



## Student Performance Q&A: 2003 AP<sup>®</sup> Studio Art Free-Response Questions

The following comments on the 2003 portfolios for AP Studio Art were written by the Chief Reader, Penny McElroy, of the University of Redlands, California. They are intended 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

As is always the case, the 2003 grading of AP Studio Art portfolios was a joy and a challenge. Overall, readers noted a good deal of accomplishment in the work of the students. The best work was truly thrilling to view. Generally, the quality of the work made it 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 challenges of distinguishing between 2-D Design and Drawing portfolios that were noted last year were evident this year as well. We continue to assess our reading structure and process to assure fair and accurate grading of the portfolios, especially the challenging Drawing/2-D Design distinction.

**The Drawing Portfolio** has traditionally yielded higher-quality work overall, in part at least 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. Further, most high school teachers understand that drawing is a fundamental art skill, and it is usually a keystone in art programs.

- **Drawing Quality**

The readers noted more sense of completion in the drawings in the Quality section of the Drawing Portfolio than has been the case in previous years. There were fewer studies; the work generally looked more polished. We also saw fewer incomplete portfolios this year—students seemed to be following directions on the poster more consistently. We noticed fewer of the lowest-scoring works (1s) in the Quality section, and the highest scores (our 6s) were mostly low 6s in quality. Thus, the scores on this section tended to cluster toward the middle of the scale (2 – 5). The work also looked slightly less technically accomplished than in years past: more “safe” and less experimental.

- **Drawing Concentration**

Concentrations improved slightly in quality over last year. As in the Quality section, the 6s were not as powerful as in years past, and the quality of work that earned a 1 was better than previously. We had fewer portfolios that simply were not a concentration.

Drawing students seem to effectively grasp the idea of concentration and use it to guide their work.

- **Drawing Breadth**

Quality is up slightly in this section as well. We had trouble finding 1s for standard setting. Breadth seems to be evolving away from mere breadth of media toward demonstration of more complex breadth of approach (a direction we laud).

**The 2-D Design Portfolio** was in its second year as a portfolio, and it seemed that it entered the “terrible twos” this summer. High school teachers and students appeared to be engaged in an elemental and somewhat thorny dialogue with two-dimensional design: What are you? How do we demonstrate mastery of you? How are you different from drawing? How are you related to drawing? What the heck are the readers looking for in this portfolio?

It would be nice to be able to offer unequivocal answers to these questions. Some readers have suggested that we “nail down” 2-D Design by designating specific media or exercises that should appear in the portfolio. This would certainly make this portfolio far easier to grade and likely far easier to teach. Yet the interdisciplinary nature of two-dimensional design does not permit such clarity or narrowness. For two-dimensional design is in a sense an umbrella—everything that happens on a two-dimensional surface, regardless of media, is designed. This means that a work of art that is created with drawing materials will have aspects of two-dimensional design that contribute to its success. The drawing may be well designed. It may show sophisticated positive and negative space/shape relationships. It may be visually unified. It may be visually balanced. It may use color in a creative and informed way. If so, then this drawing could also be said to be a good example of two-dimensional design.

And this, obviously, can be confusing. Is it a drawing or is it a design? In fact it is both.

So, then, how do AP readers evaluate this work that is both a drawing and a design? If it appears in the Drawing Portfolio, we evaluate it as a drawing, privileging drawing issues and qualities, i.e., using a drawing “lens.” (It should be noted however that the drawing “lens” includes composition, and 2-D Design is never absent from the evaluation of a work of two-dimensional art. However, in the Drawing Portfolio, the evaluation of composition is mingled with evaluation of such aspects of drawing as line quality, tonal values, illusory space, representation/abstraction, etc.) If the work turns up in a 2-D Design portfolio, we use a 2-D Design “lens” to evaluate the work. The design qualities of the work are considered foremost. Active engagement with the elements and principles of design are assessed. The readers ask themselves: *Is understanding of the principles of design evident in this work? Are the principles used intelligently and sensitively to contribute to its meaning? 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, by encouraging students to use knowledge of the elements and principles of design to solve problems in their work, and by presenting work in the portfolio that shows definite and obvious mastery of two-dimensional design skills and concepts, regardless of the media.

