

So You Want To Model For Art Classes

By Ros "Close that window, can't you see I'm naked here?" Volk

I was prompted to write this hopefully handy essay when I kept having people ask about the job of modeling for art classes. This is a wholly different thing than working with an individual artist, except for the "be a professional" part. You are part of a learning experience. I have been working as a model for more than three decades and have worked hard to create a committed, reliable reputation. I had a large art and theatrical background from which to draw (so to speak). Most of my friends and roommates in high school and college were artists, as well. They discussed the importance of good models in class. Their complaint was that there were none. I toyed with the idea, but students were not allowed to pose for the school. Later on I tried again at another school and started there. I would have been thrilled if there had been something the teacher could have handed me at the time to give me a clue.

When I first started out there were not any experienced models available for advice. I had an art background, so had a basic understanding of drawing and sculpting the model. I fortunately had the opportunity to start with a very good art teacher. I met with her and she basically taught me all I needed to know about the classroom work in a very short time. Other items are things I learned over many years of trial and error and hitting on the things that work. Many others are observations that you might say are common sense. I hope this will help to give you ideas, helpful hints and encourage you to make this, if not a fun job, an interesting one.

First you need to ask yourself if you would be uncomfortable standing nude in front of a large group of strangers. If so, maybe you need to explore another line of work. Also, remember that figure drawing is not about the "perfect" body. Very few of us are blessed to be Vogue models. It is preferable for your body to have some "personality" so students have something with which to work. Modeling for art classes is hard, but can be creative. Art modeling is certainly not the most glamorous or cleanest job sometimes, but, hey, you make your own hours, you don't really have to worry about a wardrobe (though accessibility to costuming is good) and they can't teach figure drawing without us. Well, they could but what would be the point? However, it is a JOB, an important contribution to an art education. Believe me, the student and teacher will always remember the bad model and tell you all about it. They also will remember the good model who gave them inspiration.

I have come up with what I think are four important points to being an academic type model. These are (not necessarily in order of importance) the Four P's: Punctuality, Politeness, Patience and Professionalism.

Punctuality- I cannot stress the importance of being on time. Generally arriving a bit early, especially if you are working in a new place is handy. There might be paperwork that has to be filled out, finding the classroom, traffic or parking problems. This is a real job so be sure to treat it that way. If you know that you will be late due to some circumstance CALL!!!! This way they know you are coming and you don't end up running into your replacement in the hall.

Politeness- Always be polite to secretaries as well as the teachers. The office goddesses will probably know more about your paperwork than anyone. They can find your teacher, etc. Respect them and they will respect you. Introduce yourself to the instructor when you arrive and try to find out what their game plan might look like for the session so you can do your own planning. This brings me to my next point-

Patience- Remember: This is NOT about YOU. This is a learning experience for the students. You may get there and have to wait while a teacher lectures, shows slides or goes off on a tangent. Bring a book. It is not up to you what gets taught and what you might consider wasting time. You are paid from the time class starts until the end, so how much you may work in any particular class may vary widely. Do not make the mistake of assuming that since a particular teacher tends to lecture at the beginning of class will always do so. Your presence might be necessary to illustrate a point of the lecture.

If you do leave the room, make sure the instructor knows where to find you. Some instructors have trouble expressing what it is they want from you. Don't be afraid to ask for clarification.

Professionalism- It took me a long time before I considered myself a professional. I always had a professional attitude but it took longer to become proficient. The attitude that you project to the teacher and the class is important. Be polite, punctual and cooperative. Work on feeling comfortable. That will help the class feel more at ease as well. Do ask the teacher for feedback on whether the poses are working or if they have specific aims in mind. This is important, especially if you are new to modeling and unfamiliar with terms or exercises.

Following are some essential terms for you for dealing with the dreaded art class.

Gesture- you will hear this term all the time. It is just what it implies. Very short poses, generally from 5 minutes down to bare (no pun intended) seconds. These are very important exercises. Try to keep your gestures candid and expressive, exaggerated - a snapshot of a movement caught in mid motion. Watch people's movements, athletes, dancers, mimes, etc. Look at works of art for poses: Toulouse Lautrec, Degas, etc. Try to keep a picture in your head of what you are doing. Give yourself some relaxed poses as well to give yourself that 30 second break. Take 1/4 turns between poses to cover the entire class. Feel free to repeat poses in different directions, but don't let that become habit. Think asymmetrically. Some symmetrical poses are nice, but active poses tend to be more asymmetrical. Vary your height, sit, stand, crouch, lay down. Try not to be crude (and I think you know what that means) in your poses. Practice gestures. I clock myself with the microwave and am fairly accurate counting up to about 10 minutes in my head. Work on timing so you can relieve the teacher of timing shorter poses so they can concentrate on instructing students. I use a stopwatch for longer poses and generally am allowed to time my own poses. I like to give students fair warning when a break or the end of a pose is coming so they can cram what ever they need into the last couple of minutes. I will usually check with the instructor for a suggestion. I find giving a halfway mark on 20 minute and up poses and then a five or ten minute countdown. I always give them that last minute. However, there are some teachers that would rather time you themselves. That's fine, except that's how a 20 minute pose sometimes turns into a much longer pose. If you think this may be the case and you cannot hold the pose, politely ask for a time check. They might not even have been aware how much time has passed, especially if they are also interacting with students. Remember, this is not about you.

