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Name:

Approaching the Graduate School Statement of Purpose

The Statement of Purpose is an important part of your graduate school application because it allows you to communicate in your own words what sets you apart from other applicants. It conveys several key pieces of your story, like your motivation for pursuing graduate study, research interests, and career goals, and it is an opportunity to convince faculty that you are a good fit for their program.

Many students struggle to write a strong Statement of Purpose because they rely on the same writing strategies that got them into college, which are not appropriate for writing this new document. Others struggle to get started since the pressure is high and the work may seem daunting.

The information and activities in this packet can help get you through the hardest part of the process: producing a good first draft of your Statement of Purpose. You can then share your draft with mentors and peers for further feedback and development, with plenty of time to revise before your application is due. This packet also provides guidance on how to understand and apply feedback, as well as how to approach revision and, lastly, editing.

Key Features of the Genre

In general, a statement of purpose for admission to graduate school should tell your reader:

- **Why you are compelled** to do further study and research
- **How you have become qualified** to pursue that study and research
- **What you hope to learn** and **what knowledge you want to produce**
- **Why** *this* **graduate school** is the ideal next step for you

In the early stages of developing the statement, writers encounter the following questions:

How "personal" should the statement of purpose be?
- A good statement *is* personal. It should showcase details about your unique intellectual background and goals that could not be in anyone else's statement.
- Personal does not mean emotional. Rather than construct a narrative driven by emotion or relationships (e.g., "The sadness of my aunt's struggle with cancer inspired me to become interested in bioengineering…"), emphasize the evolution of your intellectual interests (e.g., "An experience in a chemistry lab course my freshman year was the start of my interest in nuclear medicine. In this lab, we…")

What kind of a personal history is appropriate to this genre?
- Don't focus on narrating your early discovery of your interest in your field. Readers will skim or skip stories about K-12 experiences. Such information is perceived to be less relevant to your preparedness for a graduate program.
- Do describe specific undergraduate study and research experiences, and explain how these experiences have motivated and prepared you to pursue advanced research in graduate school. If you did something exceptional in high school, it may be worth mentioning that work, but keep the primary focus on your work as an undergraduate and beyond.

What's the right balance in the statement between the work you've done so far and what you want to do?
- Prioritize discussing intellectual problems, questions, and findings that emerged out of your research and study experiences. This may include limitations that you found in one context that prompted you to seek out a different set of circumstances for future work. If you're not sure what your take-away was from a certain experience or how it relates to your desired field of study, look back on any documents you generated from those experiences (e.g., SURF reports).
- Show your literacy in the field, including knowledge of current trends and leading research questions, as well as experience with key methodologies or materials.

- Connect past/current work to future research plans, i.e., questions or problems that you want to investigate (or that you need further training to be equipped to answer).
- Avoid long, chronological lists of research experiences that just list what you've done (e.g., "And then I…" "And the next summer I…" "My following project was…"). Instead, **tell a story** of what you've *learned*, highlighting the most important experiences. This may proceed chronologically; nevertheless, you need to emphasize the evolution of your thinking and your work over time.

How much should you tailor your statement for each school?
- Tailoring your statement is important. Showing that you not only want to go to grad school but why want to go to *this* school sets you apart from others. This takes time, but graduate school may take five or more years of your life, so you want to get into the right one.
- It's not enough to simply name faculty members you'd like to work with or labs you'd like to work in. Be certain to indicate *why* those people or facilities interest you and how you could fit in or contribute to the work they are already doing. Don't just look at the school website; familiarize yourself with their published work.
- Be cautious when naming a single entity, suggesting that you could only work in that configuration. If that person or lab gets no new students in the year you are to enter, it could mean that you are not admitted. Express flexibility and receptiveness to new opportunities without misrepresenting your true areas of interest.
- Note specific requirements in the instructions for your statement. Some may ask for specific elements or points of focus that others do not, (e.g., whether they ask for separate personal or diversity statements).

