



# UC SANTA BARBARA GRADUATE DIVISION

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## WRITING YOUR STATEMENT OF PURPOSE: A BRIEF OVERVIEW

Virtually all graduate applications require some form of the Statement of Purpose (SOP), though schools may use different names in referring to what is essentially the same document. Other names include "letter of intent," "personal statement," and "personal narrative." Once you've drafted a basic document, you will be able to tailor your statement to meet the requirements of specific programs. Remember to read entrance applications carefully and be sure that the statement you submit addresses the points required by a given program. In the absence of guiding questions or prompts, you are free to submit your own statement. Be sure, however that you always cover the basics:

- your preparation and background
- your area of interest
- research ambitions
- reasons for wanting to undertake graduate study
- future career goals

### **How important is the SOP?**

Personal statements allow admission committees to distinguish between otherwise very similar applicants

Opportunity to get an advocate on the admission committee

Helps you to begin graduate study with a clear focus

### **What are the formal requirements?**

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

**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?

### **What should a Statement of Purpose *do*?**

- a. Articulate a clear, realistic research purpose.
- b. Set you apart from other applicants.
- c. Demonstrate evidence of relevant experience and preparation.
- d. Convince committee of your fit and suitability to the specific program to which you are applying.

## 5 STEPS OF THE WRITING PROCESS

1. Prewriting—open ended brainstorming
2. Outline and sequence—identifying a few main points and a logical sequence
3. Draft
4. Revision
5. Proofreading

NOTE: you should prepare a MINIMUM of *three* drafts before you consider your SOP finished!

### 1. Prewriting

Try making lists, bullet-points, and freewriting, letting your ideas flow without pre-editing them. Use the below list of “essential information” as starting points. Don’t try to answer them all at once. You will probably need more than one prewriting session; that’s fine!

#### Essential Information

- **Your purpose in graduate study.**  
“I want an MA/PhD in Ethnomusicology”; “I want a MSW”
- **The area of study in which you wish to specialize.**  
“I am interested in 19<sup>th</sup> century poetry written by American women”  
“I am interested in applications of nanotechnology in cancer research.”
- **Your intended future use of your graduate study.**  
This will include your career goals and plans for the future.
- **Your special preparation and fitness for study in the field.**  
Correlate your academic background with your extracurricular experience to show how they unite to make you a special candidate.
- **Any problems or inconsistencies in your records or scores, such as a bad semester.**  
Be sure to explain in a positive manner and justify the explanation.
- **Any special conditions that are not revealed elsewhere in the application, such as a significant (35 hour per week) workload outside of school.** This, too, should be followed with a positive statement about yourself and your future.
- **"Why this school?"** This requires that you have done your research about the school, and know what its special appeal is to you. (the faculty, laboratories, a special collection in the library, special emphases such as social justice, interdisciplinary....)
- **Above all, this statement should contain information about YOU as a person.** They know nothing about you unless you tell them. You are the subject of the statement.

## **2. The outline—finding your story**

Find an angle. Evaluate the prewriting notes and look for patterns or pieces that fit together. What is the central story?

The heart of the story is your research interests—all other elements should resonate with this

Identify a few main points or mini-narratives. Rich and reflective descriptions of one or two experiences is better than a more thorough but shallow gloss of many

Choose a logical and readable sequence—remember that chronology is not only way to tell a story

Be the protagonist of your story—remember: this is about YOU

## **3. The First Draft**

Assess how your statement accomplishes four essential actions

Articulate a clear, realistic research purpose

Set you apart from other applicants

Demonstrate evidence of relevant experience and preparation

Convince committee of suitability to the specific program you are applying to

- Clarify your language, tighten sentences, work on organization issues.
- Adopt a confident voice; try to convey a professional but personable tone.
- Root out passive language
- Show, don't tell (give examples not declarations)

## **4. REVISE**

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

## **5. PROOFREAD**

Double check spelling and grammar, polish prose.

- Ask colleagues or family to read to help you check for readability and catch typos, etc.
- Get as much feedback as possible from friends, mentors, TA's, etc.

## **BEFORE YOU SEND YOUR STATEMENT OUT.....**

Solicit input from current faculty and advisers—you should include a polished draft of the SOP with your request for reference letters.

- Be proactive—make an appointment with your advisor to discuss your draft of the SOP.
- Take your draft to your career center and ask an advisor to look it over.
- Contact the programs you are applying to ask for clarifications on the application process.
- Make changes as appropriate.

AND.....