Get a prop if you wish. I find a pole, a ball and a small stool all I need for most classes and very handy for visualizing for the students. They allow me to support for myself, and provides a large variety of possible poses.

Contrapasto - This is a traditional pose in which the weight is mostly shifted to one leg. Look at many classical statues: hand on hip, one leg straight, one bent or arm behind head, hips shifted. They may ask you to add "torque". This is merely a twisting of the body to show more clearly the complexity of the body's systems.

Negative space - This is space created around and within the picture plane that is NOT the model or the environment. If you are asked to provide negative space place your hand on your hip, chair, pole, whatever; put your foot on a stool or stand astride. I use my stick for providing negative space as well as giving the student a straight line to work against. You get the idea.

Basic rules of the road:

Bring a robe, or pair of shorts or sweats. Put on your robe during break, especially if you are leaving the classroom.

Is there a place to change? Screen, restroom? These may be important questions.

Bring something to sit /stand on. Most schools and students aren't particular about the modeling stands (if there is one) or the floors. So a cloth of some sort is handy.

Watch out for thumb tacks or wet paint.

This is optional but I usually bring along things that aren't provided but come in handy: my pole, small ball, small pillows, some draping. If you have storage at the school try to stash this stuff.

Bring something to do/read. Sometimes you can spend a lot of time waiting.

Always introduce yourself to the teacher and try to get them to tell you a quick plan for the class.

Use your own knowledge of art to help you in determining poses.

Remember- This is not about YOU! You are essentially a teaching tool, albeit one with more influence than charcoal. Some models have a problem with the way in which they are portrayed in student work. These are students and the work is not about you - it is about the student learning to see. You cannot take this job personally. If you are professional in your attitude the students will appreciate you for it. They are usually more intimidated by you.

Keep the job fresh for yourself. After a week of gestures you just can't think of another thing. That's where the creative part comes in. Sometimes this is difficult when you have several hours of staring at a brick wall ahead of you. Concentration is essential.

Note: If you are made to feel uncomfortable or intimidated by someone or something in the class, *DO NOT HESITATE* to ask for a quick break. Take the teacher aside and explain the situation. If it is an ongoing problem, ask not to be scheduled for that particular class. If the problem is the teacher or another model take it to the boss. This job makes you vulnerable enough, without ignoring the very real dangers. Voice your concerns about uncovered windows, open doors, temperature (some schools do not have heaters, so find out before you go), demands for long needlessly uncomfortable poses. In the case of the poses, if you can get an idea what the exercise is supposed to accomplish, you can usually come to some kind of a compromise with the instructor. Never argue or confront the teacher in front of the class. This is very unprofessional.

Other Stuff - Teachers often complain that a model will take an unwise pose: sticking your arm out for an extended period, overly ambitious, poorly considered poses that they cannot possibly hold. Sometimes you may think you are able to hold a pose, but are shifting or wobbling around too much for students to deal with. Attempt to avoid treating this like a competitive sport. Try to be sensible in your choices. If you have taken a pose for a long time that you find is really going to be impossible, you can usually stop it, explain it was your mistake and start again. Try to catch your mistake in the first 5 - 10 minutes so you don't waste a lot of their time. However, some settling in long poses may be inevitable.

In keeping your poses not crude there is no reason to blatantly display your genitalia. Since you are already pretty much out there, there is no need to be provocative or excessive. This is not about sex, other than the fact that you are male or female. There is no one stuffing dollar bills in your robe.

Try not to stare at the students when you have a long pose. This is tough in a crowded classroom, but if you can slightly shift your view it will make the student less uncomfortable. On occasion, a teacher may want to point something out about your pose and come in close. They will generally warn you if they are going to invade your space.

One of the most frequently asked questions: What do I do when I have my period? The choice is yours. You can choose not to work. My trick is to wrap the tampon string around the tampon so it doesn't fall out and stick the whole thing in. If you use a diaphragm, that works quite well also.

Erections- These things happen. You have two choices: laugh about it or hide it. If the class laughs it will probably go away. You could excuse yourself. If this seems to be an ongoing problem, perhaps you should consider not doing this. It's hard to ignore. Professionally, I have found this not to be a problem among my male colleagues.

This gives me the perfect segue to address working with another model, same sex or otherwise. This is always your choice! A reputable school or teacher will warn you if you may be working with another model. Depending on the situation, your level of comfort, whatever, it is your choice.

Most importantly bring your sense of humor to class with you.

Well, that's all the basic words of wisdom that I can share with you. Hope it helps a bit. Talk to other models when you get the chance and find out what works for them. Good luck and Happy Modeling.