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How to Write a Great Statement of Purpose

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The Statement of Purpose required by grad schools is probably the hardest thing you will ever write. (Incidentally, the statement of purpose may also be called an Application Essay, Objectives for Graduate Study, Personal Background, Cover Letter, or some comparable title.)

I would guess virtually all grad-school applicants, when they write their first draft of the statement of purpose, will get it wrong. Much of what you have learned about writing and also about how to present yourself will lead you astray. For example, here's an opening to a typical first draft:

I am applying to the Master of Fine Arts program in creative writing at the University of Okoboji because I believe my writing will blossom at your program since it is a place where I will be challenged and I can hone my writing skills.

How's that? It's clear, it's direct, and it "strokes" the MFA program, right? Wrong. All of it is obvious and extraneous.

The admissions committee knows you are applying to their MFA program because everyone in the stacks of applications they are reading is applying for the same thing. The admissions committee will also know that your writing will "blossom" there since they feel they have a strong program. Of course you will be challenged — all undergrads going on to a grad program will be challenged, no matter how well-prepared they think they are. And of course the new grad student will "hone [her] writing skills" — isn't that the main purpose of the MFA program?

Let's assume the required length of this particular program's statement of purpose is 300 words. Well, with this opening you will have used up 15% of your space saying virtually nothing. 15%!

In fact, not only is this opening paragraph obvious, extraneous, and space-stealing, it's *boring*! Imagine who's reading this and where: five professors "locked" in a room with 500 applications. Do you think this opening paragraph will command their attention? Will they

read the rest of this statement of purpose with an open mind that this applicant is the kind of student they want? Will they remember this application later? You be the judge.

Remember what you learned in first-year composition? You need a "hook."

A former student of mine applying to enter a master's program in library science had a great hook. I don't remember Susan's exact words, but the opening paragraph of her statement of purpose went something like this:

When I was eleven, my great-aunt Gretchen passed away and left me something that changed my life: a library of about five thousand books. Some of my best days were spent arranging and reading her books. Since then, I have wanted to be a librarian.

Okay ... it's clear, it's direct, it's 45 words, and, most important, it tells the admissions committee about Susan's almost life-long passion not just for books but for *taking care of books*. When the committee starts to discuss their "best picks," don't you think they'll remember her as "the young woman who had her own library"? Of course they will, because having had their own library when they were eleven would probably be a cherished fantasy for each of them!

Suppose Susan had written this opening paragraph instead:

I am honored to apply for the Master of Library Science program at the University of Okoboji because as long as I can remember I have had a love affair with books. Since I was eleven I have known I wanted to be a librarian.

That's 45 words too. Do you think the admissions committee will remember this application among the 500 applications they are wading through? Probably more than half of the applications, maybe a *lot* more than half, will open with something very similar. Many will say they "have had a love affair with books" — that phrase may sound passionate until you've read it a couple of hundred times.

All of us have had some event, some experience, like my student's personal library at eleven, which drives us toward the discipline(s) we inhabit. I was speaking to a group of students recently about this. One student — let's call her Jennifer — said she wanted to get a master's degree in speech therapy. When I asked her why, Jennifer said she had taken a class in it for fun and really loved it. But then I pressed her: was there some personal reason she found that field significant enough to spend her whole life doing it? At first Jennifer said no, but after more questioning she revealed that her brother had speech problems. This was a discovery to her; she had not entered the field with that connection in mind — at least not consciously. But there it was; Jennifer now had her hook.

You have to really dig. Be introspective. Don't settle for "I love this field." *Why* do you love this field? Why do you want to work in this field for *the rest of your life*? Why does it *complete* you? Cut through the bull you tell your parents and relatives and friends. What is *your* truth? Find it and then find a memorable way to say it. Grad schools require the statement of purpose not only because they want to find about you as an applicant, they want you to really think about why you are taking such a life-changing step — truly and profoundly why.

Okay, back to the scene of the five professors surrounded by stacks of applications, maybe more than 500. Do you know who they are? What they want? What they like to eat?

