

WHAT IS A STATEMENT OF PURPOSE?

The Statement of Purpose is the single most important part of your application that will tell the admissions committee who you are, what has influenced your career path so far, your professional interests and where you plan to go from here.

As the name signifies, the Statement of Purpose is your personal statement about who you are, what has influenced your career path so far, your professional interests and where you plan to go from here. It need not be a bald statement of facts; several successful SoPs address these questions through anecdotes, stories or by describing their hero. But whether your SoP is subtle or to the point, it must be well written to be successful. ([What is a successful SoP?](#))

This is because the SoP is the only part of your application packet over which you have full control. Your academic and extra-curricular records are in the past. Most people only take one or two shots at the GMAT, GRE or TOEFL, and these scores could be adversely affected by conditions on the test day. It is important to choose recommendation letter writers carefully, but while you hope they give you the best possible recommendation, this is not within your control.

The SoP is your chance to talk directly to the admissions committee. To make yourself stand out from among a multitude of similarly qualified candidates. To convince the committee that you have the spark, the thirst for knowledge that could add value to your class.

Most of us work hard for the standard tests - the GRE, GMAT, TOEFL and others. We attend classes or peruse study aids. We give practice tests and do everything within our power to aim for the highest possible score. Because we know that these test scores, while not a perfect tool, are crucial to our chances of gaining admission and even a scholarship or assistantship.

WHY BOTHER?

"...the SoP is the only part of your application packet over which you have full control."

The SoP or essay, on the other hand, is put off till the last possible moment. It scares us when we look at those oh-so-perfect essay examples in the admissions guidebooks and wonder how we can ever write so well. Or wonder what shining instance we can pick out of our normal, average lives to show that we are unique and remarkable. Or how to pick our way through the minefield of endless Do's and Don'ts. Or, after overcoming all these obstacles, we falter at the seemingly endless revisions, wondering if this latest draft is good enough (If I read that essay once more, I'll scream!). Finally we write something, because time's a-pressing and we have to meet the application deadline. We do our best, juggling the writing process with the last-minute paraphernalia of applying-checking forms for errors and completeness, collating the application packets, making sure transcripts, recommendations, work samples and resumes go in their right envelopes, worrying about transit times. We feel thankful when the essay is over, do a quick scan for obvious mistakes, and send it on its way.

If you do it this way, you are practically throwing away your chances of admission (see the next section, [What do Schools look for in a Statement of Purpose?](#)). A good SoP will certainly improve your chances of getting admission to the school of your choice, and even compensate for weaker portions of your application such as less-than-perfect grades. A bad SoP, on the other hand, has the potential to drag down an otherwise strong application.

If you plan correctly, you can give yourself enough time to submit a well-written, thoughtful, polished essay that will boost your chances for admission. Equally important, this is a great opportunity to look inside yourself and be rewarded by a better understanding of who you are.

Writing a reasonably good Statement of Purpose is not an impossible task. It requires care, attention and patience. And enough time for you to be able to write several drafts, show them to people and polish the essay till you get a version you are happy with.

Done right, this will even turn out to be an enjoyable process. And you will be the richer for it. Read on.

WHAT DO COLLEGES LOOK FOR IN A STATEMENT OF PURPOSE?

The primary question admissions committee members ask themselves when they read a Statement of Purpose is: What does this essay tell me about the person who wrote it?

Put yourself in an admission officer's shoes. From among thousands of applications, you have to choose the fraction of students that will comprise next year's incoming class. A mix of interesting, confident and enthusiastic people who will make the class a stimulating place. Academic achievements and good test scores are important. But in an era where the majority of applicants have good academic records, it becomes increasingly difficult to distinguish between individuals and decide who gets the offer of admission.

When you apply, each of the items in the application packet - recommendations, extra-curricular achievements, work samples - adds an extra dimension to your personality. But it is the SoP that brings you to life. Which is why each essay is read carefully by at least two and often four or five people before a decision is taken on the application.

Does this mean that the SoP is the main deciding factor? No. Your academic record . grades and the courses you took- are the first section admission committee members turn to. Standardized test scores are useful to know where you stand in the applicant pool. For graduate schools, relevant work or academic experience is important. Being from a reputed school or college confers a distinct advantage. What your teachers or boss think of you goes a long way towards the school's opinion. A good work sample can show your creativity, skill and professionalism.

However, only the SoP or application essays can bring out your uniqueness. And therefore make or break your application. An applicant who does not take the essay seriously is throwing away the best opportunity available.

So are the admission officers looking for specific personality sorts? Well, yes and no. Creativity, curiosity, pride in your work, an enthusiasm for learning, a capacity for teamwork, the ability to think independently and so on are all good attributes, and most of us share these in varying proportions. But what schools look for is a mix of individuals that together, form a well-balanced class. This would include several personality types.

