



University of Wisconsin-Madison

Graduate School Statement of Purpose

Adapted from advice from UCLA, MIT, Carnegie Mellon, American Chemical Society, National Institutes of Health, CalTech, Northern Illinois University, Stanford University, Ohio Wesleyan University, University of California Santa Barbara, University of California Irvine, UW-Madison



WISCONSIN
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Statement of Purpose

Graduate schools require a written statement -- often called a "statement of purpose," "personal statement," or "letter of intent"-- as a part of the application. Some statements require rather specific information--for example, the applicant's intended area of study within a graduate field. Still others are quite unstructured, leaving the applicant free to address a wide range of matters. The importance of the statement varies from school to school and from field to field.

Personal Statement vs. Statement of Purpose

Personal Statement

One way to think about PS is that, in general, undergraduate programs are interested in you as a person and what you may offer to enrich their overall university community.

Statement of Purpose

SP describes your “brain,” the scientist you have become and will grow to be. You are now the scientist and any personal information should be related to your scientific approach and how you will enrich the scientific world.

Why Does a Graduate School Ask for a Statement of Purpose?

- To get to know you as scientist
- To see if you can think logically
- To see if you can write well
- To try to determine if you are likely to succeed
 - What do you know about doing research?
 - How effectively can you talk about science?
 - What do you know about the program?
 - How sophisticated are you about graduate school?
 - Do you have characteristics that favor success?
- To see if you will be a good fit for the school

Desirable Characteristics

Creativity	A positive attitude
Problem solving ability	Resilience
Tenacity	Organizational skills
Ability to work in a team	Attention to detail
Independence	Ability to see the big picture
Self-motivation	Ability to prioritize
Good communication skills	Time management skills
Project management skills	Appreciation for diversity
Relevant background knowledge	Good interpersonal skills
Flexibility	Maturity

Determine your purpose in writing the statement

Usually the purpose is to persuade the admissions committee that you are an applicant who should be chosen. Whatever its purpose, the content must be presented in a manner that will give coherence to the whole statement.

Pay attention to the purpose throughout the statement so that extraneous material is left out.

Pay attention to the audience (committee) throughout the statement. Remember that your audience is made up of faculty in your field, and you are not going to tell them how they should act or what they should be. You are the amateur.

Determine the content of your statement

Be sure to answer any questions fully. Analyze the questions or guidance statements for the essay completely and answer all parts. Usually graduate schools are interested in the following matters, although the form of the question(s) and the responses may vary:

- **Your purpose in graduate study.** Think this through before you try to answer the question.
- **The area of study in which you wish to specialize.** Learn about the field in detail so that you are able to state your preferences using the language of the field.
- **Your intended future use of your graduate study.** Include your career goals and plans for the future.
- **Your unique preparation and fitness for study in the field.** Correlate your academic background with your extracurricular experience to show how they unite to make you a special candidate.

Determine the content of your statement

- **Any problems or inconsistencies in your records or scores, such as a bad semester.** Explain in a positive manner. Since this is a rebuttal argument, it should be followed by a positive statement of your abilities. In some instances, it may be more appropriate to discuss this outside of the personal statement.
- **Any special conditions that are not revealed elsewhere in the application, such as a significant (35 hour per week) workload outside of school.** This, too, should be followed with a positive statement about yourself and your future.
- **You may be asked, "Why do you wish to attend this school?"** Research the school and describe its special appeal to you.
- **Above all, this statement should contain information about you as a person.** They know nothing about you unless you tell them. You are the subject of the statement.
- **Include faculty you would like to work with**

Relate your past and present experiences to the future


Past Experiences

have informed

Present Research

can be extended to

Future Research

- 
- Be sure to address how the graduate program will help you meet your future goals.
 - Lets the committee know you have future goals that graduate school will help you achieve.

Example 1

I am an ideal candidate due to the knowledge I have gained thus far in my Master's program at Carnegie Mellon University. I have completed courses in multiple fields of chemical engineering, as well as increased my knowledge in engineering techniques and lab research. I further honed these techniques from participating in a lab research project. My first lab experience started when I joined Professor Annette Jacobson's team to determine the electrophoretic mobility of colloidal contaminants in water, which is useful in water treatment processing. Moreover, I have acquired scientific research skills, for instance, searching literature, designing experiments, analyzing results and writing papers.

Example 2

My Master's from Carnegie Mellon University in Chemical Engineering has equipped me with content knowledge and technical experience on colloidal properties that will be a strong asset to the work on soft matter phenomena currently being conducted at Yale University's department of Chemical and Environmental Engineering. I've focused the majority of my studies on both supramolecular engineering of colloidal forces and aggregation dynamics, and electrophoretic deposition of colloidal crystalline arrays for display technologies. These foci were further honed when I joined Professor Annette Jacobson's team to determine the electrophoretic mobility of colloidal contaminants in water, which is useful in water treatment processing. I plan to extend my research pursuits to intrinsic and extrinsic microstructural relaxation rates in protein separation and crystallization processes, work currently being explored by Professor Michael Lowenberg, and my work on colloidal properties will give me a valuable perspective into that investigation.