What qualities should my writing have?
- Show rather than only tell. Don't just say "I'd make a great researcher." Prove it by sharing specific stories about the kinds of questions that concern you and the skills you have to show that you would. However, make sure the point of every story you tell is very clear.
- Avoid melodramatic language or language that embellishes without content. Interesting detail, rather than unusual language, is what draws the reader in to a personal statement.
- Clarity is crucial. Faculty reading your statement are very busy people. If your statement is difficult to understand at the sentence or paragraph level, they'll give up on it and move to the next candidate.
- Correctness is also key. If you make grammar or proofreading errors in a high stakes document, you create a first impression of not being detail-oriented and/or of being a weak writer. Neither are qualities that admissions committees admire.

Who can give me helpful feedback on my statement?

- It is important to talk to mentors in your field because the expectations for statements can vary by discipline. Consider approaching the director of grad admissions in your field at Caltech for guidance about expectations and common mistakes.
- Show your working drafts to multiple readers, including those who know you well and those who do not, as well as those within and outside your research specialization. As you decide how to revise in response to feedback, be aware that no one knows exactly what each admissions committee will prioritize.

Get Inside Your Readers' Minds

Before you start writing your Statement of Purpose (SOP), spend time thinking about what your reader needs from you and how they will read your statement. No one knows exactly what a reader of your Statement of Purpose wants, because every graduate admissions committee is composed of individuals who may have different priorities for whom to recruit into an incoming class. As a thought exercise, try to imagine what it is like to be a faculty member on the graduate admissions committee. You might have some of these qualities:

- You are very busy with research, teaching, and other committee work. There just aren't enough hours in the day to do it all. This week, you need to read 100 application packets. You can't get to it during the week, so you're going to spend all day Sunday doing it while your partner takes the kids to the zoo. You figure that if you spend an entire 8-hour day, you have about 5 minutes per application. When an application looks like a bad fit, you quickly move on to save more time to spend on the stronger applications. Also, if you finish early, you can squeeze in a run, and you haven't had time for one in a week.
- You want to admit students who are well-prepared in both their knowledge and skills for the coursework and research that graduate school will require of them. You hope to find clear and obvious evidence of this in the CVs, transcripts, and statements of purpose.
- You are also looking for students who will succeed in graduate school. Here, the Statement of Purpose is key because a CV and transcript do not reveal this. For you, success correlates with several qualities you hope to find in applicants:
  - You want to see signs that students are dedicated to this area of study. Even if their path to the work was indirect, they can convincingly explain why grad school is their desired next step. They understand the field and are interested in the problems it studies and the methods it uses to study them.
  - You also look for signs of resilience—you know grad school is difficult and want to make sure students can make adversity and failure a productive part of learning.
  - You like to see signs of ingenuity. You want to find students that have shown signs of original thinking and not just the ability to solve rote problems.
    One day you will be a co-author with your students, so you like to admit students who write well.
- You care about diversity and inclusion. You want students from varied backgrounds and with different identities, because you've found a diverse lab is a better lab in every way.
- You want to find students who have researched your program and believe themselves to be a fit for it. They want more than just the university bumper sticker. They know the faculty, areas of specialization, and unique programs, and they're excited about them.

REFLECTION QUESTIONS

Based on the faculty you have met in your field, what other qualities might your readers have that our hypothetical reader did not?

