

Writing Your Statement of Purpose

Length: Typically 1000 words, (~2 pages, single spaced). Sometimes shorter or longer. May be submitted either by mail or online - check application for specifics.

Purpose:

Graduate schools may ask for a “Statement of Purpose” or “Personal Statement” or several other variations. Some may ask you to answer a specific set of questions. However, they will all want to know:

- What you want to study, and why.
- Your experience in the field.
- Your future plans, once you have the degree.

Before you write your Statement of Purpose:

- Investigate each program you’re applying to
- Which faculty members are in your field of interest?
- What have they published recently?

First paragraph:

- Essential for making a strong first impression.
- If your application goes to a committee, one member may read the entire application, but most likely the rest will read the first paragraph and skim the rest.
- Paragraph should be 4-5 sentences summarizing your entire statement of purpose.

Primary content:

- What led you to this field? Avoid long anecdotes about your childhood, but describe what appeals to you about this discipline.
- What experience do you have that contributes towards your success in this field? Work experience, research experience, internships, publications, life experiences, etc.
- What research interests you? Give one or two topics within your discipline that you’d like to research, preferably interests that match those of the program’s faculty. (Yes, your interests are likely to change over time – they know this – but this helps the acceptance committee get a sense of how you’ll fit in to the program.)

Show, don’t tell. Describe your relevant experience and accomplishments.

- “I looked at your program and think it’s fantastic. I’d love to be a part of it.”
vs.
- “My lab experience in materials research seems suited to Professor Woodruff’s work on synthesizing germanium nanowires.”
- “I have a strong work ethic, and can be trusted to work tirelessly for your program. I’m hard working, creative, and dependable.”
vs.
- “I spent six months working on a project for the Center for Adaptive Optics, designing and testing different processor arrays to determine which would be the most suitable for our proposed tomography engine...”

Non-content: (Don't include these)

- “Your campus is beautiful and I’ve always wanted to live on the east coast.”
- “I spent four years on my college’s intramural soccer team, and I love to cook.”
- It isn’t that programs don’t want you to be well rounded; it’s that on the graduate level you need to demonstrate a focus on your individual field.

Providing hyper-specific goals can both help and hurt you.

- “I’m interested in studying under Margaret Reinelt and aiding her research on the female religious experience in Medieval Iceland.”
 - Pro: If this is your specific goal, and Professor Reinelt can take on another graduate student, this statement can help you get exactly what you want.
 - Con: If your goals are genuinely more flexible than this, and Professor Reinelt doesn’t need another student for her research, you’ve just given the program a reason to choose someone else.
- How to navigate this problem? Be honest with yourself and the program about your desires, communicating your flexibility while still sounding focused.
 - “I plan to focus my studies on the Medieval period, with an emphasis on the Scandinavian and Icelandic regions. It was Margaret Reinelt’s work on the female religious experience in Medieval Iceland that initially attracted me to your program, as well as Robert States’ writing on European Historiography.”

Other tips:

- Yes, this is about you, but it’s not an autobiography. Not every sentence should be an “I…” statement. Talk about your field of interest and paint a portrait of that field with you in it.
- Remember, they already have the rest of your application – you don’t need to summarize it.
- Don’t apologize for your application’s shortcomings, or make excuses for them.
 - This only draws attention to your application’s worst features.
 - Instead, focus on your positive qualifications.
 - If there’s something that genuinely requires an explanation, you may want to address it, but keep it short.
- When writing multiple Statements for different schools:
 - Universities don’t compare notes, but a cookie-cutter essay is obvious.
 - Write a unique essay for each program – talk about specific people, programs, etc.
 - You can (and probably should) re-use many ideas, but don’t cut and paste large sections.
- Get feedback. As much as possible.
 - Professors in your field can give valuable feedback on content.
 - Professors outside your field can give feedback on style and clarity.
 - Friends and family members can spot grammar and spelling errors that everyone else has missed.