breadth**

The quality of work in this section was generally better than in recent years. As was noted last year, the best work in this section incorporated breadth of approach and media, but many 3-D breadth sections were still not very broad.

The Drawing Portfolio has traditionally yielded higher-quality work overall, at least in part because of its clarity and focus. Possibly another aspect of this success is the fact that drawing can be taught very well with a minimum of tools and equipment. Furthermore, most high school teachers understand that drawing is a fundamental art skill, and it is usually a keystone in art programs.

- **Drawing Quality**

As at last year's Reading, this section seemed less strong in 2006 than in earlier years, especially at the high end of the scale. Readers noted that there were fewer of the truly "stellar" portfolios receiving scores of 6, but there were also fewer truly unaccomplished portfolios receiving scores of 1.

- **Drawing Concentration**

It is clear that students and teachers are still struggling with the goals and definitions of *concentration*. The Studio Art Poster and *AP Studio Art Course Description* ask for sustained development of a *visual idea* in this section, and this was often the element that Readers found lacking in the work. They remarked that concentration statements often did not relate to the actual submissions. Many students did not provide a sufficiently strong visual concept, one able to sustain them over the course of the creation of a concentration. Teachers are encouraged to help students develop their ideas first, perhaps by emphasizing coherence and a body of work that holds together.

- **Drawing Breadth**

A comparison of mean scores shows that performance on the breadth section was somewhat lower than on the other two sections in the Drawing Portfolio. Whereas last year Readers noted more success within this section, this year they discerned weaker

execution. It seems that an accurate conception of breadth must still be emphasized to students.

Submitting Student Work

Last year the Chief Reader stressed the importance of slide quality. I agree wholeheartedly and repeat most of her comments on this issue. 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. Readers cannot fairly evaluate what they cannot see. Using the light box 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. Neutral colored backgrounds (black, white, or medium gray) are a must. If students use brightly colored backgrounds, they make it very difficult for the Readers to concentrate on their work. Advise students not to do this; it is distracting.

It is best that students shoot slides over the course of the year, if possible, 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 retaken. To evaluate the slides, students should look at them as the Readers do, with a magnifier over a light box. If the student cannot see the work, a Reader will not be able to either. The *AP Studio Art Teacher's Guide* has a complete description of effective slide shooting procedures. Other helpful resources include the following:

Hart, Russell, with drawings by Nan Starr. *Photographing Your Artwork*. 2nd ed. Buffalo, N.Y.: Amherst Media, 2001.

Meltzer, Steve. *Photographing Your Craftwork: A Hands-on Guide for Crafts People*. Loveland, Col.: Interweave Press, 1993.

“Sharing” of work between students is prohibited and is often discovered. Readers have amazingly good visual memories, and the AP Program does make the effort to track down possible occurrences of this kind of cheating. Copying work or claiming someone else’s work as one’s own also falls into this category. It is dishonest, and students should be admonished not to do it.

In recent years, the AP Program instituted an “overlap check” to determine how well students were adhering to the rule prohibiting use of the same work in the concentration and breadth sections. Readers discovered an alarming amount of this kind of cheating. Violators received a letter notifying them of the discovery of the cheating, and Readers adjusted the scores on the breadth section accordingly.

Following the directions on the AP Studio Art Poster is vital to doing one’s best on the exam. The poster is revised nearly every year, so teachers and students should read it carefully, rather than assuming that they know what is there. Putting slides in the proper place, putting them in right side up, avoiding shiny coverings on actual work, and using neutral colored mats are all requests made of students, and it is to students’ benefit to follow the guidelines. Doing so makes accurate assessment of the strengths of the work easier to accomplish.

The AP Studio Art program is a very important endeavor and one that provides me with an opportunity to serve current students and future artists and teachers. It is a privilege for me to be part of the program.

Raúl Acero