Organize/arrange the work

As soon as you know where you will be showing, visit the space if possible, or get a scale drawing to plan your show. Once you have done this, sequence or arrange the work based on the room available.

Installation, video, and performance artists often tailor the work to be site-specific. If, on the other hand, you already have the work completed, it is good to lay the work out on the floor, or lean against the walls of the gallery to help you edit and sequence it.

Take your time with this—think about rhythm, pace, direction in which your audience might walk to view the work. Sit in the gallery for some time with your work spread out around you before you decide what goes where.

Organizing factors may be size, color, or some other arbitrary feature of the work.
Our physical space

Basically, with our little gallery, you have a twenty-foot square for your SIP show, but remember the space the door and light switches use up. If you want, you could also use the balcony for larger pieces and/or the display case for some smaller works.

Some conventions in hanging

The sight line—I've heard many different standards for sight lines, but I often go with 60” from the floor, which is five feet. This will be the centerline, vertically speaking, for all wall-hung 2-D work.

To figure out where to put your nail in the wall for a particular piece, measure the height of the piece, divide in half, subtract the distance from taught wire to top of piece, then add this number to 60. If you have many pieces, you can attach a string along the wall at 60”, then work off of that.

Suspend your work—Instead of nails, sometimes work is suspended from a molding that runs along near the top of the wall with wire. Using fishing line, or wire, and little hooks, you can then suspend the work from this molding.

Labels and text panels—these should be uniform, both in layout and in terms of their relationship to the work. I put all my labels at the same height from the floor, around 48”, either all to the right, or all to the left.

Variations on the sightline

A couple of years ago I hung a show with David H. Curl—the man who first taught photography at “K”. He likes to do a variation on this sightline idea that he calls “bottom-ragged”. He hangs his work with a uniform top line, allowing the bottom of the pieces to fall where they may.

One aspect of this work that is quite pleasant—it is quicker and easier to hang since there are no calculations to do at all. David also showed me his “gallery stick” which makes this go even faster. On a 1” x 1” x 7’ piece of wood, David marked where he would like the top of all of his images to be.

He made a stronger mark, a couple of inches below that, which is where all the nails would go. Therefore, to hang his show, we first simply placed the work on the floor (leaning against wall) around the gallery for overall arrangement and side-to-side placement. Then, we approached each piece, placed the stick against the wall, and drove a nail into the wall next to the proper mark on the stick. This made quick work of hanging his show.
Even with the work centered, I think you could put inch markings on the stick to facilitate quicker measuring. I’ll keep this “gallery stick” in the photo classroom—in the corner next to the whirly-gig door, which leads into the darkroom itself. Other gallery supplies are in a bin on a rolling cart in that room.

Light the work

I like to put light on the work only, not the floor or space. Do not have the general room lights on at all, especially if they are florescent, like ours. There will be plenty of reflected light bouncing onto the floor for people to get around without bumping into one another. But, if there are any three-dimensional works on the floor, you’ll have to light these of course.

Our gallery lights can work either as spots or floods—but you have to use a specific bulb for the desired effect. Use the quality of light that works best for your pieces. With spots, you get a dramatic, bold light and very strong shadows. With floods you get just a touch softer wash of light. There are brackets that can hold diffusion material in front of the lens to soften it further if you prefer. When aiming your lights, I simply hang the light directly over the piece and point straight down. I use the movable grid members for this, about one foot inside the fixed grid.

Don’t over-light your show, use only as many lights as needed to illuminate the work. With three-dimensional work, let some shadows define the form and volume of your work. A raking light can show texture if it exists in your work. Intelligently placed, minimal lighting can help you create a sense of drama around a piece that over-lighting simply kills.

These lights are very hot, so be careful when you adjust them. Use a ladder that is also in photo classroom, never a chair, and be careful not to fall.

Repair the space when done

When your show comes down, you will have to return the space to the way you found it. There is spackle, paint, and other supplies in the aforementioned gallery kit to help you do this.

Remember that the person coming behind you has a limited time to hang and light and might very well be stressed, so please leave the space in good shape for them.