Reflect on what you learned as you stepped into a possible reader's mind. How did this exercise shape your understanding of how to approach the Statement of Purpose? What qualities does a good statement need to have in order to communicate well to this reader?
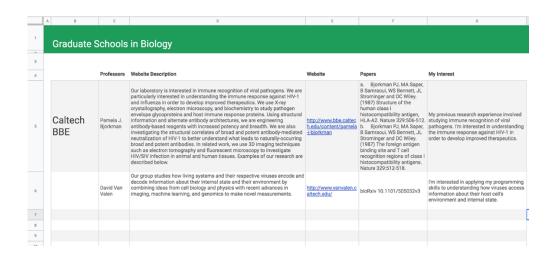
Get to Know Your Schools

Take the time to research your schools before you begin writing your Statement of Purpose. As a starting place, explore the university's department website and identify:

- Profiles of 3-5 faculty you are interested in working with and their areas of specialization
- Links to websites of faculty you hope to work with
- A list of these faculty members' recent research papers
- The department's mission statement and research program goals
- Unique programs, seminars, or organizations that you are excited to participate in through your research, teaching, or community outreach
- The university's mission statement

Stay Organized

As you're researching schools, you may find it helpful to organize information in a shareable Google spreadsheet (example below). You can organize the information however is most helpful to you. Some ideas on what to include: Name of the program, professor names, description of professor research, papers to read, and how their work connects to your past research experience or your research goals as a graduate student. We will revisit this spreadsheet later when we discuss how to customize your statement.

SHARE YOUR GOOGLE SPREADSHEET HERE:

Locate Writing Prompts

You should plan to locate and become familiar with the Statement of Purpose prompts on the program websites or the application portals long before your application due dates. The statement may sometimes be titled differently, e.g., Statement of Intent, Statement of Objectives, and even (less commonly) "Personal Statement."

Copy and paste the prompts in the space provided in the next page along with the name of the school/program. You may use a separate document if you need more space to organize these prompts.

Some programs do not have a prompt beyond merely indicating that a Statement of Purpose is needed. In this case, you should also record the name of the school with a note that the program has no prompt. Fortunately, most programs are looking for similar information, so don't be intimidated by writing a statement for programs that don't have a prompt.

The benefit of gathering all writing prompts in one place is that you have an opportunity to compare them to each other and become more attentive to the ways in which you may need to customize your statement for each program. Review each prompt and highlight any similarities and differences between them. While most will ask for the same information, some can use similar language to ask slightly different questions or ask you to emphasize different things in your response.

STATEMENT OF PURPOSE PROMPTS:

STATEMENT OF PURPOSE PROMPTS:

Things to Communicate in Your Statement of Purpose

While programs may word their prompts differently (or provide no prompts at all), they are typically looking for similar information. In your examination of prompts, you will likely discover that many of the programs are asking you to communicate the following:

Research Interests

A successful graduate school Statement of Purpose clearly conveys your research interests. These are the problems you propose to work on as a graduate student and the disciplinary tools you plan to use to solve them. Your SOP should also communicate a clear sense of why this work matters in your field. Research interests can range from naming open questions in your field to outlining a specific project you wish to work on. Your mentors are your most valuable resource when it comes to narrowing and articulating research interests.

While it may seem strange to claim research interests before you even begin grad school, your research interests help admissions committees determine how well you can delineate a viable research project and whether your interests are a good fit for the faculty and resources of their program. You will not be locked into these interests once you start your program; your research interests can (and probably will!) change during graduate school. Articulating a research project can also be a useful exercise for you as an applicant. If you are unsure of what you want to study in graduate school, this is a good opportunity to talk to your mentors about potential paths.

The specificity of your interests may vary depending on the type of program you are applying to. For a research-based doctoral program, your interests will be relatively specific. For an applied master's program, your interests may be broader. In both cases, you may tailor your interests differently for different programs.

Research Experiences

A less successful Statement of Purpose is a list of things someone has done; a more successful version is a story that explains how a series of experiences have prepared an applicant for success in a graduate program. Your CV will already list the important plot points of your undergraduate career. Your Statement of Purpose should instead connect the dots and fill in the gaps between those plot points. In other words, it should explain how you moved from one research project to the next, as well as your motivation and rationale for taking each subsequent step, and it should explicate what new knowledge you carried with you from one point to the next.

