

A written statement of purpose is a standard requirement for graduate school admission. It is a tool for the faculty on graduate school admissions committees to assess the knowledge, experience, motivation, intellectual maturity and readiness of applicants to pursue graduate education at their institution. The statement of purpose is a crucial component of the graduate school admissions process. It can determine whether an applicant is accepted or rejected, irrespective of their other qualifications. This document outlines the 5 stages that a graduate school applicant should go through in order to write an impressive and successful statement of purpose.

Stage I: Do your Homework

1. Browse through the websites of the schools/departments/programs of interest to you. Obtain brochures and booklets and read through them carefully. Highlight the aspects of the programs that appeal to you.
2. Read up on the research interests and projects of the faculty in the schools/departments/programs. Read publications from a faculty of interest.
3. Browse through recent articles from the research field of interest and try to get a general understanding of how the field developed and what are its current problems and challenges.

Stage II: Reflect and Brainstorm (on paper)

1. Reflect on your intellectual development.
 - What and when were the major moments in your life that have led you to your current research interest(s) and school/department/program?
 - What or who influenced your decision or interest (i.e. role models)? What quality about them appealed to you?
2. Why did you choose your research topic(s)/field/school?
3. Why did you choose your undergraduate major?
4. What are your career goals?
 - Where do you see yourself in 10 years?
 - What do you hope to accomplish?
 - What drives you? What motivates you?

Stage III: Outline your Statement of Purpose

1. From the results of Stage II, determine a central theme/topic that stands out or dominates your reflections and brainstorm.
2. Using bullet points and brief comments/statements, organize your reflections and brainstorm ideas that strengthen the central theme/topic of your statement of purpose.
 - Concentrate on your life experiences and give specific examples.
 - Put down only those things that excite you.
 - Do not make things up!
3. Your outline should cover these areas and, preferably, in this order:
 - What aspects of the school/department/program appeals to you?

- What are your research interest(s)?
- How did you become interested in your current research topic/area?
- How did you prepare or are preparing to address the issues in this research area/topic (i.e. research experiences, courses, etc.)?
- What are your future goals for graduate school (i.e. Ph.D.)?
- What are your career goals (i.e. professorship)?
- What characteristics of the school/department/program can help you accomplish your goals?
- What positive aspects do you bring to the school/department/program?

Stage IV: Write Draft of Statement of Purpose

When writing your statement of purpose:

- Always use positive language when referring to yourself.
- Give detailed, but concise examples.
- Use transition words, sentences and paragraphs. Your statement must read smoothly.
- Skip a line after each paragraph.
- Refrain from starting neighboring paragraphs the same way.
- Avoid using vocabulary that you do not know.
- Refrain from repeating yourself.
- Have strong opening and closing paragraph.
- Stay within the 2 – 3 page limit!
- Thank the admissions committee for their time at the end of your statement of purpose.

Stage V: Ask for Critique, Revise and Edit

1. When you are finished with your draft statement of purpose, read it out loud to yourself and make corrections.
2. Ask friends, colleagues and professors to read your edited draft. Taking their comments into consideration, revise and edit your draft.

Do:

- Explain something about yourself, your self-discipline, time management skills, motivation, and drive for seeking a graduate degree in your field.
- Mention scientific accomplishments that you are particularly proud of and why. Try to explain to the committee how you evaluate yourself in terms of accomplishments and productivity.
- Try to present a clear and well-thought-out idea of who you are and what you would like to do in graduate school.

o Briefly introduce a general problem of interest to you (why would anyone care?), and then get to the specific area of your interest.

o Explain what you would like to accomplish with regard to resolving some open question. BUT don't come across as dogmatic, or claim that you're going to solve any of the world's problems! (see DON'Ts below)

- **IMPORTANT:** Specifically mention any faculty members that you would like to work with, and whether you have contacted them about the possibility of working in his or her lab.
- Explain why you think that lab or graduate program is a great place and would be a good fit for what you are looking for from your graduate education – i.e., what are the specific reasons that you are applying to THIS program as opposed to any other?
- Explain what your ultimate career goal is (e.g., a GIS analyst, resource manager, faculty position at a major research university, etc.).

Don't:

- Take more than a couple of pages to make your point. Admissions committees have to read a couple hundred of these things, and the statements that make a compelling case for acceptance in 1-2 pages are MUCH more successful than ones that ramble for 5 pages (and are never read to the end because they are too long!). On the other hand, don't shoot off a statement that is only 1 or 2 paragraphs long either!
- Have any typos, spelling mistakes or missing punctuation. Like it or not, writing is an essential part of being a successful scientist, and a poorly written statement is always a red flag to admissions committees!
- Try to be cutesy and tell nice stories about how your love of squirrels and dolphins as a child has led you to want to save the world. This is a career path that you are trying to pursue, and attempts at being overly cute or humorous are almost always considered unprofessional.
- Claim that you'll solve some global problem. Individuals can only ever do a small part by ourselves, and although we can each advance knowledge about the natural world, we're just not going to solve some burning problem by ourselves in grad school. If it were that simple, someone would have probably done it already!
- Appear to be too set in your ways. You want to convey an interest in an area and show that you've given it some serious thought, but not come across as dogmatic or stubborn (if you can, communicate to your prospective adviser about a possible project, and describe that in your statement).

- Say anything negative about anyone or anywhere else. No one wants to hear you put down the program or advisers at another college (even if they agree with you), and being negative simply belittles your application.