



UC SANTA CRUZ

CBSE 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.

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.

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. 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>

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.