

## **Statements of Purpose for Graduate and Professional School: A “Quick and Dirty” Overview**

### **Admission as “Matchmaking”:**

Applicants are usually very aware of one of the implied questions in the graduate admission process: “Am I ‘good’ enough?” This is obviously an important question. Any admissions committee will be looking for applicants who have:

- adequate preparation in their chosen field
- demonstrated intellectual excellence
- maturity and purposefulness
- intellectual curiosity and a sustaining enthusiasm for the work

Unfortunately, applicants are not sufficiently aware of the other important implied question: “Is this program a good ‘fit’ for me, and am I a good ‘fit’ for this program?” Admissions committees want to make a good match between their programs and the applicants, recruiting students who are not simply smart or talented, but students with scholarly or professional interests that can be pursued successfully within their programs. Applicants should research prospective schools thoroughly so that they know how those programs “match up” with their own intellectual priorities.

The job in the statement is not to talk about your intellectual prowess, but rather about your interests and goals! If you do a good job of this, you will *demonstrate* your intellectual prowess.

### **The Statement as a Matchmaking Tool**

The other parts of the application (transcripts, entrance examinations, letters of recommendation, supplemental materials) tell only part of the story. Students have a tendency to focus on the so-called “objective” factors, such as grades and test scores. However, the “subjective” factors can be just as important, sometimes more important than the numbers. One of the key “subjective” factors is the statement of purpose. The statement provides information about the applicant that cannot be conveyed by the transcript or by performance on standardized tests. Because the statement focuses on the applicant’s interests and goals, it is crucial for helping admissions committees make a good “match” between their program and applicants.

The statement also puts a “human face” on the application, lets the committee know a little bit about the applicant as an individual. This is particularly important in fields where “suitability” is an issue, such as K-12 education. It can make an applicant stand out favorably (or unfavorably!) from an impressive pool. Don’t underestimate the “human” element in the admissions process!

### **The Statement as Aid to Recommenders**

- Provide a copy of your statement, or at least a good working draft, to your recommenders. This will help ensure that what you say about yourself does not conflict with what they say about you and your goals. It will also function as a helpful reminder of details they may forget.

## Content

- The statement of purpose is a place to express your intellectual interests and professional objectives, first and foremost.
- The statement should look both backward and forward. If it doesn't say something significant about where you have been intellectually and/or professionally *and* where you see yourself going, then it hasn't done its job.
- Ideally, the statement should be institution-specific. This greatly enhances its value as a matchmaking tool.
- The statement may address gaps or weaknesses in your history *when necessary* but should not dwell on them.
- It should not be a loose collection of information or informal laundry list of accomplishments, but rather a coherent *essay* which focuses on one or two important ideas and develops those ideas with a fair degree of specificity.
- Write with concrete information!

## Disciplinary Information and Variations

- For information about conventions, usages, vocabulary, or concepts which may be peculiar to your discipline, make sure you consult advisers or faculty in your field!
- The importance of the role played by the statement of purpose varies from one field to another. For example, it plays a much more central role in admission to a Master in Social Work program than to law school. However, you should never assume it is unimportant!

## Style

- The biggest danger is the completely bland or "voiceless" statement.
- Successful statements can be either more conversational, or more formal and "academic" in tone.
- Do not experiment! Be conservative, even if it seems less scintillating.
- Meticulous proofreading is required. The statement should be completely error-free.

## Avoid

- Gratuitous self-revelation. This is not a confessional occasion.
- Showboating (going on and on about awards, honors, prizes, etc.).
- Using jargon of one's discipline in a heavy-handed manner intended to impress.
- Name-dropping, flattery, or other attempts to ingratiate or bamboozle.
- Cliches, vacuous truisms, vague generalizations, second-hand information.
- Misrepresentations of yourself or your interests.

## Format

- Varies wildly from one school to another. Follow instructions!

- Single-spacing is the accepted convention, except when an application specifies otherwise.
- When no specific instructions regarding length or format are given, produce an essay that is one and a half to two single-spaced pages. Any less gives you scant room to be detailed; any more gives you plenty of room for judicious editing.

**Timeline**

- Begin drafting early, at least two months prior to your deadline.
- Two months will give you time to put together a decent draft in time to provide it to recommenders.
- Two months will also allow sufficient time to revise, revise, revise! Get responses from real readers, then revise, revise, revise!

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