The Graduate Statement of Purpose

Signet Education
Today’s Topics

- Graduate School 101
- The Application Process
- The Statement of Purpose
  - Goals
  - Timeline
  - Content
  - The Writing Process
  - Style
  - Proofreading and Formatting
Before We Begin...

- Do you know what you are getting yourself into?
- Do you want to be a professor or primary investigator?
- Do you like teaching?
- Do you like doing research and writing?
- Do you enjoy public speaking?

Humanists: read Kevin Birmingham’s Truman Capote Award acceptance speech: http://www.kevinbirmingham.net/research
Before We Begin…

- Keep in mind, graduate study gives you little practical preparation for being a professor.
  - Little emphasis on administration, publication.
  - Little training for teaching before you’re thrown into it.
- Professional development sometimes only happens if you go searching for it. Publications, conferences, networking, etc.
The Application Process

- Find advisors and read their publications; this is how you’ll choose schools/programs.
- Application: recommendations, transcripts, test scores, statement of purpose/personal statement, sample of your work.
- PhDs are usually funded, Masters are rarely funded.
Statement of Purpose v. Personal Statement

- Possibilities: one or the other, interchangeable, both, neither/combo (prompt)
- Mostly covering similar ground, but with slightly different emphases, goals, tone.
- Difference:
  - Statement of Purpose: more formal, highlighting your specific interests, qualifications, who this department/program/advisor, why you are a good fit. Answering the question: What do you intend to do with this degree?
  - Personal Statement: slightly less formal, highlighting experiences, motivations, what’s shaped you, who you are, why you are a good fit. Answering the question: What do I want them to know about me?
The Statement of Purpose

- Very different from a college application essay:
  - Less Personal
  - More Focused
  - More Scholarly
- Think of your statement as an argument or a proposal.
- Masters vs Doctoral statements
Your Statement Should Answer

- What do you want to study, and why?
- Why should we be interested in this topic?
- Why are you interested in graduate study?
- Why are you interested in this program/department/school/advisor?
- Why should we be interested in you?
Statement of Purpose Timeline

- Start in August/September
- Give drafts to recommenders in October/November
- Personalize Drafts for programs/advisers in November/December
- Submit final personalized versions in December/January
Statement of Purpose Outline

- Topic and origin of interest
- Importance of the topic
- Motivations for further study
- Your qualifications/what sets you apart
- Necessity of graduate study to career goals
- Relevance of program/advisor to goals
It’s OK for the beginning to be somewhat personal. 
Describe the factors that inspired your interest:
  ○ Discoveries, theories? 
  ○ Experiences, classes, interactions? 
Why is graduate study the logical next step for you?
Importance of the Topic

- What sub-area within your field of study do you want to focus on? Why?
- What kinds of questions do you hope to address?
- Why are these questions important to answer?
- What impact will the answers have on the field, related areas, society at large?
Motivations for Further Study

- How do you see yourself contributing to current scholarship?
  - Apply new methods to an old problem?
  - Apply current methods to a new problem?
  - Synthesize new ideas from old ones?
  - Take an interdisciplinary perspective?
Your Qualifications

What, past or present, has prepared you to undertake and succeed on these projects?

- Accomplishments
- Skills and Methods
- Experiences
- Languages
- Knowledge
Necessity of Graduate Study

- What additional skills or knowledge do you need to gain from graduate school to enable you to accomplish your goals?
Relevance of Program/Advisor

- Why is this particular program/department/school/advisor the means for you to achieve your goals?
- Be specific! Are there particularly relevant:
  - Resources?
  - Opportunities?
  - Perspectives?
  - Location-based factors?
The Writing Process

- First, do your research:
  - On your own ideas, motivations, and goals.
  - On possible advisors, programs, departments, etc.
- Then, start brainstorming based on the questions I’ve provided here. Write every idea down.
- Brainstorm in multiple sessions, on different days.
The Writing Process

- Review your brainstorms, and mine for gold!
- Develop an outline, based on my suggestions here.
- Write a draft, and expect it to be shitty (see Ann Lamott’s “Shitty First Drafts”).
- Reverse outline your draft to ensure coherence.
The Writing Process

● Write or revise a little each day. Don’t expect to finish in a weekend. This is a process.
● Seek feedback and advice throughout the process:
  ○ Advisors, mentors, friends in the field, colleagues.
  ○ Family, other friends, writing experts.
● Understand the difference between craft and strategy.
Style Tips

● Remember: *Your statement of purpose* is a writing sample.
● Strive for clarity. Use:
  ○ Simple words.
  ○ Direct phrasing.
  ○ No jargon.
Style Tips

- Avoid clichés and non-specific information.
- Something like “My past accomplishments, passion for learning, and strong work ethic demonstrate my capacity for graduate study” could be written by anyone for any program.
Style Tips

- Instead, be specific:
  - Illustrate your qualities with examples.
  - Speak about actual professors/programs/facilities.
- Show, don’t tell.
Proofread!

- Check and recheck your grammar and spelling.
- Start with spellcheck, but then read your statement aloud.
- Have a friend copyedit also.
- Mistakes can reflect poorly on your attention to detail and ability to communicate.
Formatting

- Follow any given instructions for formatting.
- Usually 1-2 pages, or 500 words.
- 12 point, professional font (like Times New Roman)
- 1-inch margins.
If You’re Stuck…

- Read some examples.
- Take breaks.
- Try typing in an email or recording yourself speaking.
- Ask for help!
Remember...

- Research and connect with advisors before you apply.
- Follow application instructions meticulously.
- Make a timeline to keep track of dates and requirements.
- Be passionate, but not so much that you won’t be taken seriously.