UNIVERSITY OF MARYLAND (HTTPS://UMD.EDU)

Writing a Statement of Purpose

Tips on writing an SOP - by Arun Vasan

Universities in the US appear to believe that the logical end of education is enabling an individual to think on her own. This is why they ask you for a "personal" statement to give an account of experiences which you believe helped you decide to apply, your expectations from graduate school, what you propose to do in school.... Of course, the typical personal statement is not so personal, and is usually edited by half a dozen people at least.

The main idea behind this exercise is to give the admissions committee an idea of what to expect from a prospective student apart from her scores, GPA, and letters of recommendation. Who would've thought that actually asking a student to tell what he thinks of himself was a good idea ? The SOP, though it sounds unparliamentary, is a crucial part of the application process and needs a lot of time and effort.

I have put a few points down with my tongue firmly in my cheek. These are CS specific, but may apply to other disciplines as well. There are sharp differences of opinion among the graduate student/ professor community as to what makes an SOP tick. I take responsibility for neither the grammar nor the contents of this page. Use these tips at your own risk.

In case you are wondering, NO, I am not jobless. Yeah, I know, my soul just cries out to be blessed. Now, now, wipe the tears of gratitude, and prepare for the most enlightening sermon you will hear about grad school admissions.

Algorithm S

- 0. RTFAF: Read The Fine Application Form. Don't write a one-size-fits-all-univs SOP.

UNIVERSITY OF MARYLAND (HTTPS://UMD.EDU)

- 2. Tell what you intend doing with your degree. Inevitably, this boils down to a suitable permutation of words from the set {creative, career, industry, academia, research, professor, university, lab,startup}.

- 3. Avoid hot air. Adjectives like thrill, passion, excitement, joy, etc., should be avoided like the plague. Explain what you expect from grad school. Of course, we all want a job, but try putting it down as politically correctly as you can.

- 4. Avoid quotations. You may have "miles to go before you sleep", "chosen the road less travelled", or "your-favourite-cliche-quote-from-high-school-here", but it ain't a personal statement unless you are quoting yourself, is it ?

- 5. Use simple English. Resist the temptation to use your new-found vocabulary from the GRE word lists.

- 6.Describe your experience. Don't say you were introduced to CS as a suckling infant, you started speaking in Python before your mother tongue, yada, yada, yada... No one actually cares for your experience as a kid, so keep it brief.

- 7. The most important experience you would've had would be your undergrad. Of course, I mean academic work. As an aside, I firmly believe that the day you really graduate is the day you realise you wasted four years. Describe your coursework tersely.

- 8. Explain a select few projects you did in gory detail and why that got you interested in research. This is a point of much debate. Personally, I like explaining things in detail while many people prefer "high level" stuff. The catch with my way is that you could say something blatantly wrong and possibly screw up your chances completely. Again, I feel that if someone knows what the hell she is talking about, she should be confident enough to sell what she did. I suggest you show your SOP to profs, preferably those who are writing your letters, to make sure you are not shooting yourself in the foot with amazing accuracy.

- 9. Articulate why you choose to work in the area you want to work on. For example, kernel hacking gives you the high, your best buddy is the memory allocator, etc., so you want to work in O/S. Or, you increase your treadmill speed like TCP increases its **cwnd**, you do a packet sniff to find out protocols used instead of chatting in a messenger, your concept of networking is making computers talk, so you want to work in networks. In particular, it will be ideal if it was something you did best. I've heard of a case where someone said the thing she did best was cooking. The story goes she baked a cake and sent it to the admissions committee. Harvard, rumour has it, fell hook, line, and sinker for this. The professors in CS@UM (mailto:CS@UM) most likely don't care for your culinary expertise, in case this gives you ideas.
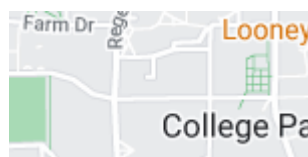
UNIVERSITY OF MARYLAND (HTTPS://UMD.EDU)

things like "I like theory, systems, AI, and NC very much. Graphics and Software, a little less".

- 10. Once you've explained why you like some area(s), explain how you will fit in with work being done in *that* univ. Say how you, Prof.Foo, and Prof.Bar can attain the holy grail of networking together. You should appear in awe of them, yet appear indispensable to their work. Avoid mentioning persons alone, i.e., qualify a professor by the group he leads/is part of. You can rest assured any CS prof will be part of some group with what she thinks is a cool abbreviated name. This way you won't antagonise a rival professor in the same area who actually sits on the committee.

- 11. Market yourself with concrete statistics. I won't believe it myself if you claim you are the second coming of Knuth. It is very unlikely that the profs of a dept. will. After all, it is their fate to have seen a billion SOPs before yours and see many more after yours. That said, mention things like "I was ranked in the top 0.123% of the FOO exam conducted by the BARs." exactly once.

- 12. Try being humorous without sounding like a clown. Wit is something which really can't be forced into writing. So it is perfectly fine if you write something totally serious as long as it is cogent and forceful. Finally, finish off with a flourish.

- 13. If (you aren't sick and tired) goto step 0.

- 14. Stop reading this page this minute and go work on your application.

I most definitely assert my rights to be identified as the author of this work in accordance with all known, unknown, and yet-to-be-framed copyright laws of this planet. Any resemblance to work produced by a certain Don of the west coast is entirely intended. © Arunchandar Vasan.

Explore Grad

View Department Office Contacts (/contact)

UNIVERSITY OF MARYLAND (HTTPS://UMD.EDU)

University of Maryland

8125 Paint Branch Drive

College Park, MD 20742

main phone: (301) 405-2662 (tel:+13014052662)

Web Accessibility (https://www.umd.edu/web-accessibility) | Privacy Notice (https://umd.edu/privacy-notice)

(https://www.cs.umd.edu)