It is good to go through the school's brochure or web site, speak to people about it, visit if that is possible; get a feel of the student mix that they look for and decide if this is the school for you. However, trying to tailor your SoP to reflect what you think the school is looking for is dangerous business. The people who read your application have been doing so for years and are skilled at spotting fakes. They are likely to know soon if a particular author is saying something for effect or if an essay does not ring true. And that means almost certain rejection.

What is this, you might ask. Of course we want to have an effect on the admissions officers. The important thing is to do so without appearing dishonest. If, for instance, you talk about your deep desire to make society a better place, your application should reflect it. Have you done anything about this desire? Can you talk about your actions and experiences? A small example of something you did, not necessarily spectacular, can do more towards boosting your chances than the noblest platitude can.

Don't try to be something you are not. Don't try to tell the admissions committee what you think they want to hear. Be honest, look inside yourself and do your best.

Which brings us to the next point - self-knowledge. The people who read your essay want to be convinced that you have thought long and hard about who you are, what are the things you appreciate, what inspires you. What you want out of life, and where you are going from here. It is not necessary to have all the answers . after all, several admirable people have no idea where they are going even at age 40 or 50. It is necessary to show that you have thought about this. And that these life experiences have taught you something.

Finally, you have to show a desire to learn. From your books and teachers, from your classmates, from music or art, from life itself.

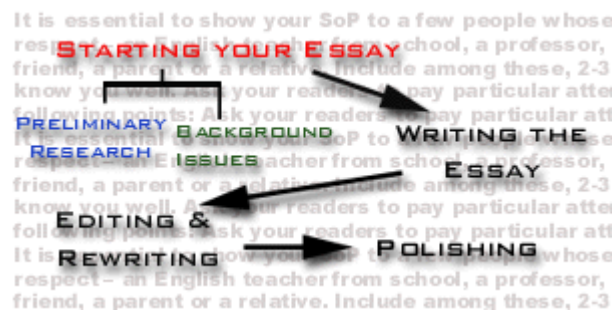
Too vague for you? Turn to the section on starting your SoP and find out how these attributes translate into concrete steps.

UNDERGRADUATE ESSAYS Vs GRADUATE ESSAYS

While both undergraduate and graduate SoPs need to show honesty, self-knowledge and a desire to learn, the focus of each is different. The writer of the undergraduate essay need not have any idea of what will come after college. Rather, her focus is on showing how she has explored her world and interests. How she relates to people. How she forms her opinions.

The graduate applicant, on the other hand, is expected to have a certain level of independent thinking. He is also expected to have a clear idea of why he wants to study further. As most graduate programs involve some financial aid from the school in return for teaching or research work done by the student, he needs to show that he is capable of such work. This is why graduate essays talk more about the applicant's professional or academic interests than about his personal life.

STARTING THE ESSAY



Writing your admissions essays or Statement of Purpose (SoP) is a long and intensive process - ten to twelve drafts over a two-month period are fairly common. It is necessary to put in this hard work to come up with an essay that is uniquely yourself, and a compelling read which convinces the admissions committee that you are right for their school. This is a great opportunity to look inside yourself and be rewarded by a better understanding of who you are and what you want.

STARTING THE ESSAY - PRELIMINARY RESEARCH

Write out your resume. It is best to get this out of the way so that your SoP is not a repetition of the information in the resume. It should instead, use the resume as a reference and highlight the learnings you have received during some key points in your career. There are a number of sites that help you to write a suitable resume for your college applications. You could also browse your local bookstore for resume-writing aids.

Research the universities you are considering applying to. Find out the strengths and weaknesses of each. Good sources for this exercise are - university and department web sites and brochures, home pages of students, your seniors or friends who are studying at that university or in the same field elsewhere, your college professors, friends in the same field. If it is possible for you to access the university's web site, find out which professors work in areas that interest you and write to them about your plans. Some professors respond, some don't - but you have nothing to lose at this stage. In fact, you could gain a better idea about

the areas of research emphasized upon by that particular department. After finding out some details about your potential universities, decide whether you still wish to apply there. While you should start work on this as early as possible, recognize that it is a long process and will continue through the various stages of writing your SoP. At the same time, you will have to draw the line at background research sometime as you are working on a timetable.

Visit some web sites that talk about how to write your essay. A search for 'college admission essays' on Yahoo will yield some sites. Check out the sample essays. If you do not have easy access to the Internet, go to your local bookstore and browse through a few books. In India, 'The Princeton Review: The Student Access Guide to College Admissions' is good and easily available. Read their section on application essays. Remember that the essays you read are usually the best the authors could find. You are not expected to write as well; most people who get admission to top schools do not.

