

Statement of Purpose

Graduate programs look at a number of things when evaluating applicants, including grades, letters of recommendation, and GRE scores, but the statement of purpose is unique in that it is your one opportunity to synthesize all you have done and present yourself as a unique individual—something you need to do to stand out amidst the sea of other applicants.

Contents of a Statement of Purpose

An effective statement of purpose outlines

1. your specific interests,
2. your relevant experience(s),
3. your plans and goals for your graduate studies and future career, and
4. your reasons for applying to that specific program.

These points should build off each other to express your overall purpose. You may have many interests and experiences, but admissions officers are not looking for an autobiography. They want an honest, concise snapshot of who you are and why you are applying to their program.

Preparing to Write a Statement of Purpose

There are two main subjects you must research and understand before writing a statement of purpose: the institution and program you're applying for and yourself.

The Institution and Program: In order to speak to your reasons for applying to and goals for studying within the program, you need to know what you like about the institution or program and the ways in which your interests and goals align with those attributes.

- Review the catalogue information and departmental website.
- Review the list of course offerings, descriptions, and syllabi.
- Research the work of faculty, alumni, and current students of the program.
- Research the structure and expectations of the program.
- Talk to current students, faculty, and advisors of the program.
- Talk to faculty at UCSB who attended that institution or a similar program.

Yourself: Writing a statement of purpose involves some deep soul-searching and reflection.

- Make a timeline of your life with struggles and achievements.
- List the topics you are most interested in or passionate about.
- Talk to those who know you best about which of your qualities stands out to them.
- Make a cluster of personal qualities.
- Look for themes among your self-reflection and decide what aspects to focus on.
- Identify anything in your application (a poor grade, a quarter off) that you want to explain (often to share what you learned).

Writing a Statement of Purpose

With a general idea of what main points to include and having done some research and pre-writing on the program and on yourself, you can now start drafting your paper.

In some ways, writing a statement of purpose isn't much different from writing any other essay. You need to

- make a "thesis" – what is your purpose (your goal for all of this), why do you want to achieve this goal (some interest or passion), how do you plan on achieving this goal (to be accepted into this program and study whatever it is you intend to study);
- give examples – discuss experiences that tie back to your thesis/purpose;
- analyze your examples – discuss how your experiences illustrate your chosen themes.

In addition, it is important to show, not tell. For example:

- Telling: The program is appealing to me because of its excellent faculty.
- Showing: I have chosen Princeton in part for the opportunity to work with Professors Joshua McCormick and Sharon Reed. Professor McCormick's realignment of contemporary understandings of the economics of shelter informed all my data analysis in my work on homelessness in Washington D.C., and Professor Reed's work on poverty among women aligns closely with my own concerns about the gender of homelessness.

Common mistakes to avoid are:

- Little white lies ("This program is my first choice.")
- Empty flattery ("This program is the finest in the country.")
- Overgeneralizations ("Life in the universe is ever-changing.")
- Narratives of discovery ("At that point I knew I wanted to...")
- Autobiographies ("When I was twelve, my family moved to...")
- Lists already seen elsewhere in the application (awards/accolades, job responsibilities, etc.)

Revising Statements of Purpose

As with any piece of writing, revision is essential. You will go through many drafts before your statement of purpose is ready to submit.

Refer to CLAS handouts and/or consult a CLAS writing tutor to revise

- content (accuracy, clear themes, sufficient explanations),
- structure (paragraph order, breaks, transitions), and
- style and presentation (clarity, concision, grammar, spelling, word choice).

Get feedback from multiple people at different stages of the writing process. Ask them a limited number of specific questions. Ask them to describe their reactions rather than evaluate or assess.