- **2-D Design Quality**

In this section of the portfolio, the readers noted slightly better work than last year; it was more difficult to find poor (1) portfolios for standard setting. At the same time, we still

saw lots of weak (2) and moderate (3) portfolios. Many of the excellent portfolios (5s and 6s) demonstrated stellar understanding of both drawing and design. Moving down the scale, the design got worse faster, sometimes maintaining drawing quality, with significantly worse design quality.

We saw increased numbers of digital work and photography in the 2-D Design Portfolio this year. And, overall, the digital/photo work was stronger in its design qualities than work in more traditional media. Perhaps this is due to the fact that two-dimensional design concepts and skills are often in the forefront in digital and photo programs and that teachers are used to using composition as a point of evaluation in works of this kind. We saw fewer examples of copied work in the digital portfolios (better karma all around) and also noted more work that extended beyond mere application of filters—making us speculate that teachers of these media are applying high standards to the work of their students. The work in photography demonstrated a similar increase in quality. We saw more well-designed photographs and fewer “snapshot” works. The Reading leadership speculates that perhaps the increases in quality in these areas may have to do with the fact that current students are very comfortable with digital means and that photography is a normal part of their lives. Having new generations of teachers who are not suspicious of these more high-tech materials is probably also having an impact on the quality of the work.

- **2-D Design Concentration**

Generally the quality of concentrations was slightly worse than last year. Excellent concentrations were harder to find for standard setting. In the 1 portfolios, application of design principles was very poor. All across the score points, it was sometimes tough to detect the involvement with design. Many seemed to be more about drawing. Conceptually (as in all Concentration sections), the works tended to rely upon trite or overused starting points.

- **2-D Design Breadth**

- The work looked slightly better in the Breadth section. Finding standards was easy at all score points, yet 1s were easier to find than 6s. As we scored the portfolio, it seemed like there was a predominance of low to mid scores. Often the range of technical and conceptual skills necessary for a high-quality portfolio was lacking. It also seemed that the students were really struggling with the concept of breadth. We saw many portfolios that defined breadth as simply many works in different media, without any breadth of approach evident.

**The 3-D Design Portfolio**, though only occupying a small percentage of the total number of exams, is beginning to look like our star portfolio. The work this year was generally strong, revealing obvious good teaching. For each of the past two years we have seen increasingly sophisticated work in this portfolio—work that belies a solid understanding of three-dimensional design elements and principles. This year we were happy to note a reduction in the number of painted chairs (a project that only demonstrates students’ abilities in surface design, not their abilities in use of 3-D space). We also noted a rise in the number of portfolios that featured architectural design, fashion design, and jewelry. Though there were excellent examples of this type of work, too often the three-dimensional qualities of the pieces were difficult to discern. Teachers can help students with this by assuring that the work is informed by solid understanding of 3-D elements and principles and by helping the students to photograph the work so that this understanding is obvious to readers.

- 3-D Design Quality**  
 3-D Quality continues to improve. Though not jumping as dramatically as two years ago, improvement seems steady. In reading for standards, we had difficulty finding enough 1s for samples. The range of media in 3-D portfolios continues to widen, though ceramics was by far still the most frequently used medium. Within ceramics, functional ceramics is still the most frequently seen type of work. Quality of the functional ceramics is improving; we did not see many 1s in this subcategory.
- 3-D Design Concentration**  
 The concentrations tended to be the strongest parts of the 3-D Design portfolios. In general, they were good—on task and of good quality. The level of artistic thinking in this section has improved. It is obvious that teachers are working on conceptual development as well as material skills. There were more “higher-end” concentrations compared to last year as well as many more mediocre ones. Overall it seemed that we had fewer 1s than in years past.
- 3-D Design Breadth**  
 The quality of work in this section was, overall, weaker than the other two areas. As in other Breadth sections, breadth of media, though easier to spot, is by itself not enough to score well. The best work in this section incorporated breadth of more than one aspect, media, approach, size, etc. One note about Breadth that may be helpful to 3-D design teachers: installation art is difficult to assess in this section. It tends to need more views to be understandable, and this may have had an impact on the scoring of the few students who included installation in their Breadth portfolios. My recommendation would be to put the installation work in the Concentration section so that readers may more easily comprehend it and use singular pieces for the Breadth section.

