

Writing Exhibition Proposals and Letters of Intent

From the Emily Carr Institute Writing Centre

Whether you're applying to a gallery or for a Canada Council grant, your writing will have to be concise (a proposal is a form of summary), persuasive, creative, and sometimes extremely practical (some proposals require that you put forward a budget, explain in detail the kinds of materials you'll be working with, etc.). If you can think of a proposal as an artist's statement with a specific purpose and audience, it may help. The audience is usually a graduate committee, a review panel, curators, adjudicators – in other words, a group of people who are there to pass judgment on your work and (often) your ability to communicate your ideas about this work in writing.

The purpose is pretty much the same in any situation: you want to convince your audience that you have something to offer that is significantly different from other applicants. You want to provide them with a good sense of who you are, what you want to do, and how and why you want to do it.

In the case of exhibition proposals, you may have to consider how you will utilize space, what materials you will use in that space, etc. It might help to do some research into what kinds of work the gallery has shown in the past, who the curator(s) are, who is on the review panel, etc. Then think about how your work might appeal to that specific audience, the gallery's clientele, etc.

Although every proposal should be unique and specifically address your own work, your own objectives and intentions, the following ideas and key phrases may help you get started if you find yourself staring at a blank sheet of paper for hours on end!

None of this is meant to be prescriptive. Remember that while you want your proposal to stand out from the others, you also want it to be clear and concise.

Begin with a summary of a methodology or historical model that you are currently challenging, deconstructing, or working toward further understanding. Isamu Noguchi's proposal to the Guggenheim Foundation provides a good example of this tactic. It begins:

It has long been my conviction that sculpture has been too consistently employed as a medium for the idealization and glorification of man, and while it may be granted that the interpretation of the human figure will always remain its chief objective, I am nevertheless of the opinion that nature offers many another subject which would lend itself to some strange and exquisite sculptural treatment
[the entire proposal is available at the web site at <http://www.noguchi.org/proposals.html>]

When applying to the Canada Council or another funding agency, you might hit your reader right away with what it is you want to do:

" I intend to create a work with video, installation, photography and painting that will speak about men's experience with cosmetic surgery."

"I intend to create a body of work which will speak about the way images are manipulated to create a fiction, and how this fiction impinges on our experience of reality. I'm particularly interested in . . ."

Speak to your past experience, so that you have a foundation on which to build your discussion of your present and future work:

"For the past two years my work has centred around . . . been based on . . ."

"Since the beginning of my ceramic education . . ."

"From the first time I walked into a darkroom . . ."

Speak to what you're working on presently that relates specifically to what you propose to do:

"I am currently interested in . . . working on . . . working towards . . . "

"I use the more traditional mediums of painting and printmaking . . . "

"I hope to confront . . . deal with . . . explore . . . challenge . . . !"