## PERSONALLIZE, CUSTOMIZE, REVISE

NOTE: many experts advise that you write your first SOP to your top-choice program, then adapt it to other programs. I would add that you should not send the first version to your favorite school until after you have written a few others. Usually the process of adapting is a kind of reassessment of the global content and will give you insights into how to make the essay even stronger.

## NOTES:

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## UCSB Graduate Division Office of Diversity, Recruitment, and Retention RESOURCES TO HELP YOU WRITE YOUR STATEMENT OF PURPOSE

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### **Digital Resources**

#### **UCSB Graduate Division: Graduate Academic Preparation & Admission**

Advice for prospective students: <http://www.graddiv.ucsb.edu/prospectivestudents>

Coversheets for SOP and letters of recommendation: <http://www.graddiv.ucsb.edu/admissions/forms>

#### **UCSB Career Center, Bldg 599**

Be sure to visit the Career Center in person to peruse the graduate and professional school library.

HOURS: 8:30-11:45 am & 1:00-4:30 pm; Phone: 805-893-4411

#### **Tips for Writing the SOP:**

[http://career.ucsb.edu/students/grad\\_school\\_options/statement\\_of\\_purpose.html](http://career.ucsb.edu/students/grad_school_options/statement_of_purpose.html)

#### **UCSB English Department**

<http://www.english.ucsb.edu/undergrad/aftermajor/statement-of-purpose.asp>

#### **Purdue OWL**

Purdue Online Writing Lab is an exceptional resource for developing academic and professional writing skills, and offers free printable handouts covering all phases of the writing process, from outlining and research to grammar and style. Noteworthy subject headings from the OWL index include: The Writing Process; Professional, Technical, and Scientific Writing; Research and Citation; Writing in the Social Sciences. You can also find clearly organized guidelines to MLA and APA style on the OWL: <http://owl.english.purdue.edu>

#### **Statement of Purpose.Com**

A commercial but nonetheless excellent site that includes clear and effective writing advice, sample essays, and even a blog for folks working on the SOP. <http://www.statementofpurpose.com/index.html>

#### **Ten Tips for Better Writing**

Solid and succinct advice, boiled down to ten key points, from commercial site Accepted.Com.

<http://www.accepted.com/grad/tenwritingtips.aspx>

#### **Chronicle of Higher Education**

THE professional weekly newspaper of academia features in-depth news about people, events and trends in higher education. The free-access Career portion of the site (<http://chronicle.com/jobs>) is full of invaluable information for job seekers. In addition to regularly updated job listings that can be sorted by discipline, institution, or region, the site includes helpful articles on strategizing the academic job search, applying for post-docs, and even advice on how to pursue non-academic positions. Not to be missed is the regular weekly column by Ms. Mentor. It is never too early to start visiting these pages. The main site requires a subscription, but is available through any computer that is connected to the UCSB server: <http://chronicle.com>

## Two Essential Books

**Getting What You Came For: The Smart Student's Guide to Earning an M.A. or a Ph.D.,** by Robert Peters. (Farrar, Straus and Giroux, 1997). A **must-have** handbook for graduate students in all disciplines. Chapters include savvy information on evaluating institutions, writing the SOP, formulating your research design, writing and defending the dissertation.

**Graduate Admissions Essays: Write Your Way into the Graduate School of Your Choice,** by Donald Asher (Ten Speed Press, 2000). Includes chapters on method and structure and well as a wealth of sample essays. Highly recommended.

## Other Titles to Explore

- Lifting a Ton of Feathers: A Woman's Guide to Surviving in the Academic World by Paula J. Caplan
- The Chicago Guide to Your Academic Career: A Portable Mentor for Scholars from Graduate School Through Tenure by John A. Goldsmith
- Advice for New Faculty Members by Robert Boice
- Professors As Writers by Robert Boice
- What the Best College Teachers Do by Ken Bain

## Human Resources

If you have questions about writing your SOP or need assistance at any stage of the process, from help with brainstorming to having someone read a draft of your statement, please contact us:

**Joel Thurston, Grad Peer Advisor**

[thurston@umail.ucsb.edu](mailto:thurston@umail.ucsb.edu)

**Zia Isola, AGEP Diversity Coordinator**

[zia.isola@graddiv.ucsb.edu](mailto:zia.isola@graddiv.ucsb.edu)

(805) 893-4820

**Writing the Statement of Purpose for Graduate Admissions: A Prewriting Exercise**

Adapted by Andrea Fontenot from Graduate Admissions Essays: Writing Your Way into the Graduate School of Your Choice by Donald Asher (Berkeley: Ten Speed Press, 2000)

Taking the time to brainstorm and woolgather before beginning writing can save you many hours of frustration later in the writing process as well as yield a more creative, effective essay. I recommend completing the following series of questions (keeping notes on your answers) before you attempt a draft of the essay and before you examine sample essays. The questions are divided into sections in order to help you touch on each of the essential components of the statement of purpose.

