

Writing the Personal Statement

For Graduate School Applications

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Overview:

The Parts of a Graduate School Application

- The application form
 - ✦ Usually done online through a secure page on the school's Graduate Division website
- Academic records
 - ✦ Transcripts of all undergraduate work—some institutions will accept unofficial (always check to be sure)
 - ✦ Order well in advance; institutions charge up to \$35 for rush
- Admissions test scores
 - ✦ GRE, MCAT, LSAT, DAT, GMAT, etc. Some programs will require the Subject exam as well.
- Letters of recommendation
 - ✦ Most programs want 3; do you have your recommenders lined up yet?
- Personal statement AKA statement of purpose

What is a Personal Statement?

- Also called other things, often interchangeably:
 - ✦ Letter of intent
 - ✦ Statement of purpose
 - ✦ Autobiographical statement
 - ✦ Personal narrative

An important part of your application package:

- Provides additional evidence of your intellectual and creative achievement.
- The only opportunity for the readers of your application to get a feel for you as a person as well as for you as a student.
- The place where you can put your academic record into the context of your opportunities and obstacles.

What is the purpose?



- To distinguish yourself from other applicants
 - ✦ Who are you, and what life experiences make you different?
- To help committees recognize your particular strengths and preparation
 - ✦ Special coursework, summer research experience, industry experience, skill with protocols and equipment use.
- To help committees identify you as a candidate for certain types of fellowships
 - ✦ Regional, heritage, gender, first in family to attend college, etc.
- To express your interest in working with particular faculty.
 - ✦ Who at this institution is doing the kind of work you want to do?
- To help programs determine if you are a good fit.
 - ✦ Why this program and not another?
 - ✦ Look for guidelines specific to program and be sure to speak to questions or prompts provided in the application instructions.

The Hidden Agenda



- How well do you follow instructions?
 - ✦ If the instructions give a word limit, stay within the limit
 - ✦ If you are instructed to use a form, use it
 - ✦ If you are given questions to answer, answer them
- How well do you craft an argument?
 - ✦ You are marshalling evidence that you are a good fit for the program, i.e. you are presenting a thesis and defending it. Sound familiar?
- How well do you write?
 - ✦ The essay should be well written, well organized, and interesting to read.
 - ✦ Grammatical mistakes or errors of syntax give the impression that you are careless or didn't allow enough time for proper proofreading.

What is *Your* Agenda?



- Convince program you are well-prepared
 - ✦ Your good grades did not happen by accident. Why did you take those hard courses and study so hard?
- Convince program you have “the right stuff”
 - ✦ Use examples to show you have the will and determination to succeed in graduate school
- Convince program you have a life plan
 - ✦ Be open with your career aspirations and be convincing about how the graduate program fits with your plan

Preparing to Write the Statement



- Think honestly about yourself
 - ✦ Why do I want this degree?
 - ✦ What am I good at and what do I love?
 - ✦ What makes me “better” than other applicants?
- Check out this online advice:
 - ✦ <http://www.wpi.edu/Academics/FS/essays.html>
 - ✦ <http://career.berkeley.edu/Grad/GradStatement.stm>
 - ✦ <https://owl.english.purdue.edu/owl/resource/642/01>

One Possible Template

- **First paragraph**—who are you and what do you want?
 - × What's your major and standing, and what are you applying for?
 - MA, MS, PhD? Program name?
 - × What sets you apart, or what obstacles have you overcome?
 - First in family to go to college, re-entry student, student parent, double major in philosophy and neuroscience, triathlete, etc.
- **Middle paragraphs**—inspiration, preparation, explanation
 - × Address your reasons for wanting to be in the field, or perhaps say what experience originally captured your interest
 - × Discuss coursework, lab training, other preparation
 - × Address any gaps or problems in your record
- **Last paragraph**
 - × Draw the threads of your argument together to show the committee that you are a good match for this program
 - × Briefly discuss your future aspirations (to be a professor, to contribute to the field of stem-cell research, etc.)

The First Draft

- **Get your ideas on paper**
 - × Write it quickly; don't be a perfectionist
 - × Don't worry about typos
 - × Don't worry about organization or style
- **Get away from the internet**
 - × You have already read advice and examples; now put them away and work from your own head (and heart!)

Revisiting the First Draft

- **Let the first draft cool off before you evaluate it**
 - Good writing takes time and part of that time is just getting fresh eyes
- **Read it for content**
 - Have you covered everything you think is necessary?
 - Have you left out critical information required by the instructions of the particular school?
- **Read it for style**
 - Is my writing clear?
 - Am I getting my points across?
- **Read it for the intangibles**
 - Is my own personal voice coming through?
 - What kind of tone am I conveying?
- **When possible, get other readers to give you feedback** (peers, TA's, program coordinators, etc.)