You should also plan on using a good deal of the allotted space to write about the experiences that have prepared you to study the things that interest you. For some applicants, this has been a straightforward path; perhaps you have known all along what your research interests are, and you pursued research opportunities that are closely related to those interests. For many other applicants, the path has been less direct; maybe your research experiences were more exploratory, and your most recent research experience revealed the area that you're most interested in.

If you are in the latter group, you don't necessarily have to exclude the less-related research experiences from your statement. If they provided opportunities for you to learn generalizable research skills or soft skills, like completing collaborative writing with a mentor or others, you may choose to include the experience and focus on these other skills that the experience yielded. You may also write about industry experiences, such as internships, as they relate to your learning trajectory. A narrative that successfully tells the story of your development as a researcher is integral to convincing admissions committees of your preparation for graduate work and your potential to succeed in their program.

Intellectual Fit

It is also important to make a case for why the program you are applying to is the ideal place to do the work you are interested in doing. This can be communicated explicitly in a tailoring paragraph by naming faculty members whose interests overlap with yours, and it is communicated implicitly by articulating research interests that align with the department's. Your aim here is to communicate that you understand the nature of the program and can demonstrate your fit for this place.

Contribution to Intellectual Community

You may also have other relevant experiences that you wish to communicate, like an interest in teaching or involvement in campus leadership or DEI initiatives. If a particular program has a multitude of outreach programs and opportunities that align with your extracurricular interests, you could devote some space to writing about how you plan to contribute to the intellectual community at the university. Keep in mind that there may also be other opportunities in your application to write about some of these other things, like a diversity statement or personal history statement.

Crafting a Narrative

The key to crafting a narrative in your SOP is to not only present your most significant experiences but also to think about how those experiences have shaped you. Your readers don't know anything about you, so you will need to do the work of making all the meaningful takeaways from your experiences add up to a coherent narrative that creates a vivid and memorable impression of you. Think about the difference between offering someone a handful of puzzle pieces and showing them a fully assembled puzzle. The latter is easier to understand and much more impactful. Considering your meaningful takeaways will also help you avoid simply listing experiences and ending up with a repetition of the information you have already provided in your CV.

Likewise, by explaining what meaning or value you derived from your experiences, you will have better control of your readers' interpretation. You shouldn't assume they interpret the meaning of your experiences in the same way you do. You might assume that mentioning the paper you co-authored will demonstrate to them your advanced writing skills, but your readers might see something different. When you interpret the value of your experiences for them, you eliminate ambiguities. You control the stage lights and can spotlight the skills and qualities you want your readers to see.

The Meaning Making Worksheet on the next page is a tool that can help you begin brainstorming for the narrative you want to craft. Use the left column to jot down your significant experiences from your undergraduate years. In the right column, reflect on why the experiences have been meaningful or valuable to your learning. Having each significant experience and its corresponding meaning or value detailed in a list offers a convenient, shorthand method for envisioning what your narrative might look like. Through this activity, you should discover that these experiences provide opportunities to demonstrate specific qualities and skills you have developed along the way that admissions committees will find valuable, such as strong writing skills or working well in collaborative settings.

Your experiences will likely have yielded more than one takeaway apiece. While you can describe multiple takeaways for your experiences, you should also keep in mind that you will have a word limit to adhere to. Use the worksheet to be strategic about your takeaways and choose thoughtfully so you can be sure that your SOP ends up with a broad range of meaning.

Sample Meaning Making Worksheet

Below is an SOP Meaning Making Worksheet from a student who is applying to Astrophysics graduate programs. This student listed major experiences in her life that have influenced her path to graduate school. Remember, certain experiences that are relevant or meaningful to one student may not be as meaningful to you. For example, this student assigns a lot of value to her first undergraduate research experience, even though it's not in the field she has chosen to pursue.

