

3.4 Statement of Purpose

As far as the committee is concerned, the statement of purpose (SOP) is one of trickiest components of the overall application since it cannot be easily and objectively evaluated. It also requires considerable perseverance and patience on the committee member's part, especially when one needs to read dozens of such two page (or even longer) essays. The difference that the SOP can make in the outcome of one's admission decision differs on a case by case basis. The SOP is a great place to point out things which could not be covered in other parts of the application – past projects, internships, work experience and other academic and non-academic achievements. The SOP can also be crucial in cases where there is a genuine reason for poor academic performance over a quarter or two, since those reasons can be clearly stated in the SOP. However, the applicant must take care to not go overboard and write a very detailed biography, because a very long statement is more likely to irk the reviewer than to impress him/her.

In reality, a lot of the SOPs end up being artefacts that neither help nor hurt the cause of the application. Most SOPs tend to be similar to each other in flow and format and even though the individual facts differ, only rarely do they stand out. An important point missed out by most applicants is that even though the SOP is a means to convince the admissions committee of his/her calibre, it should not merely be a boastful compilation of the applicant's previous achievements. In that case, the SOP ends up being nothing more than a verbose curriculum vitae, when it actually is supposed to be a statement of *purpose*. Majority of the SOPs fail to address the *purpose* part completely or only talk about it in a few sentences in the concluding paragraph. The statement should instead prove the candidate's worthiness not just through his/her prior work, but with a detailed discussion of why the candidate chose the particular program, what he/she intends to do while pursuing the program and what he/she will do after having gained the education. Talking about a bright idea that one might have or an impactful long term project that the applicant wants to work on is more likely to catch the reviewer's attention (and convince him that higher education will serve a good purpose) than the applicant's memoirs.

In most cases, if the overall application (GRE, grades, recommendations, etc.) is very strong, then the applicant has a good chance of getting admitted even with a lacklustre SOP. In other words, a badly written statement will almost never be the sole reason for a rejection. However, skilfully written statements will always help the applicant's cause. In the entire application, the statement of purpose is perhaps the only opportunity that the applicant has to *excite* the admissions committee. Getting straight A's and a GRE score in the 90th percentile will impress the committee, but there is a good chance that many of the other applicants could have emulated the same feat, since the application pool for a top tier university is typically quite competitive. However, a new research idea or problem that the applicant has been working on (or would like to pursue), or a novel and useful application that he/she intends to develop, etc. are things that will get the committee excited and make them want to admit the candidate to their university.

3.5 Letters of Recommendation

Letters of recommendation play a very **vital role** in the admission process. In fact, even a single letter might at times change the committee's overall outlook towards the applicant and thus potentially change the application's outcome. The committee attaches a lot of importance to these letters since they provide evaluations of the applicant by professors and/or supervisors who have closely monitored the applicant's work over a period of time. However, the committee is also smart enough to detect anomalies in the letters most of the times. Every admission committee has professors who have reviewed applications year after year and have read a variety of recommendation letters, besides composing them for their own students. They can thus use some helpful cues to find out whether the recommendation has indeed been composed in confidentiality by the person it claims to be. Even easier to figure out are cases where the recommendation writer clearly does not know the applicant well and has written the letter off a standard template. Such letters usually just praise the applicant without citing any personal experiences or facts to support their claims. They therefore sound too generic and could have been written by the recommender for any applicant.

It gets a lot more serious if two different applicants with the same recommender have the exact same (or almost same) letter since that proves beyond doubt that the recommender is simply using a template. Though this could at times be the letter writer's fault, it is highly unlikely that a professor (or manager) would write a one-letter-fits-all recommendation if he/she indeed did know the applicant very closely. A good recommendation letter is one where the recommender talks in some detail about the actual work done under their supervision by the applicant, how he/she fared at the task and other specific instances from their interactions with the applicant. Such a letter not only

gives the committee an idea of the applicant's impression on the recommender, but also highlights projects, achievements and other salient information which might not have evident from rest of the application.

Reading and evaluating applicants based on recommendation letters is not a very easy task. Recommendations from different applicants across the globe are subject to variations (regional, cultural, etc.). For instance, a recommendation letter from an Asian university might be quite different from a letter from a European or an American university. There are also variations on a recommender to recommender basis. Some might only choose to highlight the positive points (and in general, fill the letter with praises) and say nothing negative about the applicant at all, whereas others might do a more honest evaluation – highlighting both the positive as well as the negative points. The committee thus takes the overly glorifying letters with a grain of salt. It also has to factor in other influencing information like the undergraduate university that the applicant comes from, the general level of competition there, etc. For instance, the committee might decide against a highly enthusiastic recommendation from a university that's been unheard of, in favour of a good but not so enthusiastic recommendation from a top tier university.

While nominating recommenders, the applicant has to clarify on his/her application form whether he/she waives the right to read the letter. The committee looks more favourably at letters for which the right has been waived, since this ensures confidentiality of the letters and reduces the chance that the letter writer was influenced by the applicant. Also, to help the committee take more informed decisions, universities might also ask the letter writer some additional information apart from the actual recommendation itself. These are fields that the recommender has to fill in the recommendation form and may include (i) The recommender's position/title (ii) The recommender's relation to the applicant (iii) The duration for which the recommender has known the applicant (iv) The duration for which the recommender has been writing such recommendations for his/her students/employees (v) The number of such recommendations he/she has written earlier (vi) The pool of students/employees he/she is comparing the applicant with, and its size (vii) The rank of the applicant when compared to that pool (viii) The strength of the recommendation. Each of these can play a role in determining the overall efficacy of the recommendation:

