

So you've decided to apply for graduate schools. Congratulations, you've now realized that you will be required to write a Statement of Purpose, or as it's affectionately called, a SOP. Your SOP is arguably the most crucial piece of document you need to submit. This 2 page, ~1000 page essay has the power to make or break your chances of getting an admit.

I'll be writing my advice on how a SOP should be. I am basing this on my own experience and successful application process. I hope these points help in your SOP writing process.

### **1. Start early:**

One doesn't write a SOP in one sitting. Writing a SOP is an iterative process. You will have to improve on it multiple times. I understand that you are very proud of your first draft. You might even think it's perfect. Sorry to burst your bubble, but in all probability, you aren't a Wordsworth. Feel proud of your essay? Ok, put it down for the day. Come back to it the next day. Save your drafts, and at the end, when you read your first draft, you will no doubt feel embarrassed. You not only would need to fix the grammar, but SOP writing involves making crucial decisions on the sentence formation, flow of the SOP and points included in it. Submitting your first draft of your SOP is equivalent to a neural network being satisfied with its very first guess. Since you require multiple edits, start early. How early you might ask? As early as possible. First do your due diligence. Shortlist the programs you'll be applying for. Ascertain the aspects of the selected programs that attract you. Figure out which professor(s) would you like to work with if given the chance. Decide if you want to go for a Masters or a PhD. Then start writing ASAP.

### **2. Introspect:**

Building on the previous point, your first draft is like an unpolished diamond. I consider a first draft to be a verbose collection of the most important points of your life (both professional and otherwise). At this juncture, I recommend taking a step back. Start introspecting on all your life decisions. Why did you take up this bachelor's program? When was the first time you thought about doing this? Is there any childhood experience that may have contributed to this decision? Why did you do what you did in your bachelor's (your projects, your extra-curriculars)? What made you happy and what frustrated you? Why do you want to go to graduate school? What would you like to accomplish? There would be a common link driving your decisions, Find that! That's the most important aspect of your SOP! These questions will help you answer the following questions:

- a. Short term motivation for graduate school
- b. Long term motivation/ ambition in life
- c. The reason behind your choices

### **3. Connecting the beads:**

Paraphrasing a quote from a very experienced woman, a SOP is like a necklace joining the beads which are your life experiences. Your SOP should feel connected. Each major point should be in its own paragraph. Each sentence should connect with the previous sentence and transition into the next sentence. Your SOP should be smooth. Paragraphs should not feel

disconnected. This might seem like a very difficult task but realise this, the entire SOP is about one and one person only: You. Hence, it is not as hard as it seems! It just requires some effort.

#### **4. SOP: Not a verbose, extended CV**

Your SOP should talk about you. Yes, your achievements are important. Yes, your project may be very cool. Include that in your CV. In a SOP, the reader is more interested to know about you. The journey you undertook in the process. The reason behind selecting the project, what you learnt in the process (not just the technical stuff but the non-technical stuff too), what failures you encountered and what did you learn from it, how did the experience shape you as a person you are today. This has 2 advantages: One, since you talk about yourself, it becomes much easier to connect the figurative beads I mentioned above. Two, talking about yourself is 100% more interesting to the reader than about your projects, which one can already get from your CV. Simply repeating accomplishments that are on the CV won't count as "stand out" material. Universities want to see the aspirations and interests that drove those successes.

#### **5. Show and Tell:**

This is my favourite point and mantra for me. This is a common advice given to make good writers great. "Show, don't tell" describes writing in various forms with an emphasis on using and showing actions in order to convey your point instead of just stating facts (i.e verbose CV).

By showing the actions, relationships and feelings instead of just telling the reader what happened, the writing comes off as deeper, and more meaningful. This creates a much deeper connection and encourages a keener engagement with your story. By first showing and telling, you give both objective facts and compelling descriptions of your achievements. In this way, you can give life to your SOP without losing the content. I remember this example:

- I wrote compelling news stories for the new app and increased readership by 10%. In the end, I attracted over 40 thousand Millennial readers. (Just telling)
- I changed the way I wrote news stories by using chunks of simple verbal expressions to guide readers through long articles. (Just showing)
- For the new app I used chunks of simple verbal expressions to guide readers through long articles; employing this method attracted over 40 thousand millennial readers and significantly increased readership. (Showing and *then* telling)

#### **6. What do you bring to the table?**

Welcome to the cold, hard world of capitalism. Your admission to a university is an investment by the admission committee. By giving you the seat, they are denying admission to someone else. So in a contest between two equally talented individuals how would the committee decide between the two? Simple, based on which candidate is more likely to contribute to the university in the future. So help them out! State the things you bring to the table. Be confident, be frank. Talk about your ambition and goals! Universities like ambitious answers with a touch of realism.

#### **7. Write for the best**

Write the SOP aiming for the best university. Your absolute dream university. Think of it like this: If Stanford accepts you, everyone else will obviously take you in!

#### **8. Tailor your SOPs**

That being said, in your SOP, tailor it for the given university you're applying to. Answer the questions - What made you choose to apply to the university, What things in the program excited you, courses you wish to do, people you want to work with, etc.

#### **9. Hook Line and Sinker**

Understand that the admission committee looks at thousands of SOPs every year. This becomes quite boring really fast. Like the age old adage goes: "The first impression is the last impression", most readers would already have made a heavy judgement bias within your first paragraph of your SOP. Hence it is vital that you start your SOP with some flair and pizzazz. Grab the reader's attention! If they take the bait, then it's just a matter of reeling them in with your fantastic points.

#### **10. Third-party Review**

After a hundred reviews, your SOP would by now have become the apple of your eye. You might think it is perfect and capable of no wrong. Don't let it fool you. Get it reviewed by two-three confidants. Choose people who are more experienced than you, ideally people who have gone through this admission process, your parents, etc. A word of caution, do not share your SOP with just about anyone. Be extremely selective about the people you trust. Don't tempt fate by sharing it with friends who are applying with you, unless you trust them 100%.

All in all, I hope these 10 points would have helped you in your SOP writing process. In the end, I'll like to mention that I do not believe in paid agencies writing SOPs on your behalf. After all, no one knows you as well as yourself and that will be reflected in your SOP. Don't take the easy way out. SOP writing is a very enlightening process and it helps one discover more about themselves. Don't cheat yourself of this opportunity.

All the best!

Saksham Consul