	EXPERIENCE/BACKGROUND	MEANING/VALUE
1	SURF 2016 - Astronomy	My first industry experience that gave me a glimpse of astronomy and also helped me develop my passion for the stars.
2	SURF 2017 – Astrophysics (Prof Marcolli lab)	This experience brought me close to what I want to study in grad school. I also learned how to think creatively to solve problems. I also had a great female professor as a mentor.
3	(continued from SURF 2017) SURF 2018 – Astrophysics (Prof Marcolli lab)	Showed that I can stick with a problem and work hard to produce meaningful results. It also confirmed my decision to go to grad school.
4	Outreach: robotics for disadvantaged communities (2016-2018)	First research experience. Showed me that I want to shape the problems that bioengineering will solve; mentorship, communication skills; shows I'm capable of doing research
5		
6		

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Sample Meaning Making Worksheet

Below is an SOP Meaning Making Worksheet from a student who is applying for Biology graduate programs. Like the previous example, this student listed major experiences in her life that have influenced her path to graduate school. This student's first major experience was an internship, which she found somewhat unfulfilling. Despite not being the best fit for her, she found it to be meaningful/valuable because of the insight about her true interests that the experience offered.

	EXPERIENCE/BACKGROUND	MEANING/VALUE
1	2021 Medtronic bioengineering internship	My first industry experience. Learned that I want to do research because I am most passionate about posing questions and creating novel methods instead of implementing existing ones. Solidified my decision to go to grad school.
2	Took graduate level courses in biology as an undergraduate	Showed me what I am most interested in. Demonstrates my knowledge and skillset in my area of study
3	Tutoring and TAd in biology	Demonstrates my love for teaching, knowledge of the field, and wanting to be a professor
4	2022 SURF in biology	First research experience. Showed me that I want to shape the problems that bioengineering will solve; mentorship, communication skills; shows I'm capable of doing research
5		
6		

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Meaning Making Worksheet

Write down the major experiences you're considering for your SOP and the meaning/value of each experience (e.g. what quality or skill it demonstrates, how it shaped your decision to pursue grad school, how it shaped your research interest, or what it made you do next). In this stage of your planning, focus on major experiences and worry about whether they belong in your SOP later.

	EXPERIENCE/BACKGROUND	MEANING/VALUE
1		
2		
3		
4		
5		
6		
7		

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Draft an Outline

Although not always necessary and not always the path taken by the enthusiastic Statement of Purpose writer, starting with an outline can save you a lot of time and energy. An outline will give you flexibility in organizing your experiences and qualifications without committing very much writing to paper. It can also help you envision where you want to take your statement and how you'll get there.

Reflect on the experiences you listed in the Meaning Making Worksheet and how you evaluated them. Can you see how you might separate and group your experiences? Can you logically connect different experiences? Can you organize these experiences in an order that makes sense? Can you see what experience can easily find a home in your statement and which do not?

There are several ways you can organize your SOP. Some schools may provide you with suggestions on how to compose your statement. Consider using their template as a starting place for a statement that you can tailor for other schools. Whatever organizational scheme you choose, make sure that the structure supports your narrative and aligns with the readers' expectations.

Below are a few suggestions on how you might organize your experiences and qualifications for your SOP. You can even mix them to suit your needs. These examples are simplified outlines only, where each enumerated experience may contain multiple meanings and values. For example, a research experience may have allowed a student to co-author a paper or present their work at a national conference, but we have not indicated it in the outline. Additionally, we do not indicate where a student might tailor their statement for a specific school.

Chronological Order

A common approach for structuring the SOP is to lay out major experiences chronologically. This approach works especially well in demonstrating how your research interests and goals have evolved and matured over time and with each new experience or project. One concern students may have in choosing a chronological structure is that their SOP may read like an extended version of their CV/resume. To make your SOP more engaging, weave in a narrative between your experiences. Reflect on what each experience taught you, how it shaped your research interest/goals and your desire to pursue graduate school, or how it connects to future goals.