Obviously, no. Conversely, do they know you? Well, no. But ... the statement of purpose is your chance to help them get to know you! Your statement of purpose should portray you as a person, not just an application among hundreds of others. Not just paper and ink.

Here's one way to do it. When I was an undergrad senior first applying for grad schools, I knew a grad student — I'll call him Nigel — who told me he had written a three-sentence statement of purpose to get into Stanford:

I want to teach English at the university level. To do this, I need a PhD. That is why I am applying.

That was the whole thing. That's only half of 45 words. It certainly portrays Nigel as brash, risk-taking, no-nonsense, even arrogant. If this is how you want to portray yourself, then by all means do this. But you should also know that Nigel's statement of purpose is an all-or-nothing proposition. You can bet there will be members of probably any admissions committee who will find Nigel's statement of purpose offensive, even disrespectful. And they might not want such a student at their school. But then I suppose Nigel wouldn't want to be a student at that school, either.

Try to make your paper-and-ink self come alive. Don't just say, "I used to work on an assembly line in a television factory, and one day I decided that I had to get out of there, so I went to college to save my own life." How about this: "One Thursday, I had soldered the 112th green wire on the same place on the 112th TV remote, and I realized the solder fumes were rotting my brain. I decided college would be my salvation." Both 35 words. Which narrative do you think will keep the admissions committee reading?

Tell stories (briefly). Use vivid language. Be specific. Be dynamic. Liven up a moment in the lives of those five professors trapped with those 500 applications. Maybe 600. Maybe more.

At the same time, be careful not to be glib. Don't be slick. Don't write your application in a sequence of haiku. Don't put in photos. Just be yourself, but a more heightened version of yourself in words (since face-to-face nuance and gestures won't be there to help).

Remember your statement of purpose should portray you as (1) passionately interested in the field; (2) intelligent; (3) well-prepared academically and personally; (4) able to take on the challenges of grad school; (5) able to have rapport with professors and fellow grad students — in other words, collegial; (6) able to finish the graduate degree in a timely fashion; and (7) a potentially outstanding representative of that grad school in your future career.

That's a lot to cover in a few hundred words (the length of a statement of purpose, as required by different schools, tends to be around 300 to 1000 words). "Passionate interest in the field" will be covered by the kind of hook I have described above. "Intelligence" will be conveyed by the overall writing, organization, expression, etc. of your statement. Being "well-prepared" can be demonstrated by using the lingo of the field (theory, craft, etc.), describing the specific kinds of coursework and other accomplishments you have in the field. Ability "to take on the challenges of grad school" can be shown by describing the rigor of the work you have done. "Collegiality" is not particularly important but is nevertheless a factor — if you can show yourself as a generally nice and cooperative person, that will do — just be true to your own style. Ability "to finish the graduate program" can be conveyed implicitly by your success thus far and more explicitly if you can tell some (brief) story about adverse obstacles you have overcome. Being a "future outstanding representative" can be implied by your being an outstanding representative of your undergraduate school — for example, don't "bad-mouth" your current college or professors.

Often, grad schools will ask you to address other or similar qualities as I've listed above. Just use common sense in focusing on each. Don't address them in the same order as the grad school has listed. Combine them; rearrange them; do whatever you need to do to show yourself as an imaginative person, not a parrot following a line of Brazil nuts to crack.

If you have some problematic academic background, address that as well to reassure the admissions committee. For example, let's say that you got all C's one semester. Take a (brief) paragraph to explain that you had some emotional setback that semester but then demonstrate how your grades have been sterling since then, and that you now have a 3.83 grade-point average in the discipline. If you spin this well, your story will enhance the admissions committee's image of you as someone with the abilities to "take on challenges" and "to finish on time."

Here's an organization I would recommend: (1) passionate hook; (2) segue to your background in the field; (3) specific classes by title and professors you have had (especially if well-known in the field); (4) related extracurricular activities (especially if they hint at some personal quality you want to convey); (5) any publications or other professional accomplishments in the field (perhaps conference presentations or public readings); (6) explanations about problems in your background (if needed); and (7) why you have chosen this grad school (name one or two professors and what you know of their specific areas or some feature of the program which specifically attracts you).