WRITING TIPS - BACKGROUND ISSUES

Ask yourself why you want to study further. Take a piece of paper and start writing down all the reasons. Spend about half an hour on this, so that you can go beyond cliched ideas like wanting to improve your prospects or contribute to society. Write a few sentences on any reason that particularly strikes a chord with you.

Make lists of instances you can use in your SoP. For example, if you've been asked to talk about an important event in your life, list down events that have made a significant impression on you. Don't worry if these are events that are not 'conventionally' important or seem insignificant; what matters is that they have had some influence over you. Similarly, make a list of people you admire or who have influenced you - this could be a friend, a family member, a teacher, etc. and need not necessarily be a famous person.

Go through your resume and reflect on what you have learned from your various experiences. How have they molded your interests and led you to this point? Pick one or two cases that you can talk about in-depth. For graduate school, it is best to take at least one professional situation and show what you did and learned.

Make a list of schools you plan to apply to. As you continue through the background check, you will add a few universities and delete several. A final shortlist of ten to fifteen schools is common. Ask yourself why you wish to study at each of the schools you have listed. For graduate study, it is important to ensure that your interests are compatible with the research interests of the department you are applying to. As you progress through the background check and understand more about your interests through subsequent revisions of the SoP, add to and improve the list.

WRITING

Read the essay question carefully to find out what the university expects you to write about. While you don't have to stick to the questions asked, you must be sure to answer them all in your SoP. Refer to your lists of [background research](#) and write about two handwritten pages in response to the essay question. Go through them the next day.

Remember that your essay has the following objectives:

Show your interest in the subject. Rather than saying that you find electronics interesting, it is more convincing to demonstrate your interest by talking about any projects you may have done and what you learnt from them. If you have taken the initiative to do things on your own, now is the time to talk about them

Show that you have thought carefully about further studies, know what you are getting into, and have the confidence to go through with it. Have the admissions committee like you! Avoid sounding opinionated, conceited, pedantic or patronizing. Read your essay carefully, and have others read it to find and correct this.

Demonstrate a rounded personality. Include a short paragraph near the end on what you like to do outside of your professional life. Keep the essay focussed. Each sentence you use should strengthen the admissions committee's resolve to admit you. So while you may have done several interesting things in life, avoid falling into the trap of mentioning each of them. Your essay should have depth, not breadth. The resume is where you should list achievements. Remember that you have very little space to convey who you are, so make every sentence count.

Pitfalls your essay must avoid : It is a repetition of the resume or other information available from the application form, It could have been written by just about anybody; your individuality does not come through, It is not a honest account in response to the essay question (why you want to study what you do, what you have learned from an event/person in your life and so on) It has embarrassing, highly personal and emotional content that should be avoided unless it makes a unique, creative point. The admissions committee would not appreciate reading about the pain you went through after breaking up with your boyfriend. An account of how you overcame difficult family circumstances, illness, or a handicap, would be a valid point to include in your essay. However, avoid emotional language.

EDITING AND REWRITING

Language Guidelines

Take another 7-8 days to write 3-4 more drafts. Go through the objectives and pitfalls often. Refer to, and edit your lists as you go along.

Flow

While each paragraph should make a complete statement on its own, the essay should logically progress from paragraph to paragraph. Read your essay for flow, or have someone else read it, and ask yourself if there seems to be an abrupt shift between ideas in two consecutive paragraphs.

Structure

This follows naturally from flow. Do all the paragraphs mesh together to form a cogent whole? Does the essay, through a logical progression of ideas, demonstrate your interest, enthusiasm, and fit in the department you have applied to?

Language

Avoid slang and abbreviations. For acronyms, use the full form the first time and show the acronym in parentheses. Use grammatically correct English and ALWAYS read your essay carefully for spelling mistakes before you send it off - your computer's spellcheck may not flush out all the errors. Try to make your essay crisp, cutting out unnecessary adverbs, articles and pronouns (for instance, a careful reading may yield several "the's" that are superfluous).

Tone

Use a consistent tone throughout the essay - it will only confuse the admissions officers if you alternately sound like Ernest Hemingway and Shakespeare, and is hardly likely to endear you to them! While you should avoid flowery language and cliches, there is no harm in looking for the most apt phrase or sentence. Be careful while using humor - it can misfire and harm your chances.

POLISHING YOUR STATEMENT OF PURPOSE

So now you have a coherent essay put together. You think the structure is more or less right, the ideas flow, and the language isn't bad. What next?

Polishing - The 'In Their Shoes' Check

Put your essay away for a day or two. When you take it out, lay it face down for two minutes while you put yourself in the admissions committee's place. Imagine yourself to be a professor or graduate student who is going through a few hundred applications and classifying them into 'yes', 'maybe' and 'no' piles. Think of how you would look at SoPs and try to read yours through a stranger's eyes. What do you see?

