

THE PHD

SOP STARTER KIT



How to write an SOP that
makes grad schools say...

“YES!”



THE PHD
SOP FORMULA

by Jordan Dotson
Founder of Writely.com

Imagine something for me.

Imagine holding an essay in your hands. You've just written it, and honestly, you're amazed. It's organized, powerful, and persuasive. It just *feels right*. Your research goals are clear and luminous. Your potential as a PhD student...*it's all right there*. And as you read it, you're suddenly eager to hit "submit"—what is this weird confidence?—because you know this SOP is sharp, intellectual, and shows admissions committees that ***you're truly one of them.***

Imagine sitting back with a happy sigh, proud in the knowledge that you wrote this. Proud of yourself and all you've accomplished. Proud that professors at your target universities will see you for the devoted researcher you are.

Can you imagine that? Cool feeling, isn't it?

With a smart, sophisticated SOP, you'll experience this feeling. You'll escape the anxiety trap most applicants fall into, and instead, submit with absolute confidence, knowing that you've written exactly what admissions committees want to see, and that you've made yourself ***as competitive as possible.***

The 4 Questions

To start engineering this powerful SOP, there are four important questions you need to answer. As long as you answer those 4 questions somewhere in your SOP, admissions readers will know you're...

- **Fiercely intelligent,**
- **Self-disciplined, and...**
- **Qualified**

Let's answer these questions one-by-one. When you're done, you'll be ready to write an SOP that proves you can ***lead*** research projects in the future, and thus, that you ***deserve admission.***

QUESTION

01

What are my research questions?

The most powerful step you can take right now is to get clear on your **research questions**—the central intellectual topic of your candidacy. This one step will put everything into motion.

I'm sure you already have a few ideas—or too many—about topics you'd like to research. But, the best applicants ALWAYS frame these interests as *questions* or *focus problems*.

These questions are the topic your target schools want you to write about because the faculty and PhDs reading your SOP...*they've dedicated their lives to these questions*.

It's also the topic you should be excited to write about. You're going to be investigating these questions for the next five years after all!

Bad Example (No Questions or Focus Problems)

"My ambition to continue learning new skills, exploring the scientific method, and learning more about the molecular world has resulted in my decision to pursue a degree in the Biomedical Sciences Program at Gotham University."

Good Examples

1. "Although I can already work as a medical researcher, the questions I hope to investigate require more rigorous training. To what extent can we use approaches like transcriptome sequencing to improve diagnostic yield for disease? How to better analyze sequencing data to improve our ability to detect balanced structural variants and non-coding variants and, more importantly, to establish their causality for diseases?"
2. "Current literature does not fully explain how racial diversity's cognitive benefits and challenges promote a more collaborative world. Thus, I aim to investigate the roles of focal public spaces and environmental inequity on cognition, belongingness, and social welfare and the complex interaction between these social phenomena and their impact on our lives."
3. "Today, as a hopeful PhD student, I am excited to expand this work in robotics for industrial applications by improving autonomous arm manipulation and interaction. I am interested in exploring how to combine physical sensors with visual feedback for state estimation and inference for manipulation, and how to take inspiration from humans to explore non-conventional means of managing internal arm impedance."

What are your research questions?

Write 1-2 sentences describing the questions/problems that interest you most:

QUESTION

02

Why am I interested in pursuing these questions?

The best applicants have a story that makes them memorable in the admissions pool. It isn't an autobiography. It isn't a life story. Instead, it's a mature, factual account of how they discovered their research questions.

Think of this as "the story of how I discovered my *current* research agenda and why I think these problems are important."

Don't let yourself get stuck by dwelling in emotional themes like passion, inspiration, or motivation. Everyone who applies is passionate, inspired, and motivated. Instead, your task is to think of an experience from your research or academic work that illustrates why these questions—not the field in general, but your *questions*—are worth investigating.

Bad Example (Non-Research Background)

"Throughout my life, I have always been interested in medical science, particularly cancer treatment. To pursue this goal, I chose to major in Molecular Biology at Gotham University. Today, I apply for a PhD in Biophysics to learn more about drug development and how to create better treatments and patient outcomes."

