

## **Writing a Winning Statement of Purpose for Graduate School**

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1. Demonstrate your preparation for the discipline and graduate program and your research interests
2. Illustrate your fit or match for the graduate program
3. Discuss how the graduate programs contributes to your career goal/s

### **Nuts and Bolts of the SOP**

1. Well-organized
2. Concise
3. Free of grammar, punctuation and spelling errors
4. Original and interesting
5. Typically 3-4 pages, double-spaced or a specific number of characters (for example, UC Davis' is 4000 characters)
6. Break up content with paragraphs
7. Gather all of your materials, such as transcripts, résumé, test scores, etc.

### **Keep in mind...**

1. There is no one "right" way to write the SOP
2. Establish your voice
3. Exude humble confidence and be straight forward
4. Do not make excuses
5. Answer the questions
6. Turn weakness into strengths

### **Parts of a Statement of Purpose**

#### **1. How did you become interested in the field?**

A course, particular project, research project, work experience, field work, an "ah-ha moment"?

#### **2. What activities or experiences have contributed to your preparation for or understanding of the field?**

- a. Typically the longest section in the SOP
- b. Discussion of relevant experiences should include:
  - i. Research project, internship, summer job, volunteer experiences, specific course work, etc.  
*NOTE: If there are several experiences, address how they are related to each other*
  - ii. Describe what you did
  - iii. What did you learn?
  - iv. What skills, abilities, values did you gain or develop?
  - v. Relate your experiences to graduate school and your future goals

#### **3. What is your career objective?**

- a. Master's degree, research Ph.D. or professional Master's or Ph.D.?
- b. Sub-discipline or sub-field?
- c. Career goal of professor, industry, private practice, public service or other

#### **4. What are your research interests?**

- a. Discuss topics of interest of you
- b. Identify topics or subfields you are interested in pursuing
- c. Place your topics into a larger context
- d. Discuss 2-3 topics, but not too many interests as to appear unfocused
- e. Make clear how your research interests parallel those of the faculty in the specific graduate program or others for interdisciplinary work
- f. **Include a paragraph/s personalized for the specific graduate program**
  - i. Review specifics of each graduate program from websites
  - ii. Write a different personalized statement for each graduate program

- iii. Identify a research area, institute, faculty member/s or special program
- iv. Illustrates you have “done your homework”
- v. Shows you have researched the graduate program
- vi. Highlight your fit with the program

**End results – Graduate admission committee members should be able to:**

- See your development and preparation over time
- Determine your research interests in the field of study
- Clearly see your fit with their graduate program

***If you have difficult circumstances***

- Include in body of the essay
- Turn negatives into positives
- State issue concisely and move on; no more than 2-3 sentences

***From DePaul University, Preparing Personal Statements For Graduate School & Professional Programs  
– with slight modifications by Cal Poly LSAMP Faculty Director Jane Lehr***

**To Do –**

- DO take time to think about who you are and the experiences that have shaped your life.
- DO look at an open-ended essay as an opportunity to tell admissions committees about you, but go beyond the facts that are conveyed by other parts in the application.
- DO allow yourself plenty of time to brainstorm and rewrite your essays.
- DO tailor and adapt an essay for each specific program you are applying to, unless it is to be submitted to multiple schools via a centralized application service.
- DO mention possible career paths, interests, professional goals, and explain why you are ready for an advanced degree in this field. Prove you have the work ethic, commitment, and resilience necessary to succeed.
- DO recognize potential changes in your plans for graduate study, be realistic and flexible; and convey that in your statement.
- DO be specific; be sure to back up all statements with examples and concrete evidence. Remember: show, don't tell.
- DO research your programs and schools. Ask yourself if there are certain values expressed in the program or aspects, such as a thesis, that intrigue you.
- DO have someone proofread your essay for you, if they have questions or something is unclear, the admissions committee will probably experience the same confusion.
- DO answer all parts of the prompt. DO stay within the word or character count. DO frequently save your document in multiple locations.

**Don't Do –**

- DON'T forget to have a thesis or theme that is woven throughout your essay.
- DON'T be cliché or use generalizations; i.e. “I want to be a doctor to help people.”
- DON'T submit a personal statement with spelling and punctuation errors.
- DON'T mention political or religious affiliations unless necessary or relevant.
- DON'T make up stories, exaggerate, or lie on your personal statements.
- DON'T make lists of accomplishments. Instead elaborate on (some of) them with examples and stories highlighting your skills and experience.
- DON'T write in the third person. First person is always best. DON'T sound defensive or arrogant. Tone is key.
- DON'T start each sentence with “I.”
- DON'T (just) mention names of professors you hope to work with, highlight your areas of interest.
- DON'T have your essay focus too much on others. This is about you.