EXAMPLE FROM AN ASTROPHYSICS MAJOR APPLYING TO GRADUATE SCHOOL IN ASTROPHYSICS:
1. Introduction
2. 2016 Harvey Mudd Research Internship in Astronomy

3. 2017 Harvard REU Astronomy
4. 2018 SURF Caltech Astrophysics
5. 2018-present Caltech ongoing academic research in Astrophysics
6. Advanced Coursework and TAships in physics, astrophysics
7. Conclusion

Relevance to Intended Field of Graduate Study

Another common approach is to group and prioritize research experiences that are most relevant to your intended field of study. You may find your outline to be in reverse chronological order. This approach works well for students who (1) find their current or most recent experience to be more relevant or more meaningful than earlier experiences or (2) who take a more circuitous route to their intended field or grad school altogether. Grouping and prioritizing experiences by relevance can help streamline your story and keep you from having to write a tangled narrative around your less relevant but significant experiences. Again, to tie these separate experiences together, reflect on what each experience taught you, how it shaped your research interest/goals and your desire to pursue graduate school, or connect it to future goals. When you discuss less relevant experiences later in the SOP, you can focus on applicable skill sets rather than the research field.

EXAMPLE FROM A CS/EE MAJOR APPLYING TO GRADUATE SCHOOL IN COMPUTER SCIENCE (CS):
1. Introduction
2. Advanced Coursework and TAships in CS
3. 2018 SURF Caltech - CS- Machine Learning
4. 2016 SURF NASA JPL- Astronomy - Mathematical Modeling
5. 2017 Venture Capital Firm - Software Engineering Internship
6. Conclusion

Quality/Expertise

A less common approach is to organize your SOP by qualities or expertise. This approach would work well for students who do not have much experience in their intended field of study. It would also suit those who have multiple/extended research projects with one research professor over several years. However, students who fall into this category can easily use other organizational schemes. One challenge in prioritizing by qualities/expertise is that a single experience may illustrate multiple qualities and expertises; if experiences are divided and distributed over the entire SOP, your readers may struggle to keep track of your growth as a scientist, identify deliberate decision making toward graduate school, or understand your contributions to a specific research project.

EXAMPLE FROM A NON-CS MAJOR APPLYING TO GRADUATE SCHOOL IN COMPUTER SCIENCE (CS):

1. Introduction
2. Advanced Coursework in CS
3. Algorithm Development Expertise
4. 2018-2019 in Chemistry
5. Creative and Critical Thinking Skills
6. 2018 SURF in Chemistry
7. 2017 SURF in Neuroscience
8. Communication skills
9. Co-authored a paper in chemistry (2018)
10. Presented posters and gave talks at conferences
11. Conclusion

Use the space below to write your outline

Customize Your Statement

It is essential that you customize your Statement of Purpose to every school/program that you apply to. Your statement should tell the committee why you chose to apply to their school/program. In most cases where schools are looking for the same information, you may not need to re-write your entire statement from the ground up (unless you really want to). Different parts of your statement can be shared across the different statements. For example, you may find that the descriptions of your research experiences do not need to be customized if you're applying to very similar programs. However, you should make a concerted effort to customize as much of your statement as possible. To begin customizing your statement, refer to your Google Spreadsheet from Get to Know Your Schools.

Use the following questions to connect program-specific information to your relevant experiences and research goals:

- Why am I interested in working with the faculty I've listed?
- What are each of these faculty member's current research interests and how do these interests align with my research and career goals? (Read more than one of their papers to develop a deeper understanding of the direction of their work.)
- With an understanding of each faculty member's current research, how can I contribute meaningfully to their lab and its respective field? How does my relevant experiences make me a good fit for the research being done by this faculty member?
- How can I connect my findings about this specific program to support my intended communication goals for my intended readers?
- How can I thoughtfully organize my relevant experiences to communicate why I am a good fit for this specific program? Where in the SOP can I connect my relevant experiences and goals to the specific program I am applying to?