I should probably expand on item 7. This is a practical issue as well. If you are applying to ten grad schools, it's a mismanagement of time to write ten separate, tailored statements of purpose. Items 1 through 6 above can be exactly the same for all the statements. Then when you get to item 7, put in a different paragraph for each school. Remember this means the ten statements will all be as long, in terms of word count, as the shortest required length among the ten schools. If the shortest length is 300 words, probably that length will be okay for the 500-word school (in fact the admissions committee at the 500-word place may see you as savvy for not going on and on). But those 300 words will clearly not work for the 1200-word school, so you'll need to expand that one. Don't pad. Find other engaging material in your background.

About mentioning professors at each grad school: doing this will portray you as someone "who has done her homework," as someone who is genuinely interested in the field, enough to have done some prefatory work in that area. Don't just mention their names (anyone who can browse a web site can do that). Say something of substance about each professor by name, something that reveals you know and appreciate that person's work. Don't necessarily pick the most famous professor at the grad school; chances are many other applicants will do the same, and the admissions committee members will soon be unconsciously filtering those mentions out. (Besides, the most famous professor doesn't always work with all graduate students or may be out of town half the year, and you may come off as naive if you say you're looking forward to working with her.) Find a lesser-known professor whose work truly intrigues you (and *truly* is the operational word here). Then say something about what you know of that professor's work — remember that person may be on the admissions committee. Don't suck up — don't be a sycophant. Be fair and honest.

Be sure to show your statement of purpose to several professors. Remember they will have different ideas about what constitutes an appropriate and effective statement of purpose. If one of your professors has a connection with a specific grad school, she may have some inside knowledge about what kind of statement of purpose will work best at that school. Make your final editing decisions based on what will convey you most accurately as you see it. Again, be specific, be dynamic, come alive on paper. Continue to get advice from your professors on later drafts.

Proofread your statement of purpose. Copyedit for consistency, accuracy, and style. Ask your friends to copyedit and proofread your statement; perhaps you can do the same for them if they are also applying for grad school.

Remember that style in writing can be parallel to style in dress: the second affects your image in person while the first affects your image when you may not be present. Leaving in typos and misplaced commas is like dressing in your grubbies for a coat-and-tie / cocktail dress event. Being too wordy is comparable to dressing in an evening gown or a tuxedo for a casual get-together. Being too glib, too mannered, may be like wearing a furry rabbit costume to a party which turns out *not* to be a Halloween bash. Be careful. Be a perfectionist.

Keep working on your statement of purpose even after you have sent it to the school(s) with the earlier deadline(s). You might have a later epiphany about your personal and academic background, your motives for applying for grad school, your long-term plans, and this epiphany may be just the thing that gets you into the school(s) with the later deadline(s).

To close, the statement of purpose, in the eyes of Department Heads, Program Chairs, and Admissions Committee members, can be the most important document in the application. Other parts of your graduate-school application — test scores, transcripts, letters of recommendation, writing samples — do not say as much about you as a person as the statement of purpose can: your proudest accomplishments alongside your fondest hopes and dreams.

Checklist for Writing a Statement of Purpose
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[] Organization ...

[] A "hook" that demonstrates your passion for the field

[] Segué to your background in the field

[] Description of your academic background in the field

[] Specific classes you have taken, given by name

[] Specific professors you have had, especially if well-known in that field

[] Extracurricular activities in the field

[] Publications or other professional accomplishments in the field (perhaps conference presentations or public readings)

[] Explanations about problems in background (if needed)

[] Explanation of why you have chosen the specific grad school

[] Mention one or two professors in that school and what you know of and appreciate about their work

- ☐ Specific features of the grad program which attract you
- ☐ Get advice from several of your professors — philosophical advice as well as specific writing advice
- ☐ Proofread and copyedit; ask friends to proofread and copyedit as well
- ☐ Keep working on the statement of purpose, even after you have already sent it to school(s) with earlier deadline(s)