How to Write a Great Statement of Purpose

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What are the formal requirements?

• Some applications call for one statement, while others require responses to a series of six or more questions. Responses range from 250 to 750 words each. Always read the instructions carefully! When in doubt, call the department or program for clarification.

• In general, a personal statement is about 1-2 single-spaced pages (standard font, 12pt, 1” margins).

• Include your NAME and contact information on the first page.
Statement of Purpose - PhD (Economics)

When introduced to economics in high school I realized that it interestingly qualified as a subject of both Arts and Science. It was an area defined by precise rules, principles and axioms and yet there was tremendous scope for self-expression in the form of interpretation and analysis. This facet of economics intrigued me very much and I decided to pursue further studies in Economics. During my Master's program I equipped myself with various tools used in economic analysis. I obtained rigorous training in mathematics, econometrics and game theory. After completing the Master's program, I joined the National Institute of Public Finance and Policy, as I was very eager to use economics to tackle real life problem. Using various simple and complex models, I was able to decipher data that was consequently incorporated in a journal article. I have done some very interesting work, which is described in my resume. I want to delve deeper into the subject to be able to carry out independent research and analysis, hence my decision to join the Ph.D. program at the University of Illinois at Urbana-Champaign.
Statement of Purpose

I am applying to the Ph.D. program in Race and Ethnic Studies within the Social Sciences & Comparative Education Division of the University of California at Santa Barbara’s (UCSB) Graduate School of Education. My desire to attend UCSB is driven by my passion for researching the recruitment and retention of Latinos in higher education. My primary interest lies in working with Professor …..
What is essential?

• A discussion of your preparation and background
• A statement of your area of interest
• A statement regarding your research ambitions
• Your reasons for wanting to undertake graduate study
• A brief discussion of your future career goals
What makes it great?

• Concise
• Well-written
• Organized
• Relevant
• Sets you apart from other applicants (without gimmicks)
• Speaks to your audience (the admissions committee)
• Establishes your voice
What should it do?

- Articulate a clear, realistic research purpose.
- Set you apart from other applicants.
- Demonstrate evidence of relevant experience and preparation.
- Convince committee of your fit and suitability to the specific program to which you are applying.
- Convey your collegiality.
What are the component parts?

- Introduction
- Research Experience
- Current Interests and Aspirations
- Career Goals
- Statement About Your “Fit” With the Program
- Summary and/or Conclusion
1. Introduction

- A statement of who you are and where you are going.
  - This is where you should foreground qualities that make you stand out from other applicants (unusual experiences, member of an underrepresented population, first generation to attend college, etc.)

- Name the degree program, department, and school to which you are applying.
  - “I want to enter the Ph.D. Program in Chemical Engineering at Illinois….”

- Discuss the genesis and evolution of your research interests:
  - What do you intend to study in graduate school and why?
  - How did you get interested in your field?
  - What is the tie-in between your inspiration and your current research interest?
  - What is it about your field of study that motivates you to pursue a graduate degree?
  - Why is the Ph.D. your next (and only) logical step?
2. Research Experience

• The lengthiest portion of your statement.
• Showcases your research or other relevant experiences.
• Illuminates your research goals.
• Demonstrates your fluency with the discourse of the discipline.
Tips for Writing the Research Experience Section

- Discuss influences or inspirations in your development as a researcher.
- Is there a turning point or “ah-ha” moment when you realized you wanted to pursue this path?
- Do you have a summer research experience? Be sure to discuss it!
- Is there a particular researcher or teacher who inspired you to become a scholar?
- Explain how all of these research experiences are related to your current research interests.
- Convey your understanding of the subject matter that you are interested in pursuing your graduate studies in.
Organizing the Research Section

• Research can be discussed chronologically or categorically:
  • Classroom
  • Internship
  • Fieldwork

• Skills
  – What skills have you acquired?
    • Operation of equipment (-Not a list)
    • Techniques
    • Analysis/Critical Thinking
    • Developing a Research Plan

• Statement of the relation of your experience and skills to your current research objectives.
3. Current Interests

• Why is graduate school the next logical step for you?
• What do you plan to accomplish while in graduate school?
4. Statement About Your “Fit” With the Program

- What attracts you to the program?
- What particular professors from that program would be appropriate for you to work with?
- Name at least 2 faculty.
  - Include a sentence or two about each of their research.
  - NOTE: Do not apply to a program if you have not bothered to read at least some of the published work of the faculty who you will be naming.
5. Summary/Conclusion

• Don’t just regurgitate earlier sections.

• Use what has already been stated to finalize the theme.
Challenges you’ve faced: whether, how, and where to include them

• **What** was the challenge?

• **How** did you get over it?
  – What did you learn from it that will help you in graduate school.

• **Where to include this information?**
  – Introduction—or in a paragraph just after.
  – Summary paragraph (conclusion).
Addressing Inconsistencies or Challenges

- There are two schools of thought about how to deal with academic blemishes or uneven preparation.

1. Address inconsistencies head-on (don’t hope no one will notice that C-), and show how you resolved the problem (i.e., by taking the class over again or reorganizing your priorities).

2. Having one minor blemish may be forgiven, but a low grade point average will be a cause for concern.

3. Ignore negatives and focus on your strengths.

Another option: ask one of your recommenders to address the issue in her or his letter.
REVIEW

• **In general** the SOP should be around 2 pages and should tell the reader three things:
  • Why graduate school?
  • What are your ultimate professional goals?
  • Why this school? (What’s the connection?)
  • Why you? (Why you above other candidates?)
  • What makes you different/special/interesting?
  • What makes you a good FIT for this *particular* program?
Final Steps

• **REVISE**
  Revise, revise, revise. Tighten, polish, add, subtract. Be willing to make changes!

• **PROOFREAD**
  Double check spelling and grammar, polish prose.

• Ask colleagues or family to read it and to help you check for readability and catch typos, etc.

• Get as much feedback as possible from friends, mentors, TA’s, etc.

• Ask faculty mentors to read it and to advise you on any details that may be discipline-specific.
Acknowledgements

Zia Isola PhD
Associate Director
Diversity Outreach Programs
Center for Biomolecular Science and Engineering
Jack Baskin School of Engineering
University of California at Santa Cruz
Questions?