Readers may expect to find your "tailoring" near the conclusion of your SOP. This can take the form of a penultimate paragraph that summarizes why you chose this specific graduate program, why you are a good fit, and who are faculty you want to work with.

You may also bookend your SOP with tailored paragraphs both at the beginning and end of your statement.

In addition to writing customized intro and concluding paragraphs, you can tailor all throughout the statement. Below are a few guiding questions to help you:

- Can I immediately connect the overarching research goals of a previous experience to the interests of the program or a professor whose group I'd like to join?

- Have I developed advanced knowledge in a particular theory or a unique skill set that I hope to apply or explore further with a professor at the school I'm applying to?
- How did this specific experience shape my research interest and how do those interests align with the faculty's research goals?

REFLECTION QUESTION

How and where might you customize your statement?

Make a Revision Plan

When revising, experienced writers tend to begin by addressing "global concerns" (content, structure, and organization) before moving on to "local concerns" (sentence-level grammar and style). After all, you don't want to spend ages tweaking a sentence that you don't end up using in the final draft of the Statement of Purpose.

GLOBAL REVISIONS

What content changes do I want to make?

What structural and/or organizational changes do I want to make?

LOCAL REVISIONS

What types of clarity issues tend to appear in my writing (e.g., unnecessary nominalizations, unclear pronouns, large gap between subject and verb)?

Where can I be more direct and concise in my writing?

What other kinds of grammar, style, and usage issues do I need to address?

Seeking Feedback

The Statement of Purpose is an important document, and it will benefit from several rounds of revision. Sharing your draft with readers helps you identify the strengths and weaknesses of a draft. Different readers can offer different types of feedback:

Mentors and peers in your field of study
- Should I include/remove a particular experience?
- How much detail should I provide about experience X?
- How do I show the profs at program Y I am a good fit for their specific program?
- What positive qualities/knowledge/experience do I have that not every applicant will have?

Writing experts (e.g., writing center staff, former writing teachers)
- Will this statement meet my readers' needs?
- Is my statement organized in a way that best accentuates its content?
- Is it easy to read my statement quickly and absorb its main ideas?
- Am I writing in the right register?
- Are there issues with grammar, syntax, or usage that may bother some readers?
- Will my statement be clear and compelling to readers outside my field, like graduate school administrators who may read applications to award financial aid?

Friends and family outside your field
- Does this statement capture the best of me so that it successfully introduces a reader to me and my intellectual goals?
- Is my statement clear and easy to read?

Navigating Feedback

Receiving feedback from multiple sources can leave you feeling confused, as different readers will likely have different – and sometimes conflicting – thoughts on your Statement of Purpose. Here are some tips for navigating multiple forms of feedback:

Look for Patterns

Start by identifying constellations of feedback. Before you try to integrate all the changes being suggested to you, take time to identify where most of your readers are offering you similar kinds of feedback. For instance, if multiple readers are telling you a section is unclear, that would be a good place to begin your revisions. This will help you prioritize your time so that you don't get bogged down in minutiae.

Conflicting Feedback

When you receive conflicting kinds of feedback, critically consider your next move. In writing, there is rarely a single correct way to achieve an aim; instead, writers must constantly ask themselves the following questions: What do I gain by doing it this way? And what do I lose by doing it this way? When confronted with conflicting feedback, make a list of pros and cons in order to identify the best option, and, if it helps, talk through that list with a writing specialist and/or mentor.

Unclear Feedback

If you get feedback that doesn't make sense, ask follow-up questions. At some stage in the drafting and revision process, you will likely receive unclear feedback from a reader. Don't be afraid to ask for further clarification.