- Remember that for graduate school, your essay need not be great writing. What the school is looking for is a competently written statement of goals and interests that demonstrates how you think, whether you have thought through this decision to apply, and whether your interests and strengths fit in with the program you are applying to. To this end, they expect to see the following in an essay –
 - What areas are you interested in and why,
 - How well defined your interests are,
 - Are these interests based on experience (academic or on the job) that the school may find useful,
 - Where do you see these interests taking you,
 - How do you think graduate school will help you,
 - What experience have you had that will help.

Does your essay cover these points? Does it do so in an honest and interesting manner? Many of the students applying will have backgrounds similar to yours, so avoid cliched ideas.

- Are you repeating information that is available from the resume? Do so very sparingly, and only if you are making a point about your learnings or achievements during that experience. Weed out all other information that sounds like repetition (it will only irritate the reader), or can be included in your resume, or does not actively contribute towards making a point in your essay.
- Does your essay have an interesting beginning? This need not be witty, but should persuade the reader to stay with you.
- Have you talked about specific incidents that illustrate your interest or familiarity with the subject, or show something about you? These incidents might include, for example:
 - A college or work project that was instrumental in confirming your interest in the field (be sure to include a recommendation from your guide!),
 - Extra-curricular activities that brought out useful aspects in you (leadership skills or team activities are particularly helpful for business school applications!),
 - A book or person who had a strong influence on you.
- Does the essay bring out your personality? Or could it have been written by just about anybody?
- Have you mentioned why you are applying to that particular school? Does this section of the essay demonstrate that you have researched the school and the program? DON'T stop at the standard formula phrase, 'I am applying to XYZ because of it's great reputation in _____.'
- Does your essay flow smoothly? If it is choppy and abruptly jumps from paragraph to paragraph, your readers will have a tough time keeping up. Make it easy on them – smoothen the transition between paragraphs.
- Is the tone too formal or not formal enough? Be professional yet informal – the tone you would take with your Principal or Head of Department, for instance.
- Does the essay end well? Does it leave the reader with a sense of completion? Avoid usage of cliches like, 'I hope the admissions committee finds my application up to their expectations'.

Polishing - Showing Your Stuff Around

It is essential to show your SoP to a few people whose opinion you respect – an English teacher from school, a professor, an older friend, a parent or a relative. Include among these, 2-3 people who know you well. Ask your readers to pay particular attention to the following points:

- The beginning and the end – do they hold interest?
- The logical and smooth flow of ideas – does each paragraph smoothly give way to the next?
- The structure – does each paragraph bring home a central idea and contribute to the overall ‘feel’ of the essay? Are the paragraphs in proper positions?
- The style and language – are they appropriate and consistent? Does the essay have too many clichés? Does it repeat particular words or phrases too often? Does it have too many superlatives?
- The tone – is it unnecessarily boastful or overly modest?
- The quality of the essay – is it boring? Does it bring out the writer’s personality? Does it include superfluous information? Or conversely, are there incidents or aspects the essay should mention?

Ask your readers to write their comments on the essay. Also, spend some time discussing it with them. Listen to their suggestions carefully but remember that this is your essay. You don’t have to implement every suggestion, only those that make sense to you.

Polishing - The Final Printout

Once you have the final draft ready (you have to stop sometime!), do the following before you take a final printout:

- Run a spelling and grammar check.
- Read the essay carefully two-three times for spelling or grammar errors the program did not detect.
- Look for and correct any anomalies in spacing, font and margins.
- Choose a readable font and size, nothing fancy. Avoid special effects like underlining, boldface and italics (except in the title, if you have one). Don’t use colors. Don’t use special stationery or your letterhead.
- Make sure that the school and program mentioned in the essay are correct. **THIS IS VERY IMPORTANT.**
- Include a header in the top right-hand corner with your name and the name of the program you are applying to. Use a smaller font size for this.
- Take a rough print and show it to someone else who can read it over carefully for errors and anomalies.
- As far as possible, print out your SoP on a separate sheet of paper. Make sure that the printer cartridge is good enough to print clear, crisp copies. Put in a good-quality sheet of white paper. Keep the printed copy carefully in a folder till you are ready to transfer it to the application envelope.

If you must print or write your essay on the application form itself, take a photocopy of the form. Print or write the essay on the copy first, to ensure that it fits easily in the space provided. If it doesn’t, and you don’t have the option of attaching more pages, cut portions of the essay to reduce its length. This is painful, but a much better idea than reducing font size to unreadable levels or using tiny, cramped handwriting – the essay should never cause strain while reading. While writing by hand, use a good pen, write slowly and carefully and if necessary, draw light pencil lines on the form to ensure that your letters are uniform and in a straight line.