



Student Performance Q&A: 2001 AP[®] Studio Art Portfolios

The following comments are provided by the Chief Faculty Consultant regarding the 2001 portfolios for AP Studio Art. *They are intended to assist AP workshop consultants 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. Consultants are encouraged to use their expertise to create strategies for teachers to improve student performance in specific areas.

Examination Overview

Over the past several years, evaluators of the AP Studio Art portfolios have felt that the quality of the work has increased; and this year was not an exception to that trend. The greatest number of students achieved moderate-to-good success in making and presenting their artwork, with slightly more this year submitting strong-to-excellent portfolios of work. There were relatively few very poor portfolios. I take this to mean 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. I also think it means that high school art teachers are overall quite successful in engaging even the least interested students in the process of creating art.

This was the last year for the two-portfolio structure:

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 **General Portfolio** has been the "kitchen sink" portfolio — anything that a student wanted to do that wasn't primarily drawing fit in here. This has been part of the irritation of the portfolio and also part of its strength; it is also the reason that the overall picture of the work in the General Portfolio is more variable. Our faculty consultants thought that the Quality section of the General Portfolio this year was much stronger than in years past. Though the quality of Concentrations seemed to have declined somewhat, the Breadth section also showed definite improvements notably in the 3-D/Sculpture section.

Predictably, this year we had some students who followed the guidelines for next year's three-portfolio structure. We saw a number of photography, digital, and 3-D design portfolios, for example, that had to be scored as General Portfolios, and suffered because they didn't fit the criteria for evaluation as well as they might have next year. This, in my mind, stresses the need for students and teachers to carefully read and follow the directions on the current AP poster and

in the Course Description. The poster, especially, contains up-to-the minute information about the current rules for submission.

Standards and Criteria

Two or three different faculty consultants using a six-point grading scale evaluate each section of the Portfolio. Each section counts for one-third of the final score. After the Reading, cut-off points for each grade are set, and the scores are translated into AP grades. 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 AP grade 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 faculty consultants use to guide them in assigning grades to the work. The rubric evolves from year to year, based on the experience of the Chief Faculty Consultant and Table Leaders, but is not changed during the actual Reading. The current rubrics can be viewed online at www.collegeboard.com/apcentral.

Section I: Quality

This section is an opportunity for students to show their very best, most developed work. Further, because the faculty consultants are viewing the actual pieces, more information about the work is readily available to them than works submitted via slides in other sections.

The best work in the Quality section demonstrates intentional manipulation of media in the service of a visual idea. In such work, there is a sense of confidence, visual intelligence, informed risk-taking, imagination, and "voice." The student has obviously developed both his or her 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. 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 submissions in both the General and the Drawing Portfolios were very strong overall. Faculty consultants reported that they were seeing very little of the weakest work, and much to delight them in the way of successful involvement with the technique and thinking evident in the pieces.

Section II: Concentration

This section 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.

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 most students have more trouble focusing their ideas than broadening them. It is often productive to ask students some broad questions for their Concentrations, such as, "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; the students 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. 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.

In the General Portfolio this year, there was an overall disappointing sense that the Concentrations were "mushy." The portfolios demonstrated a limited understanding of the concept of a Concentration. It seemed that not much effort had gone into the development of ideas for the Concentrations. The investment of time and energy appeared to be lower than it has been in years past.

Happily, the Drawing Portfolio Concentrations remained strong; there was plenty of very good work in this section. Students seemed to have a handle on how to construct a concentration and how to develop a body of work over time.

Students should remember that they have an opportunity to illuminate their work with a Concentration statement. Though these statements are not scored, they provide invaluable assistance to faculty consultants as they look at the work. A good Concentration statement gives a clear and concise verbal accompaniment to the visual work; 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 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 faculty consultants 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; one of the qualities faculty consultants are looking for is development of skill and idea. If slides are placed to effectively demonstrate this, it works to the student's benefit. Faculty consultants 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. Although faculty consultants adjust when this is obviously not the order the student used, in general it is a good idea to place the slides to go with their natural reading preferences.

Section III: Breadth

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

In the General Portfolio the work that scored highest showed a wide range of abilities and approaches. Such work persuaded faculty consultants that the student had an excellent command of the elements and principles of art and thus could use them to create imaginative and engaging pieces. The work moved beyond class exercises to show assimilation of the concepts and maturity in handling them. For example, in the Color/Design section, the color work was not simply in color, but was at some level *about* color. The sculpture was not just a three-dimensional image, but showed that the student clearly understood the options and limitations of work in 3-D and could use them to express clear and articulate ideas. The drawings showed a "serious and successful engagement with broad range of drawing issues and techniques."

Average portfolios were frequently varied. They might show strong work in Color/Design, but demonstrate significantly less ability in the other two sections. 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 in the General Portfolio showed a lack of understanding of the elements and principles of art. Sometimes the portfolios in this score range were incomplete, with one or more sections left blank.

Overall, the faculty consultants felt that the Color/Design section was of higher quality than it has been in the past. The Sculpture/3-D Design section continued on its trend of improvement. Drawing, however, was weaker this year than we are accustomed to seeing in the General Portfolio.

In the Drawing Portfolio, we saw the same weakness — the scores for the Breadth section seemed to cluster around the low middle. Experienced faculty consultants felt that the work was generally less accomplished than it has been in recent years.

The best work in this section of the Drawing Portfolio showed confident, serious engagement with a wide range of drawing issues. Strong evidence of thinking, successful demonstration of skill with various materials, and a sense of ambition and risk-taking marked the best of the portfolios we saw.

The average work had some of these qualities but with lower levels of success/skill/breadth. Sometimes work that was of generally good quality would receive an average score because it showed very little range of material or approach. Conversely, work that was of slightly lower overall quality but that demonstrated good breadth might receive an average score.

The weakest work generally demonstrated very little breadth. Often it was also of poor quality. If the slides were impossible to see they would also fall in this range.

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. Faculty consultants cannot fairly evaluate what they cannot 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 faculty consultants do, with a magnifier over a light box. If you can't see the work, they can't see it either. The *Teacher's Guide to AP Courses in Studio Art* 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