

How to Write a Winning Statement of Purpose



The Statement of Purpose plays a major role in graduate school admissions. This is the only area of your application that allows you to express your goals and achievements (and most importantly, how those goals and achievements have prepared you for the position or program) to selection committees and faculty members. The statement is used as a way to distinguish applicants—if students are equally considered across the other components of the application packet, the statement may be used as a final determinant for admissions.

Getting Started:

Determine your fit for the program

Fit and match is one of the most important factors that programs consider when reviewing applications.

- Get **complete** information about the program and institution to which you are applying. What are the program's philosophy, outcomes, and goals?
- What types of research are being conducted in the program? What academic opportunities are offered or required?
- Make sure your interests match that of the program and institution to which you're applying! If you are not able to effectively demonstrate this, you will be rejected.
- Consider your discipline-specific experiences, skills, knowledge, or abilities relevant to the program. Direct experience in your field of interest is a HUGE component!

Determine your purpose in writing the statement

The purpose of a personal statement is to persuade the admissions committee that you are a highly qualified applicant. You want to show (through examples and specifics) that you have the ability, experience, and motivation to succeed in your field. A few things to keep in mind:

- Pay attention to your "purpose" throughout the statement so that extraneous material is left out.
- Pay attention to the audience (committee) throughout the statement. Remember, your audience is made up of faculty members who are experts in their field. They want to know *that* you can think as much as *what* you think.

Determine the content of your statement

Fully analyze the essay questions or prompts and answer and/or address all parts. Typically, graduate and professional schools are interested in the following:

- *Your purpose in graduate study.* Why do you want to go to graduate school?
- *The area of study in which you wish to specialize.* This requires that you know the field well enough to make such a decision.
- *Any specific advisors with whom you'd like to work or projects you wish to work on.* Consider this collaboration from both perspectives—the value-added for you and what you have to offer.

- *Your future use of your graduate study.* This will include your career goals and plans for your future.
- *Your special preparation and fitness for study in the field.* This is the opportunity to relate 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, justifying the explanation. Remember to frame it in the context of a challenge that you've overcome and have grown from. Most importantly, be brief – this should not become the focus of your statement.
- *Any special conditions that are not revealed elsewhere* in the application such as a large (35 hour a week) workload outside of school. This too should be followed with a positive statement about yourself and your future.
- You may be asked, "Why do you wish to attend this school?" This requires that you have done your research about the school and can articulate "why" you've chosen to apply.
- Do any attributes, qualities, or skills distinguish you?
- If there is a separate *Personal History Statement* and/or one of the prompts asks you to specifically discuss your unique history, ask yourself:
 - How has my life influenced who I am today and my present and future goals?
 - Do I maintain any strong beliefs or adhere to a particular philosophy?
 - What is my strongest, most unwavering personality trait?
 - How would my family and friends characterize me?
- Above all this, the statement is to contain information about you as a person. They know nothing about you that you don't tell them. *You* are the subject of the statement.

Organize your Ideas and Write:

Consider what they are looking for and organize your content

This is a STATEMENT OF PURPOSE, which means it is a document that clearly explains your purpose with respect to your intended field. Be mindful of what the document is and how it is used by admission committees. The committee needs to first see you as a scholar before they see you as a person—they need to recognize your abilities, level of scholarship, academic commitment, and passion to the field first and foremost.

- ***PAY VERY CLOSE ATTENTION TO THE SPECIFIC PROMPTS AND QUESTIONS THAT YOU ARE ASKED TO ADDRESS!!!*** You may also consider the following general prompts:
 - *What are my academic and career goals? What is my purpose and motivation to achieve these goals?*
 - *Why have I chosen this specific program at this school?*
 - *Why am I an excellent candidate for this program?*
 - *What preparation and personal attributes do I have that demonstrate I will succeed?*
 - *How will I contribute to the program, lab, or institution, and how will I contribute to the discipline?*

- Free write – get what’s in your head on paper.
- Organize the information you’ve written, paying close attention to recurring themes.
- Further organize the information paying attention to the prompts.