Which Example does a better job?

Why are you qualified to attend graduate school?

- Schools want to admit the most qualified students.
- Use your SoP to help explain your qualifications.
- Be specific in what makes you qualified to be a strong graduate student.



Example 1

I am an ideal candidate for Carnegie Mellon University's Electrical and Computer engineering program **due to my extensive research on radio transmitter identification techniques** that can identify multiple transmitters and weak interference sources, independent of the DTV reception. More specifically, my current collaborative publication with Professor Qijun Wu of Xidian University **proposes a timely new transmitter fingerprinting technique that reduces multipath distortion generated by neighboring transmitters in an SFN**, which would enable broadcast authorities and operators to identify the source of in-band interference in some coverage overlapped areas. I believe my expertise at this area could supplement the cutting-edge TxID work being conducted at Carnegie Mellon.

Example 2

I believe my knowledge base, skills and motivation for research make me a great contribution to Carnegie Mellon's electrical and computer engineering research group. I'm passionate and enthusiastic about ECE techniques. I also have a strong background in foundations of engineering, due to my comprehensive undergraduate work, and I'm versed in research methodologies, as shown through my multiple collaborative projects.

Which Example does a better job?

Why are you and the institution a good match?

One of main goals of the admission process is to determine if the graduate program is a good match for the student.

Your SoP will help admission committees determine if there is a good match.

Persuade the admission committee that you are a good match for the school.



Example 1:

My visit to Carnegie Mellon University and my correspondence with several faculty members has further strengthened my will to join CMU's chemical engineering department. I believe that your leading faculty and rigorous training is a good match for my research interests, and will aid me in pursuing an academic career in a top Process Systems Engineering program.

Example 2:

Carnegie Mellon University is the ideal institution to support my academic pursuits since the Process Systems Engineering group's focus on optimization dovetails perfectly with my research interests. I believe I would be a valuable asset to the PSE team's endeavors to solve design and operation problems in process industries, specifically with my research focus in integrated process water systems. In particular, the techniques of Professor Ignacio E. Grossmann on mixed-integer nonlinear programming for the synthesis of integrated process water networks are foundational to my current work. In addition, the work of Professor Nikolaoz V. Sahinidis on global optimization is very intriguing to me as a path for future research, as I've communicated to him in our correspondence. I would greatly appreciate the opportunity to learn from and collaborate with CMU's influential faculty and the Center for Advanced Process Decision-making.

Which Example does a better job?

Determine your approach and style of the statement

There is no such thing as "the perfect way to write a statement."
There is only the one that best fits you.

DOs

- Be objective, yet self-revelatory. Write directly and in a straightforward manner that tells about your experience and what it means to you. Do not use "academese."
- Form conclusions that explain the value and meaning of your experience, such as what you learned about yourself and your field and your future goals. Draw your conclusions from the evidence your life provides.
- Be specific. Document your conclusions with specific instances. See the list of general words and phrases to avoid using without explanation.
- Get to the point early on and catch the attention of the reader.
- Limit its length to two pages or less. In some instances it may be longer, depending on the school's instructions.



Do's

Determine your approach and style of the statement

DON'Ts

- Use the "what I did with my life" approach.
- Use the "I've always wanted to be a _____" approach.
- Use a catalog of achievements. This is only a list of what you have done, and tells nothing about you as a person.
- Lecture the reader. For example, you should not write a statement such as "Communication skills are important in this field." Any graduate admissions committee member knows that.



Don'ts

Words and phrases to avoid without explanation

significant	enjoyable/enjoy	meant a lot to me	I like helping
interesting	feel good	stimulating	people
challenging	appealing to me	incredible	remarkable
satisfying/satisfaction	appealing aspect	gratifying	rewarding
appreciate	I like it	fascinating	useful
invaluable	it's important	meaningful	valuable
exciting/excited	I can contribute	helping people	helpful

MIT's Five Stage Plan to Writing a Statement of Purpose

Do Your Homework

Reflect and Brainstorm

Outline your Statement of Purpose

Draft your Statement of Purpose

Ask for Critique, Revise, and Edit

Stage 1: Do your Homework

1. Browse through the websites of the schools/departments/programs of interest to you. Obtain brochures and booklets and read through them carefully. Highlight the aspects of the programs that appeal to you.
2. Read up on the research interests and projects of the faculty in the schools/departments/programs. Read publications from a faculty of interest.
3. Browse through recent articles from the research field of interest and try to get a general understanding of how the field developed and what are its current problems and challenges.



Stage 2: Reflect and Brainstorm

1. Reflect on your intellectual development.

- What and when were the major moments in your life that have led you to your current research interest(s) and school/department/program?
- What or who influenced your decision or interest (i.e. role models)? What quality about them appealed to you?