Good Examples

1. "While working as lead engineer of the AGV team at Katara, a vertical farming start-up, I developed three versions of an environmental sensing AGV for scale. Amongst the fragrant Canadian blueberry plants, I experienced many facets of novel robotic design, and discovered a passion for research development. Today, as a hopeful PhD student, I am excited to expand this work in robotics for industrial applications by improving autonomous arm manipulation and interaction."
2. "Two years ago, I was given the opportunity to participate in a joint research effort between the El Salvador Ministry of Health and the National Science Foundation REU program to explore the success of El Salvador's family planning program. Coming from an underserved community whose health needs were rarely met, and where narratives from community members' culture of origin—including my own—tainted information regarding contraceptive methods with myths and biases, I was inspired to learn about how the Bukele administration had embraced modern family planning."

Why are you interested in pursuing these questions?

Write 2-3 sentences explaining how or why you've chosen your focus problems:

QUESTION

03

How will this PhD program help me answer my questions?

One thing that's just as important as dreaming up your big research questions is to look at your target universities and ask: How am I actually going to investigate these questions?

- Which professors am I going to work with?
- Will I have to take any classes first?
- Which specialization or concentration will I choose?
- Which labs, archives, or other unique resources will be useful?

Good applicants know these answers.

In fact, this is often the biggest difference between "great" and "average" applicants. Plunk either into a research program and they'll all work hard. But when they submit their SOPs, it's the focused, detailed, and thorough applicants who shine brighter.

Bad Example (No Specific Detail)

"I believe the cutting-edge laboratories and world-class faculty at Gotham University will be the pivotal next step in helping me achieve my goal of saving the world with AI."

Good Examples

1. "The PhD program in Community Health at Gotham University would uniquely empower me to explore my research questions, given the university's exceptional strength in both public health and the study of Asian-American communities. Those in public health often exalt the field's interdisciplinary nature, and the CH program truly lives up to this by building an outside minor right into the curriculum; with my interests inextricably linked to Asian-American and gender studies, I would embrace the opportunity to formally weave these disciplines into my public-health education through a sociology minor. Similarly, the Wayne School features an array of faculty and research centers specializing in immigration, race, and gender, a telling sign that my own research directions would have ample support."
2. "I am quite interested in the research of Prof. Lucius Fox, who expressed enthusiasm for my proposal in our preliminary meeting. Prof. Fox's research on audit culture, masculinity, and belief systems in contemporary China, and how they regulate in global time, makes him an ideal mentor for me. In particular, his anthropology fieldwork in Chengdu, a celebrated city for the rise of contemporary Chinese art, proves that his guidance will be enlightening as I reexamine my country's urban-visual representations with both anthropological and multicultural lenses."
3. "Gotham University will be the ideal place in which to explore these issues. Courses such as *CS1568: Solving Computational Games* will provide a strong initial foundation, allowing me to explore three concepts that I expect to be vital to my PhD work: regret minimization algorithms, subgame solving, and game abstraction. Later, *CS1758 Machine Learning and Game Theory: Advanced Topics* will improve my understanding of multiagent reinforcement learning for both complete and incomplete information scenarios, while highlighting practical applications like bidding strategies in spectrum auctions and Stackleberg security games."

How will this program help you answer your research questions?

Write 2-4 bullet points outlining target faculty & key program features:



QUESTION

04

What convincing proof do I have that I'm 100% ready to pursue these questions as a PhD candidate?

The final piece in your SOP puzzle is proving to the admissions committee that you're a real researcher. Luckily, that'll be easy, right? You know how hard you've worked. Now, we just have to make sure your reader knows too.

When answering this question, think of it as a highlight reel. It's NOT an expansive and detailed list of everything you've ever accomplished. That's what the resume/CV is for! Instead, this is your *Greatest Hits* album. It's a description of your most unique skills and achievements—the accolades that prove you're *better in comparison to other applicants*.

What Should I Include?

Feel free to pick and choose from any of the items on the page below. Discard the ones that aren't relevant to your research questions, and focus on the ones that really make you shine.

RESEARCH EXPERIENCES

Which previous research gigs or independent studies are most relevant to your new goals? Choose the 1-2 *most important* and explain *how* they've prepared you to lead your own projects.