Determine your approach and the style of the statement

There is no such thing as "the perfect way to write a statement." There is only the one that is best for you and fits your circumstances. With that being said, there are some things the statement **should not** contain:

- Avoid the "what I did with my life" approach. You want to present yourself as a scholar, as someone ready for the next step.
- Equally elementary is the approach "I’ve always wanted to be a _____." This is only appropriate if it also reflects your current career goals.
- Also avoid a statement that indicates your interest in a particular field as being purely personal (e.g. I’m interested in psychology because of my own personal psychotherapy or a family member’s psychological disturbance). While this may have been the motivation for your interest, it is neither the reason nor the *specific* future direction of your goal.
- Do not use jargon.

These are some things the statement **should** do:

- It should be objective yet self-revelatory. Write directly and in a straightforward manner that tells the reader about your experience and what it means to you.
- It should form conclusions that explain the value and meaning of your experiences such as: (1) what you learned about yourself; (2) about your field; (3) about your future goals; and (4) about your career concerns.
- It should be specific. Document your conclusions with specific instances or draw your conclusions as the result of individual experience. See the list of general *Words to Avoid Using without Explanation* listed below.
- It should be an example of careful persuasive writing.

WORDS TO AVOID USING WITHOUT EXPLANATION

significant	satisfying	meaningful
invaluable	satisfaction	useful
appealing to me	I can contribute	helping people
interesting	it’s important	meant a lot to me
exciting, excited	rewarding	feel good
appealing aspect	valuable	I like to help
challenging	fascinating	stimulating
enjoyable, enjoy	gratifying	remarkable people
I like it	helpful	incredible
	appreciate	

Writing Exercise to Generate Content

1. Free-write short paragraphs recalling and analyzing the following:
 - A. Relevant past experiences.
 - Pick a memorable accomplishment in your life. What did you do? How did you accomplish it?
 - What sort of important activities have you engaged in? With whom? What role did you play?
 - What research experiences have you had? What was your role? Responsibilities? How did you carry it out?
 - What factors have influenced your decision to attend graduate school? How will graduate school affect your next steps?
 - B. Your academic and career goals.
 - What career have you chosen? What factors formed this decision?
 - What evidence shows that this is a correct choice? Consider how can you show that this choice is realistic (personal experience is a good place to begin).
 - How will your academic program get you there?
2. Now look over your paragraphs. What themes emerge? What factors and influences stand out?
3. Looking at what you have found, consider your audience (the program). What might be important to them and how they view you as a candidate? What is important, what is extraneous?

NOTE: You will undoubtedly have more material than you can use. This is good, but you need to make strategic choices. Be concise and particular. This is your first impression – make it count!

Putting it all Together:

Evaluate the tone and flow of your statement

- Do the first few sentences set the appropriate tone for the rest of the statement?
- Are you too chatty? Too verbose?
- Is your introduction too personal, too general?
- Have you been specific and concise?
- Does your statement flow from sentence-to-sentence, from paragraph-to-paragraph, and from start to finish?
- Do your conclusions draw naturally from the previous paragraphs?

Evaluate the mechanics of your writing

- Pay very close attention to grammar and spelling errors. Don't rely on the spell check on your computer – remember it checks for misspelled not words used incorrectly or typos (e.g. I realized I had to not only math his example, but exceed his expectations. The word should be match but since math is a word & is spelled correctly, spell check will not alert you to the error.)
- Keep your statement to a reasonable length and if a page or word limit has been established, do not exceed it!

Evaluate the impact of your statement

- Is your statement enjoyable to read?
- Does it represent you in the way you want to be represented?
- Does it reflect your abilities as a scholar?
- Does it convey a sense of excitement and focus?
- Does it emphasize your abilities and potential for:
 - Creativity
 - Integration
 - Research
 - Synthesis
 - Critical Thought & Analysis
- Have you provided concrete statements and examples?
- What about your overall statement makes it memorable?

Seek feedback, edit, and rewrite

- Have others read your statement and seek critical feedback.
 - Provide drafts to your faculty, mentors, and letter writers and ask for their comments.
 - Consider creating writing groups with your peers and help evaluate one another's work.
 - Seek out programs on campus that can provide feedback on writing.
- Write multiple drafts, and provide ample time for editing and rewriting.