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?)

Total Essay

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 preediting 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.

Total Essay

“I am interested in 19th 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 interest—all other elements should resonate with this

Total Essay

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, and 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.

Total Essay

• 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.

Total Essay