In order to get the full benefits from prewriting, you must turn off your inner critic and allow your mind to entertain a wide variety of options. The questions below are designed to stimulate thought and help you cast a wide net in gathering material for use in your statement; they are not meant to imply that all of this information is appropriate for inclusion in your essay. The goal of prewriting is to generate a wealth of information that *could* go into the statement, and then later as you prepare a first draft of the statement you can rely upon your critical mind to decide what *should* go in. In answering each of these questions, try to use as much description and depth as possible—really think about your answers. And be honest. Maybe your first impression of your faculty mentor was that she was nuts, or maybe you joined this summer research project because you were broke and needed a summer job. You can include these details here, as they often lead to greater insights, even though those details would be a little *too* honest for inclusion in your final statement.

**Clarity of Purpose: Defining Your Research Interests**

1. Devil's Advocate: Divide a page of paper into two columns. On the left side define your career goal in as precise terms as possible, list reasons for your career choice—what attracts you, what you hope to gain. On the right hand side, list other career options that would allow you to pursue those goals or otherwise satisfy your vision of career happiness. Really challenge yourself to explore all of the different options: Can you think of nonacademic careers that would allow you to do the kind of work you are interested in doing? Why this department or discipline? Do other disciplines approach the subjects and issues you are interested in? This exercise will not only help you make absolutely sure that a doctoral program is the right fit for you—a very important question to ponder *before* applying—but will also help you determine what *exactly* your goals and interests are.
2. Name the single most influential concept that has shaped your approach to your field. Why?
3. Build a historical overview of how you came to the decision to apply to graduate study in this particular field. Turn it into a narrative of distinct events: What steps led you to this place? What experiences, discoveries, or misadventures affected your decisions along the way?
4. Look into the future: What career/academic goals do you want to achieve in the next five years? Be specific: Would you be done with graduate school? If so, where would you want to work—academic or nonacademic? Will you have published research? Will you have traveled? Will you have done summer internships? Now repeat this process for your goals ten years from now? Twenty years from now?

### **Setting Yourself Apart: Defining Yourself as an Individual**

5. List the most unusual things about you as a person, e.g., your family, your upbringing, travels, college experience, work experience, etc. What unique perspectives do you bring to your life and work?
6. Describe some challenges you have overcome in your life, especially with regard to your academic career. Discuss strategies you have developed for responding to adversity.
7. Describe extracurricular experiences, participation in student groups, leadership experience, group identifications, and jobs. What drew you to these experiences? What skills did you develop through them?
8. What is your most proud achievement? What enabled you to achieve this? What did you have to overcome? What does this achievement demonstrate about your personality, your values, and your potential.

Note: Even if some the answers for these questions will not go in your statement of purpose they may be useful in answering diversity related questions in your admissions applications.

### **Relevant Experience: Demonstrating Your Preparation for Graduate Study**

9. List your most significant and challenging academic experiences. How have you prepared for doctoral study? Where did you develop skills you will use in graduate school (i.e., independent research, critical thinking, writing, teaching, specific computer programs, experimental protocols, etc)? Remember you need not limit this to experiences directly related to your proposed course of study.
10. List your major research projects. If published, cite them. If unpublished give them a working title (if you are unsure if they have been published, find out). Describe the hypothesis, methodology and findings. Spell out the ramifications and (possible) applications of the research.
11. What did you *really* learn? A concept? A technique? A methodology? Emotional lessons: How to work with others? How to persevere? How to improvise? Give examples of how you learned these things.
12. If you have any relevant nonacademic (i.e., work, internships), describe them and repeat questions from #11.

### **Match to Specific Program: Doing Your Homework**

13. List the pros and cons of attending graduate school at each of the institutions you are applying to. Consider things like funding, location, and lifestyle as well as research opportunities, potential faculty mentors, and prestige. This means doing research about the schools, making contacts and asking questions. The more you know about the programs you are applying for and what in particular attracts you to them, the better you'll be at selling yourself to them.
14. Who at each school would you want to work with? Why exactly?
15. List the differences between each program's philosophy, mission, and program requirements. Give examples of how your learning style and career goals match with each.