

How to write a statement of purpose for graduate school applications in political science

I am a lazy person, and I hate repeating myself. So whenever I need to provide the same advice more than three times, I prefer writing these thoughts down and sharing them. For many years now, I've helped students to prepare their statement of purpose (SOP) for graduate school applications in political science. I have provided this service especially for students from marginalized populations and non-traditional backgrounds, to make the field more accessible to these students. The following tips are based on my experience and observations. Some usual cautions are warranted. These tips don't represent everyone's perspectives; you should take them as food for thought.

First, put yourself in the shoes of admission committee members. What do they expect from the statement of purpose? They would like to understand why you are a solution to a particular problem in the field. To some extent, academic work is also entrepreneurial. We first need to create value and then monetize it (in our case, through publications). The value comes from identifying unsolved "interesting" and "important" problems. Show the admission committee how you discovered a problem in a particular literature based on your reading of the literature and previous (academic, professional, and lived) experiences. The problem/puzzle doesn't need to be something ingenious. Creativity stems from remixing. For instance, you can say there's a long-standing problem in literature A that can be solved by connecting literature A and literature B, collecting original data, or applying novel methods. So, identifying a problem and suggesting a solution often go together.

Second, outline and signpost your argument. Admission committee members have to read many applications in a limited time while dealing with other responsibilities. Therefore, helping them to do their job efficiently is also your job. There's a hidden checklist that a committee member will likely apply to your SOP. Specifically, they would like to see some signs of careful engagement with the literature (a rough predictor of your performance in coursework plus field exams), skills in identifying a puzzle and designing research that tackles it (a rough predictor of the quality of your dissertation), and finally, your qualifications and plans to undertake the project using the resources provided by the program (your experience and fit). Given these expectations, the usual structure of an SOP is a hook (the first paragraph), the gap you identified in the literature (the second paragraph), your research design (the third paragraph), your qualifications to tackle it (the fourth and fifth paragraphs), and your fit to the program (the final paragraph). Provide relevant information and move it upfront so the committee members won't miss it. In addition, think about what is the punchline of your SOP. If a committee member has finished reading your SOP, what should they take away from it? In their mind, what kind of candidate are you? Their impression should not be that you're a smart and hardworking person (these are indistinguishable characteristics among candidates on the long list). Rather, you're a solution to a specific, interesting, and important problem in the field, and the department has the right resources (faculty, training, etc.) to help you to resolve that problem.

Finally, avoid (excessive) technical jargon. Write like a journalist rather than a lawyer. Not everyone reading your SOP is deeply familiar with your selected subfield and its literature. You must convince these people why you are a strong candidate they should admit. In fact, you need to make your SOP accessible, even better, relevant to them, so that you will have more people on your side, or at least no strong objections. Assume that people reading your SOP are upper-division undergraduates, intelligent but relatively new to your subject. You should signal that you're informed; you know your subject matter. Using a certain amount of technical jargon is not a sin. But you don't want to create the wrong impression, that you're desperate to be taken seriously, by employing unnecessary technical jargon in your SOP. Your strength and fit should shine through your carefully crafted, framed, and organized argument.