The Second Draft

- **Edit ruthlessly**
 - **Prioritize!** Only the best and most relevant and/or compelling information stays
 - × Dull or irrelevant material must go
 - × Sometimes even interesting material must go to make way for better material
- **Aim for a professional, personal, and consistent "voice"**
 - Your voice should be yours, but also needs to be professional sounding, and should incorporate the vocabulary of the discipline.
 - Once you arrive at the voice you want to communicate in, then make sure the voice is consistent throughout the document
- **Organization and transitions**
 - Smooth connections are nice, but readers understand that you are working under strict space limitations. A well-organized essay won't need to rely on artful transitions.

Evaluate the Second Draft

- Have I improved the statement?
- Does it convey the message I intend?
- Does it speak in my voice?
- If the answer to any of these questions is no, then REVISE AGAIN
- If you think the answer is yes, then it's time to share it with readers again.

The Penultimate Draft

- Let the prior draft cool off
 - Does the document still hold up? Are you happy with it?
- Edit for grammar, syntax, spelling
 - Now you can, and should, be a perfectionist
- Choose a trusted external reader to give feedback
 - A good reader will give you useful feedback that may make you want to change things. That's why we called this the penultimate draft.

The Last Draft

- Your final document should meet all guidelines in the instructions you received
 - Create a checklist and read your essay against that
- Read to see if your voice is unified and consistent throughout
- Writing should be clear, error-free, and professional in tone.
 - Professional, not pretentious.
- Edit *ruthlessly*

Keep it real, keep it personal.

- Never, ever cut & paste from someone else's work
 - ✘ "I'll just put this in place until I can figure out how to say it" is a recipe for disgrace and disaster

Help With the Process



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For best results, email me in advance so we can schedule an appointment to discuss your essay.

- I will *not* proofread for typos and bad grammar.
- I *will* help with ESL issues.
- Best of all, I will give you feedback on structure and content and help you write a clear, compelling, and overall *awesome* statement.

RESOURCES & REFERENCES



Web-based Resources:

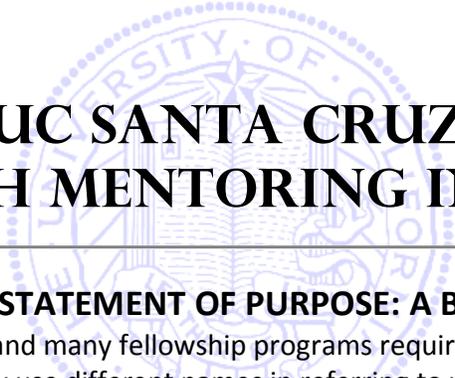
- ✦ <http://www.wpi.edu/Academics/FS/essays.html>
- ✦ <http://career.berkeley.edu/Grad/GradStatement.stm>
- ✦ <https://owl.english.purdue.edu/owl/resource/642/01>

An Actual Book!

- ✦ **Graduate Admissions Essays: Write Your Way into the Graduate School of Your Choice, by Donald Asher**

Publisher: Ten Speed Press

ISBN-10: 1580088724 **ISBN-13:** 978-1580088725



UC SANTA CRUZ RESEARCH MENTORING INSTITUTE

WRITING YOUR STATEMENT OF PURPOSE: A BRIEF OVERVIEW

Virtually all graduate applications and many fellowship programs 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." By any name, the SOP has to perform the vital function of presenting you in your best light; its job is to persuade admissions and awards committees that you a competitive candidate and a good fit for their program. The SOP is also an important tool to let committees know what is unique about you—information that isn't conveyed in resumes and transcripts.

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 (especially research experience)
- your area(s) of interest
- research interests and goals
- reasons for wanting to undertake graduate study
(or to win the fellowship/internship)
- future career goals

How important is the SOP?

- Personal statements allow admission committees to distinguish between otherwise similar applicants
- Opportunity to win 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*?

- 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.

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!

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.

PERSONALIZE, 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.

RESOURCES TO HELP YOU WRITE YOUR STATEMENT OF PURPOSE

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: <http://owl.english.purdue.edu>

UC Berkeley Career Center: <http://career.berkeley.edu/Grad/GradStatement.stm>

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.



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

Taking the time to brainstorm before beginning writing can save you many hours of frustration later in the writing process as well as yield a more creative, effective essay. 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.

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 help you determine more exactly what 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

1. 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?

2. 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. Note: Even if some the answers for the questions from this section don't make it into your statement of purpose, they may be useful in answering diversity related questions in your admissions applications.

3. 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?

4. What is the life achievement you are most proud of? 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?

Relevant Experience: Demonstrating Your Preparation for Graduate Study

1. 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.

2. 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.

3. 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.

4. If you have any relevant nonacademic (i.e., work, internships), describe them and respond to the above question (#3) again.

Match to Specific Program: Doing Your Homework

1. 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.

2. Name the faculty at each school with whom you would you want to work. Why, exactly?

3. 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.

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