- (i) Usually, the higher the title, the stronger the recommendation. Thus, the recommendation from a professor who has a doctoral degree will carry more weightage than that of a lecturer without a doctoral degree. Similarly, recommendations from the Head of the Department, the Dean, a senior researcher or a senior manager can be more influential. However, it is important to note that any recommendation will work only if it has a personal touch to it and if the recommender has indeed had a close association with the applicant. Despite being penned by a very senior person (for instance, the director or the president of a university), if the letter turns out to be a very generic certificate of appreciation, or if it can't convince the committee that the recommender did in fact personally interact with the applicant, it does not serve the purpose.
- (ii) The relation should be such that it involves direct supervision and frequent interaction over a period of time. For instance, a professor who has taught a class or two to the applicant or has supervised him/her for a project, a manager who the applicant directly reports to, etc.
- (iii) The committee values the recommendation more if the recommender has known and worked with the applicant for a significant period of time. It is understandable that one (or at times two) of the recommendations might come from persons who have known the applicant for a relatively short period. For instance, a professor who just taught one class but the applicant excelled in that class or a manager/researcher with whom the applicant worked for just one project (like a summer internship). However, it is highly preferable to have at least one recommender who has known the applicant for a year or more.
- (iv,v) As would be obvious, the committee would be more comfortable in trusting a recommendation if the recommender is someone who has been evaluating and writing recommendations for students (or employees) for a while, than someone who is writing his/her first recommendation letter.
- (vi,vii) The recommendation form typically asks the recommender to rate the applicant as being in the "top 1-2%", "top 10%", "first quarter", "second quarter", etc. of an evaluation pool. Depending on the recommender, the pool might be "all undergraduate students of a particular class", "all undergraduates ever taught/supervised by him/her", "all interns recruited this year", etc. This rating is a helpful indicator of the recommender's overall opinion about the applicant. The committee however does take into account various influencing factors such as the size and competence of the comparison pool. For instance, someone rated as being within 10% of all students in a top school like Stanford or MIT might still be considered to be a better candidate than someone who is in the top 1% at an unknown university.
- (viii) Finally, the recommender has to choose on the form whether he/she "strongly recommends", "recommends", "recommends with reservations" or "does not recommend" the applicant. This, along with

the rating (vii) gives the committee a summary of the recommender's opinion, even before reading the actual recommendation letter.

All of the above information can (and in most cases will) also be a part of the actual letter. Though I have given a lot of importance to the identity of the recommender (i-v above), it is the content of the letter itself that matters the most. Not realizing this basic fact is a common pitfall for a lot of the applicants. It is of no use if the recommender is a very popular person in the field or is affiliated to a prestigious institution if the letter that he writes does not sound enthusiastic enough. Many recommenders are frank and will clearly mention that they can only recommend the applicant with reservations since they haven't worked with him/her for a long enough duration. It is therefore always safer to choose recommendation writers (even if they do not hold a high title or are not popular) who have had a chance to monitor the applicant closely for a considerable span of time. Thus, the recommendation from a lecturer who supervised the candidate's final year project for an entire year would be more valuable than that from a visiting professor from a highly reputed university who only interacted with the candidate for a couple of weeks. On the other hand, there could be applicants who have known a professor or a senior manager for a long period of time, but on a personal level, i.e. as family or friend. In such cases, even though the recommender might have known the applicant since he/she was born and can strongly vouch for him/her, the recommendation would not support the applicant's cause since it does not provide a unbiased evaluation of the applicant's skills in an academic or professional setting.

Finally, when given an option of submitting more than the required number of recommendation letters (which is usually three), it is in the applicant's interests to not submit the extra letter unless he is entirely sure that all the four recommendations would be strong. Not everyone in the committee might read all the four letters. So it might turn out that the ones being read by them are not the three strongest letters. Even if a committee member does read all the four, it may turn out that one of the four is a very weak letter and can give him/her a reason to reject the candidate (despite the other three letters being strong). It is thus safer for the applicant to just stick to three strong letters that he/she is confident about.

3.6 Résumé

The résumé is usually an optional component of the graduate application. It is a good place to fit in all the details that can't be covered in rest of the application. The applicant can mention details about his/her courses, projects, work experience, publications, extra-curricular activities and other achievements here. However, the applicant should not rely on the committee members reading all the details in the résumé or even going through the résumé at all. Important information that the applicant definitely wants the committee to know should already get mentioned in one of the application components mentioned so far. A good rule of thumb is that if a particular item is not necessary for successfully submitting the university's online application form, it does not carry a lot of weightage. Résumé is one such item. There might be a few universities that demand a résumé as a required component, but even in such cases, I would strongly advice applicants to not entirely depend on it for the committee to discover important and potentially decision-changing information.

Information regarding an important academic project or research publication should get mentioned in the statement of purpose. Additionally, the professor who the applicant worked with on the project can talk about it in his/her letter of recommendation. If the applicant had a good stint as an intern at a premier institute/company, he/she can get a recommendation from the supervisor to make it more noticeable to the committee. If the applicant received a gold medal or certificate for academic excellence, that should find mention either in the statement of purpose or a recommendation letter. In summary, the résumé can contain a lot of information about the applicant which is absent elsewhere. However, some of the achievements certainly deserve to get highlighted in a better way than being mere bullets on a résumé that might often go unnoticed.

3.7 Other deciding factors

Suppose a candidate has secured a very good score in GRE and TOEFL, always maintained a strong academic record and has a fluently written statement of purpose. Would these be enough to guarantee him admission at a school like Stanford or MIT? Not necessarily. As already mentioned, recommendation letters can often play a vital role in admission process. However, there are a few other factors which play a decisive or at least an influential role in the outcome of the application.