



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



Topic and Origin of Interest

- 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 to you 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 to 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 brainstorm, 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.