

Secret Door Editorial Guidelines

Please run all drafts through a spell and grammar check before submitting. Please self-edit multiple times before submitting a draft to ensure that the structure and organization of your piece is coherent, outlines a clear argument or story, and is in keeping with the guidelines below.

We are a team of volunteer editors and, unfortunately, will not be able to accept work that does not adhere to the guidelines or requires extensive editing.

Table of Contents

[KEY MESSAGING AND PRACTICES FOR WRITING](#)

[GRAMMAR & PUNCTUATION](#)

[CONTENT](#)

[STYLE](#)

Overview

The Secret Door is a Toronto-based publication of critical arts writing and accessible art.

We engage with underrepresented or niche topics in historical and contemporary art through a curious and investigatory lens, and showcase unconventional art and artists focusing on individualistic meaning.

Our Mission

To connect artists and art-lovers through a community that celebrates art and critical discussion.

Our Audience

People who want to engage with art as a reflection of humanity and who recognize the importance of art as a singular expression. People who want to hear artist's stories.

Our Tone

- **Meaningful** - We think deeply about subjects and art that interest us, have thoughtful discussions that critique society and culture, and openly share the experiences that affect us.
 - **Intellectual** - Thinking critically means examining cause and effect from a multifaceted perspective that incorporates both the empirical and the abstract in a holistic analysis.
 - **Accessible and Real** - We don't want to perpetuate the stereotypes of pretentious exclusivity often associated with intellectual art conversations.
 - **Art-centric** - If you're writing about art, don't forget to talk about the art! Many discussions within the arts and academia are about social and political issues, but we prioritize art as the subject through which to convey meaning. It should not take a backseat.
-

Our Voice

Different types of articles are written in different voices (see Content-Specific Voice), but the following should be applied universally.

- Be clear and concise. Consider what you want to say and then express it clearly.
- Nothing hateful against any demographic, obviously. Note that critiquing or engaging with challenging or uncomfortable subjects is not hateful.
- You can write about the work of cultures other than your own, but don't speak on their behalf or presume to know how they feel. Incorporate quotes or research from people with lived experience instead.
- Use the active voice whenever possible. We know that sometimes it doesn't work, but overall, opt for the active.

- Avoid jargon, social-media speak, sarcasm, and other forms of vernacular that distract from your work. The Secret Door isn't an academic journal, but it's not a Reddit post, either.
- Kill your darlings. We know you love it, but if it doesn't fit naturally, make sense, or enhance the writing, then remove it. It's usually clear when a writer has an idea for a great metaphor, analogy, pithy phrase, or something of the like, and is intent on including it no matter what.
- No clichés.
- Limit rhetorical questions.
- Don't speak in the second person unless it's the perspective chosen after careful consideration of why it will work.
- Don't use superlatives unless they're accurate, which they rarely are.
- Be direct and assertive in your writing. Cut out clunky sentence openers (It can be said that... Nowadays there seems to be... It is a proven fact that...) and get straight to your point. Cut out Maybe, A Lot, Very, So, and any other words that undermine your statement.
- Cut out words that are self-evident in the preceding word. Ex. Bad problem, future plans, uniquely special, clearly evident, a true fact.
- Reduce or eliminate passive voice. Don't put the subject after the predicate.
No: In this art movement, gestural movement and dramatic lighting were often seen.
Yes: Dramatic lighting and gestural movement were often seen in this movement.
- Do NOT write in *bucket brigade* style.

What is the bucket brigade style of copywriting?

I'm glad you asked. Because, guess what???

It's not as harmless as it may appear at first. And do you know why?

Is it because it's irritating, unprofessional, unintelligent? No.

It's because...

It's a juvenile and overly conversational style of writing in one or two-line paragraphs with a leading tone designed to keep readers scrolling down for just a few seconds longer. The goal is to increase ad revenue on a website through longer page visits, but it's become a widely used method of copy delivery that connotes sales tactics, shallowness, and poor understanding of the content on behalf of the writer.

Grammar & Punctuation

Please run all your writing submissions through a spell and grammar check before sending. We recommend the free version of Grammarly, but Google Docs is also free to use and will check for basic errors.

We follow a mix of The Chicago Manual of Style, and the Associated Press style. When in doubt, refer to the CMS. Some of the specifics and notes on often-seen grammar issues are listed below.