Know When You Have Enough Feedback

When writing a high-stakes document like the Statement of Purpose, it can be tempting to keep requesting feedback until someone tells you your statement is perfect. However, there is no such thing as a statement that will be "perfect" in everyone's eyes. So, after you have collected several rounds of feedback, ask yourself these key questions: Why do I want more feedback? Am I hoping my reader will tell me that I no longer need to make changes, or am I prepared to do more work on this document? Ultimately, deciding when the statement is good enough to send out is a decision only you can make – no one else can tell you when the time is right.

Editing Your Own Draft

Because your Statement of Purpose is a living document, you will likely find yourself revisiting, revising, and tweaking it throughout the application process. This checklist is designed to help you structure and prioritize your time by guiding you from global- to local-level revisions.

Content

It is important to be intentional when choosing the content for your Statement of Purpose. Your space is limited, so each experience should communicate something important about who you are as a candidate.

- ☐ Are there any experiences you should add to enhance this statement?
- ☐ Are there any experiences that don't serve a clear purpose? If so, can their purpose be clarified? Or should they simply be removed?
- ☐ Are there any unnecessary or overly technical details that should be removed? Remember: the technical details you choose to include and how clearly you write about these technical details will demonstrate your own understanding of your field and your ability to communicate within that field.
- ☐ Is it clear what each experience is supposed to communicate about your capabilities as a researcher? Remember: don't rely on your reader to make the connections for you. Make sure your reader can easily tell what your content says about why you should be admitted to their program.

Coherence

Once you feel confident about your content, consider how that content is organized. In the margins of your SOP, note what each paragraph focuses on.

- ☐ Is this flow of information logical?
- ☐ Does your organization place emphasis in the right places? (For instance, a chronological order emphasizes your intellectual development over time, while starting with your most relevant experience emphasizes who you are now.)
- ☐ Is every paragraph relevant to your purpose?
- ☐ Do any paragraphs contain more than one important topic? If so, would it make more sense to break them up into shorter paragraphs?

Look at the first couple sentences of each paragraph:

- ☐ Do these topic sentences tell your story?
- ☐ If your audience were to read only these topic sentences, would they get the most important information about you as an applicant?

Cohesion

Once you're happy with the organization of your statement, turn your attention to what is happening with the flow of information within each paragraph.

- ☐ Are there any places where the logical connection between sentences might be unclear?
- ☐ Do you have too many transition words? (This can be a sign that your paragraph lacks cohesion.)
- ☐ Are there any lengthy or overly complicated sentences that could overtax your reader?

Clarity and Conciseness

Make sure that your statement shows an attention to detail at the sentence level.

- ☐ Are there any general words that could be replaced with more specific ones?
- ☐ Are there any needlessly difficult words that could be replaced with simpler ones?
- ☐ Are there any unnecessary or redundant words that can be deleted?
- ☐ Are there any negative constructions that can be replaced with affirmative ones? (e.g., "not only X, but Y" can sometimes be easier to understand when rephrased as "both X and Y")

Other Writing Tasks for Applying to Graduate School

It's important to know that you may be asked to complete additional writing tasks as a part of your application. Applicants are sometimes surprised to discover supplemental essay questions because these writing prompts may not appear until after the Statement of Purpose is submitted. You might find unanticipated prompts for essays as you go through the online form for submitting your statement of purpose. This is another reason why beginning your application early is a good strategy.

One common supplemental essay to anticipate is a Personal History Statement, which is typically a place for you to discuss your research interests in relation to your background. You might also be asked to write a Diversity Statement, which can be an opportunity to write about social or economic barriers you have personally faced and, more broadly, is an opportunity to write about your understanding and awareness of inequality and barriers faced by others. Some programs may ask you to write an essay that is a combination of a Personal History Statement and a Diversity Statement. The Hixon Writing Center offers more detailed guidance for writing a Diversity Statement in the "Resources" section of our webpage.

Here are some things you may be asked to consider for these supplemental essays:

- How your personal journey has led to your decision to pursue graduate study
- How your background has influenced your academic goals or research interests
- Your leadership or service to advance equity in higher education