Photography portfolio for higher education admission
Higher education guide

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About this guide

This guide has been produced by Dr Silke Lange, Director of Learning and Teaching in the Faculty of Media, Arts and Design, at the University of Westminster.

With one of the most varied portfolios in Europe, the Faculty of Media, Arts and Design prepares students not just to enter the creative industries, but to shape and lead them. The University of Westminster has a strong reputation for professional and practice-based education which is matched by a distinguished record in academic teaching and research, encouraging the development of reflective critical practitioners.

This guide is packed with useful insight, hints and tips for students and exemplifies what a leading university regards as important to learn for A-level Art and Design students wishing to progress onto degree courses in creative subjects.

We hope the guide will be helpful to you.

Please be aware:

• the particular requirements of each university, and each course, are different.

• the guide is relevant to both AS and A-level Art and Design, but does not contain mandatory teaching content. This is featured in the AQA qualification specification.

How to develop your portfolio?

The aim of this guide is to help students develop a portfolio for applying for a degree in photography, or related media. It encourages students to produce a portfolio which demonstrates imagination, creativity and individual style. It promotes the idea of producing a printed portfolio and an online portfolio.

Why is the portfolio important?

When applying for further study in photography or related media, students will be expected to demonstrate their skills and knowledge in the form of a portfolio. Students may be asked to present their portfolio online (digital submission) pre-interview, or during an actual face-to-face interview. The portfolio should include work from previous study of the subject, i.e. self-initiated personal projects, as well as projects that were produced in addition to the assessed A-level work. For either version, it is important to include some form of narrative, introductory text or captions to provide information beyond the visual material.
What to include in your portfolio?

A portfolio is more than simply a *collection* of images. It is a way of representing the strengths, aims, and influences of your photographic work. When preparing a traditional portfolio (printed version), you should aim to keep the physical dimensions within a reasonable size (e.g. maximum A2). This will help demonstrate the overall image quality without having to carry a bulky portfolio when visiting colleges and universities. There are a number of different types of portfolios available, including boxes, folders and display books; you should choose what is most appropriate for the work.

Quality versus quantity

It is best practice to be selective in the work you present. Avoid presenting too much work – 15-25 images should be sufficient to represent the breadth and depth of work. Interviews normally run to a tight schedule, if you attend an interview with too much material to present, you may be rushed through the viewing of the work, and may not get a chance to discuss images in as much detail as you hoped.

Talking about your portfolio

It is common practice during the interviewing process to invite the interviewee to explain a little about the images. You will usually be provided with guidelines prior to the interview. For this process, you should prepare to talk about the selection of images in the portfolio:

- What is the context of the work?
- When, why, and where was it taken?
- What photographers or artists have influenced the work?
- What research has been done to produce the work?
- Is the work of a personal nature or project work?

Some students find it helpful to use captions or cue cards to remind themselves during the interview.

It is crucial to edit the images in the portfolio with a critical eye. You should only choose your best photographs, avoiding repetition, poor prints, or images that you are not happy with. It is better to show fewer images than dilute the strength of the portfolio with poor quality material.
Presentation

A portfolio which is divided into clearly signalled sections, like book chapters, can offer a better viewing experience and allows you to tell a story about your journey through / with photography so far.

It is important to include at least one photographic based project as opposed to simply presenting a collection of single images. This will demonstrate to the interviewer how well you can conceive a project, and use photography to represent the themes, issues, and arguments entailed in your chosen subject.

Due to the limited time available during interviews, it is not always possible for you to have an opportunity to show a sketchbook. However, if you feel that the sketchbook would be useful in clarifying the work or its process of production you should certainly take it with you, but be aware that there may not be sufficient time to consider it. An alternative would be for you to identify ways of including some of the material in the actual portfolio.

Online versus traditional portfolios

Most photographers these days have an online portfolio as well as a printed portfolio. So, it is not only useful for you to develop an online portfolio for applying for potential further study, but also for your professional development as a practising photographer. An online portfolio can be created as a website or a blog, using a platform such as Wordress, Tumblr, or Blogspot (all of these are free of charge and user friendly).

Here are some examples of online portfolios produced by students on the BA (Hons) Photographic Arts:

http://bythelightdivided.com/
http://ruthbridget.com/
http://www.kerimcangoren.com/
http://www.julielauritzen.com/index.html

and by alumni of the same course:

http://www.lillianwilkie.co.uk/
http://lauraedithguy.com/
Conclusion

The principles of designing an online portfolio are very similar to the ones outlined above for traditional portfolios. However, it is important to bear in mind that you would normally email a link to your portfolio on request, not having the opportunity to discuss the work. Therefore, it is advisable to include any information that would help the viewer to gain insight into the work presented in the actual online portfolio.

An online portfolio also enables you to include material traditionally included in a sketchbook. The structure of the online portfolio should be simple and easy to navigate.

To view other guides, from the University of Westminster go to: http://www.aqa.org.uk/subjects/art-and-design/Art-and-Design-higher-education-community/university-of-westminster

Research practice in Photography

This guide has been produced by the University of Westminster in association with AQA.