2. Why did you choose your research topic(s)/field/school?

3. Why did you choose your undergraduate major?

4. What are your career goals?

- Where do you see yourself in 10 years?
- What do you hope to accomplish?
- What drives you? What motivates you?



Help Brainstorming your Statement of Purpose



Getting Started: Brainstorming Exercises

This form provides spaces for you to brainstorm and draft parts of your essay.

Writers of application essays often feel that they have either too much to say or too little. In either case, a good way to get started is to do some writing that will help generate and focus your ideas.

The form is divided into two parts that you can fill out selectively depending on where you are in the process. The first section includes questions you can use to brainstorm content and the second section guides you through the process of drafting your essay. You can move back and forth between the two sections using the buttons on the bottom of the form.

Use the space below to do some brainstorming and mail your writing to yourself later (using the form below) to keep a record of what you've written. If you're more comfortable writing by hand, take this opportunity to brainstorm on paper in response to the questions and suggestions below.



Stage 3: Outline your Statement of Purpose

1. From the results of Stage II, determine a central theme/topic that stands out or dominates your reflections and brainstorm.
2. Using bullet points and brief comments/statements, organize your reflections and brainstorm ideas that strengthen the central theme/topic of your statement of purpose.
 - Concentrate on your life experiences and give specific examples.
 - Put down only those things that excite you.
 - Do not make things up!
3. Your outline should cover these areas and, preferably, in this order:
 - What aspects of the school/department/program appeals to you?
 - What are your research interest(s)?
 - How did you become interested in your current research topic/area?
 - How did you prepare or are preparing to address the issues in this research area/topic (i.e. research experiences, courses, etc.)?
 - What are your future goals for graduate school (i.e. Ph.D.)?
 - What are your career goals (i.e. professorship)?
 - What characteristics of the school/department/program can help you accomplish your goals?
 - What positive aspects do you bring to the school/department/program?

Stage 4: Writing Draft Statement of Purpose

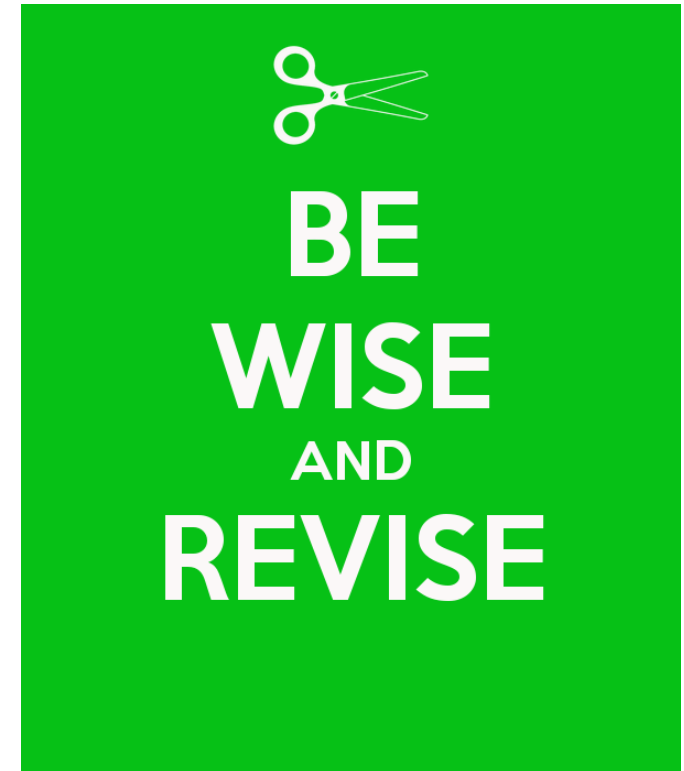
When writing your statement of purpose:

- Always use positive language when referring to yourself.
- Give detailed, but concise examples.
- Use transition words, sentences and paragraphs. Your statement must read smoothly.
- Skip a line after each paragraph.
- Refrain from starting neighboring paragraphs the same way.
- Avoid using vocabulary that you do not know.
- Refrain from repeating yourself.
- Have strong opening and closing paragraph.
- Stay within the 2 – 3 page limit!
- Thank the admissions committee for their time at the end of your statement of purpose.

DRAFT

Stage 5: Ask for Critique, Revise, and Edit

1. When you are finished with your draft statement of purpose, read it out loud to yourself and make corrections.
2. Ask friends, colleagues and professors to read your edited draft. Taking their comments into consideration, revise and edit your draft.



Where to go for help

- Writing Centers provide excellent guidance
- Once you have done a draft (or 2 or 3), show it to people you trust such as faculty, mentors, family, friends, letter of recommendation writers, etc. The best people to review your statement are those who know you well and have excellent writing skills.
- There are a lot of excellent resources online that includes essay critiques and writing tips.