### 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 2002-03 AP Studio Art Poster (see the 2003-04 poster for information on the 2003-04 portfolio requirements).

**Section 1: Quality—Excellence demonstrated in original artworks—(5 actual works in the Drawing and 2-D Design Portfolios, and 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 in Drawing and 2-D Design and 16 slides of 8 works, 2 views each, in 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 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 nonobjective 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 integration 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. 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.*

***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 AND 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 "place 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 the College Board's Web site ([apcentral.collegeboard.com](http://apcentral.collegeboard.com)<sup>™</sup>). Go to "The Exams" and then navigate to "Exam Questions." On that page you will see "Scoring Guidelines." Clicking on the scoring guidelines link will cause Adobe Acrobat to launch, and the PDF version of the rubric will be downloaded to your computer.

### 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 demonstrated intentional manipulation of media in the service of a visual idea. In this work, there was a sense of confidence, visual intelligence, informed risk-taking, imagination, and "voice." The students had obviously developed both their technical art skills and their creative-thinking/problem-solving skills. The work showed a high level of engagement with the process of making art as well as commitment and challenge. The degree to which the work demonstrated these qualities determined the grade that the student earned on this section. In less successful portfolios, the work may have shown strong technical competence but lacked a sense of invention or imagination. Or vice versa. It might have seemed purposeful and have had verve but was less resolved than one might hope to see in a student's very best work.

An average portfolio was often a mixed portfolio—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 addressed ideas, the student may not have had the technical skills to depict them. Or vice versa.

The poorest work showed little if any evidence of thinking—solutions tended 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 grade the student earns.

I would like to recommend to teachers that they 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 we see facile manipulation of art materials in service to tired, clichéd ideas in the Concentration section. I think that it is a disservice to students to neglect the conceptual aspects of art in deference to the physical.

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 was evident. These works were engaging in both form and content. They were 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, it also 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, 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 had not perceptibly benefited by this kind of questioning. They generally demonstrated limited investigation (translation: they weren't as interested in the topic as they thought), there was little growth in the work, or though the work might have been technically well handled, it was not really a concentration.

The weakest concentrations were frequently not convincing as a concentration—there was 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 was generally not easy to see, and the pieces may not have been very technically adept as well. It might have been a good start, but just not enough work to be an effective investigation.

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, or at least make sure to write neatly in pen, 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 reader's natural reading preferences. If students use a different scheme to order the slides, it would be helpful to have a brief description of this order included in the concentration statement.

### **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' works 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.

In all three portfolios, the debate continues about breadth in media or materials versus 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 balances 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. 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? 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**

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. Readers cannot fairly evaluate what they cannot see. It also means that work that fills the whole frame of the slide and is appropriately exposed has a slight advantage because it is easier to see. Neutral-colored backgrounds (black, white, or medium gray) are a must. If you use brightly colored backgrounds, you make it very difficult for the readers to concentrate on your work. Don't do it. It's distracting and looks tacky.

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 retaken. 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 unrequested, unnecessary, or unilluminating 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. It’s dishonest. Don’t do it.

This year we 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. We found an alarming amount of this kind of cheating. Violators received a letter that notified them of the discovery of the cheating, and the 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. 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, and using neutral-colored mats 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.

The AP Studio Art Program offers the rare opportunity to see the dedication, creative talent, and passion for art that is apparent in the work of so many student artists and teachers. I am thankful to be a part of it.