Writing your statement of purpose

Putting together your statement of purpose for graduate school can seem daunting, but rest assured, millions have come before you and survived. Below is a quick guide to writing your statement, including the general structure as well as some helpful advice for ensuring your draft showcases the best of you and your experiences.

The statement of purpose - in a nutshell

- The statement of purpose is a letter explaining your rationale for applying to a graduate program and why you would be a good candidate.
- Admissions committees want to know why you are interested in their program and how you intend to make use of the degree in the future. While prompts vary, all are looking to learn more about your interests, experiences, and goals.
- A good statement of purpose clearly articulates the relationship between your previous academic and professional experiences, the program you are applying to, and your plans after completion.

Structure

There are many ways to format your statement of purpose, but in general, you should include the following sections:

Introduction (1-2 paragraphs):

- Clearly state your goals and interests in applying to the program.
- Include a “hook” – something unique about you or your experience that will grab the attention of the reader.

Your background and interests (2-4 paragraphs):

- Include undergraduate (and graduate, if applicable) degrees, previous research and relevant work experience.
- Explain how these experiences have informed your current research and scholarly interests.
- This is the lengthiest section of your statement and is meant to showcase your familiarity with (and passion for) the discipline.
- You can organize your experience chronologically or by categories (academics, internships, research).

Academic and professional goals (2-3 paragraphs):

- Explain why graduate school is the next logical stop and what you hope to accomplish.
- How does this program fit with your future aspirations?

Closing (1 paragraph)

Helpful tips

DON’T ignore instructions. Admissions committees read hundreds of statements each year, and you want yours to stand out for all of the right reasons. The statement of purpose often also serves as your writing sample, so you want to demonstrate your ability to be succinct and to articulate yourself given the requirements.

DON’T write a long cover letter. Your statement of purpose should be professional, but conversational.

DO proofread. Then do it again. Utilize the writing center and professionals in your network who can offer an objective eye.

Finally, DO be genuine. Before you start writing, it’s important to take some time to ask yourself, “Am I passionate about this program?” If the answer is yes, then explain why. Hint: It’s not enough to simply say that you took a few classes and found it interesting. If you are passionate about this particular field, the single most important thing you can do in your statement is to let that zeal shine through in your writing. Best of luck!