GRAD-LEVEL COURSEWORK

Did you take any relevant graduate classes? Did you make As? Did they give you skills that'll be useful in your research? Awesome. DEFINITELY mention that.

AWARDS AND HONORS

Did you receive any official awards which prove you're more prepared than other students? Publications? Fellowships? Phi Beta Kappa?

GRADE POINT AVERAGE

What was your undergrad GPA? Your major GPA? Were they impressive? Good, let's mention those. They show that you worked harder than your peers.

TECHNICAL / LABORATORY SKILLS

Are you a wizard with Python, Ruby, and Shell? Are you experienced with cell and tissue cultures? Electrophoresis? Data visualization? Or, perhaps you speak a foreign language that will help you in your research?

INTERNSHIPS / CAREER EXPERIENCES

Have you had any internships or job responsibilities related to your goal? Have you led engineering projects or learned to adjust to ever-changing deadlines? How were your experiences different from other applicants'? How have they prepared you for this next step?

What proof do you have that you're 100% ready to pursue these problems as a PhD candidate?

Outline 1-3 paragraphs that explain your “Greatest Hits”:

Congratulations!



Now, you're on your way. At this point, you've defined:

1. Your research questions
2. Why you care about them
3. How this school will help you investigate them
4. Why you're qualified to investigate them

That, my friend, is what we call an argument. Now, outlining your SOP will be easy.

Of course, I have strong feelings about *how* to structure that outline (which you can [see here](#)). But really, as long as you answer all four questions, you'll be WAY ahead of the game.

The fact is, *thoughtfully* answering these questions is the single most powerful way I've found to persuade admissions committees that YOU'RE 100% prepared to be a successful doctoral student—that you can **design and lead** research projects.

It's worked for hundreds and hundreds of applicants, in virtually every academic field, at every "brand name" university you can think of.

Now it's your turn.

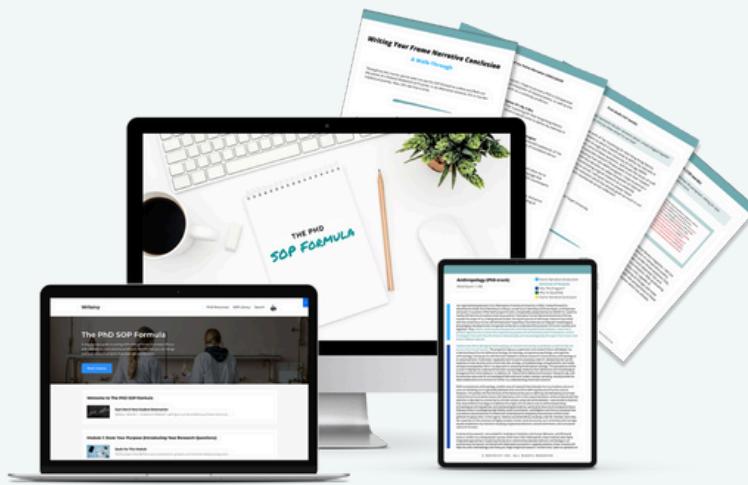
In the next few days, I'll send you some examples of how other students answered the 4 questions in their SOPs. You'll see what it takes to move from feeling overwhelmed and frustrated with your applications, to becoming an intellectual dynamo who grad schools WANT to admit!

Jordan

Want to give yourself the best possible chance of admission?

The four questions are always the right place to start. But you know what's even better? Learning exactly **how** and **where** to answer those questions in your SOP...without ever second-guessing yourself. If you want to submit a statement of purpose that's **bulletproof**, check out...

THE PHD SOP FORMULA



ONLINE COURSE: Learn the proven strategy that's helped hundreds of students get accepted to 3, 4, or even 5+ top PhD programs...even if you're not a "writer," had a low GPA, want to change fields, or just feel nervous and confused.

(This is the exact system that **two separate students** used to go **from 0 admissions in their first cycle to 5 in the next**...both without any new research experience. I'll breakdown their essays for you inside, explain why they worked, and show you how to do the same!)

TELL ME MORE!