General Guidelines:

1. No representational-man phrases.
No: Man-made art.
Yes: Human-made art.
2. Avoid *overusing* sentences beginning with *And*, *But*, *Yet*, *In*, or *Because*.
3. Quotations should only be used if directly quoting someone. Do not use scare quotes.
4. Capital letters: Do not use capitals randomly to indicate importance.

4. Hyphens: Use hyphens to form compound adjectives or create new compound words.

Don't use them for nouns.

No: He painted a still-life in the 20th-century.

Yes: He painted a still life in the 20th century.

5. Nouns should typically follow *This* and *That*.

No: This shows...

Yes: This idea/concept/practice shows...

6. Commas: Don't split up a single clause with a comma splice; only use commas between independent clauses with a conjunction, after an introductory clause, after addressing someone, for appositives, or between items in a list.

7. Don't use a numeric value for numbers under ten unless it indicates a standard of measurement.

No: She had 1 solo show this year.

Yes: She had one solo show this year.

8. Oxford commas keep things clear. Please always use them unless the ending two items are supposed to be paired, or if they modify the previous word.

No: I love my parents, Bill and Ted.

Yes: I love my parents, Bill, and Ted. (Unless Bill and Ted are your parents.)

8. Don't start sentences with numeric values; write out the number instead

No: 8000 years ago...

Yes: Eight-thousand years ago...

9. Ensure all your sentences are complete. A complete sentence has at least one subject and one predicate, otherwise, it's a sentence fragment.

No: The basis of the work.

Yes: Colour theory was the basis of the work.

10. Don't use compound words as nouns when they should be adverbs.

No: They didn't have anytime to paint.

Yes: They didn't have any time to paint.

Style

Specifics for Writing About Art:

1. Art movements are capitalized: Impressionism, Expressionism, Renaissance, etc.
 2. Use the secular CE and BCE for eras.
 3. Art captions should keep to this model: artist's name, title of the artwork, year, medium, dimensions, followed by the location of the artwork if applicable
 4. Use italics to refer to artwork titles, titles of books, movies, catalogues, etc. Quotations marks for titles of articles, chapters, essays, short stories, poems. When in doubt, look it up according to the Chicago Manual of Style.
 5. When referring to a deceased artist, follow the name with their dates of birth and death in brackets. Vincent van Gogh (1853-1890)
 6. Write unusual or non-English terms in italics for the first use, and follow with a brief description of that term.
 7. Include images of any artwork referenced in your writing.
-

Content-Specific Voice

All types of articles should include cited images of referenced work. Those images can be shared in a Google Drive folder.

Criticism - Op-ed pieces or academic essays on historical or contemporary issues and ideas within art and culture.

We prefer topics on the more obscure or neglected areas of conversation, but if you are pitching a widely covered topic, please approach it from a uniquely critical standpoint.

All criticism essays should have a clear thesis at the beginning that is supported throughout the rest of the essay. Essays should be formatted according to the Chicago Manual of Style and written with an original perspective and thoughtful and objective research.

Please, no ill-conceived hot takes, callouts, take-downs, or scapegoaty style articles.

History

We want to hear about little-known or underexplored topics in art history, whether it's the close-reading of one painting based on intersectional research or a survey of circus clowns in 19th-century paintings.

All history essays should have a clear thesis at the beginning that is supported throughout the rest of the essay. All history essays should be formatted according to the Chicago Manual of Style and written in an academic voice that includes an original perspective and thoughtful and objective research.

Art/Life

This series includes personal essays and alternative prose. Submit your satirical essay or write about your specific experiences as an artist. The voice of these articles can use creative license when it comes to style and grammar; just don't go overboard with slang, buzzwords, and trendy vernacular.

Be brave enough to critique yourself and others and to write honestly and reflectively about your lived experience.

Don't slander anyone, and don't write about events without offering a thoughtful and personal perspective.

Interviews

Ideas for interviews or conversation pieces are welcome and should include either a request to be interviewed or a proposal to interview someone else, along with a theme or a specific topic as it relates to issues and ideas of art or art history.

A good theme or topic is crucial. We're not looking for incendiary rants – we believe that people are entitled to informed and thoughtful opinions, not just opinions in general. On the other hand, we won't accept general interviews full of easy questions in a puff-piece

style. We want to hear considerate dialogue on arts and culture from the appropriate people. The tone of our interviews is investigatory and introspective.