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Personal Statements and Statements of Purpose (SoP)  
Graduate Studies in Social Sciences



# What is a Personal Statement / SoP?

Statement of Purpose, a letter of introduction, a personal statement, or a cover letter.

After all, every person is more than just a number.



# More than just grades

- Ties together and expands on grades, test scores, and application.
- The SoP/PS will tell them “**who you are**” and “**what you want to be**” in a much more detailed and personal way than the other components in the application package.



# Difference between PS and SoP

- **Personal Statement:**
  - personal background, motivation, inspiration, strengths, values
  - what makes you the right candidate for the program
- **SoP:**
  - Why you want to study a certain program
  - Academic aspirations, goals, achievements
  - E.g. Research goals if applying for a Masters program or professor's name who teaches that course



# Basics

## Questions to Answer

The following questions should be clearly answered in your SOP (in relatively this order):

- **WHO** are you (as a person and a student)?
- **HOW** did you become interested in this topic/field of study?
- **WHAT** have you done so far in the field of your choice?
- **WHY/HOW** do you want to study this field?
- **WHY** do you want to study at this university/program and **WHY** are you a good fit?

\*some info may vary depending on the field/working experience and the requirement of the program: E.g. if one has 10-15 years of work experience!!



# Basics

## Length and Formatting

- Between **500 and 1,000 words**, depending on the requirement, level of your program and your academic history and achievements.
- A grad school SOP **usually does not exceed two pages** when written in a traditional font at a readable size of 11-point or 12-point.
- Leave enough whitespace in the margins to make the statement **easy to read** for the admissions committees .
- Your SOP letter should also be double-spaced and **follow standard formatting rules** for university essays.



# Basics

## Style

Although the SOP letter is **more informal than a research paper**, make sure that your language is of an academic level that **reflects your educational level and qualifications** (free of grammatical errors)

Some tips to keep in mind while writing/drafting:

- Compose using “**graduate-level**” academic writing.
- Make your **language more personal in tone** than research writing.
- Use the **active voice** and **first-person point of view** more often.
- Write **chronologically**, starting from your **most important actions** and achievements during your undergraduate years.
- Use lots of **details** — list course names, professors, methods, and specific schools and programs.



# How to Write your SoP?

Let's break it down into three steps

1

2

3



# How to Write your SoP?

1

2

3

Research the **university** and the **program** you are applying for. Make sure you are confident you are a **good fit for both of them**.

Your **Univeristy Website** and the program page has all the info you need.

Pay very close attention to the university's **values, policies, history, faculty, and achievements**. This knowledge will help you stand out from the crowd and show your sincere interest in the university. Even if that seems silly, admissions committees do look for this in your letter.

# How to Write your SoP?

1

2

3

Think about the **motive** and answer it in one sentence or less. This thesis will be your **starting point** for writing the rest of the letter.

Then elaborate by describing your **background**, your **hobbies** and how they **relate to the degree** you are applying for. Perhaps you changed your views on your education because of an experience, people who inspired you and valuable advice you received from your mentors.

**Connect the dots** and start writing.

# How to Write your SoP?

1

2

3

After you've written your first draft, set it aside for a day, **breathe**.

Next, make sure you've answered the prompt and give it a **proper read through** to correct any errors. You can use tools like Grammarly etc. to check for grammatical mistakes.

Ask your **friends, family members, and colleagues** to look at it. You don't have to make all the changes they suggest, but having someone read your draft with a fresh set of eyes is one of the most effective ways to edit your work.

# How to Structure your SoP?

1

## Introduction

An introduction catches your readers' attention with a powerful statement.

In one or two sentences, [state your name] and why you are applying to [university] and [program].

This is your thesis, which you will elaborate on in the next paragraph.

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## Middle

Now elaborate. Start by describing your background, experiences, and interests.

What made you decide to pursue a Master's degree? What are your goals now? How will the program help you achieve them? What will you contribute?

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Address your thesis; express sincere hope and confidence that the university/program you chose is a perfect fit for you.

State why you believe you are a perfect fit for it. End on a pleasant and polite note.

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# Structure deconstructed

- A well-structured Statement of Purpose allows readers to see your growth and development as an individual and as a researcher and student. You can think of the SOP letter as a story where all parts are in sequential, chronological order.
- The following is the most standard structure of a Statement of Purpose. For each “section,” you should write at least one paragraph but no more than two paragraphs, depending on the word-count limit indicated by your graduate program:
  - A “hook” that demonstrates your passion for the field
  - Segue (transition) 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
  - Extracurricular activities in the field
  - Publications and other professional accomplishments in the field
  - Explanations about problems in your background (if applicable)
  - Explanation of why you have chosen the specific grad school
    - Mention one or two professors whose work you appreciate
    - Specific features of the grad program which attract you
  - A brief conclusion repeating your purpose for applying to this program



# Structure deconstructed

<b>Paragraph 1: Introduction/Hook</b>	Your first paragraph should clearly state your intentions for applying and capture the reader with a hook.
<b>Paragraph 2: Background, Interests, and Motivations ("segue")</b>	Include a lot of details about your background, including what classes you have taken and what additional related work you have done.
<b>Paragraph 3: Elaborate on your academic background</b>	If you do not have many academic experiences to draw on, be more specific about what you learned from these courses/professors. If you have extensive experience, focus on those most relevant to your graduate program.
<b>Paragraph 4: Extracurricular Activities</b>	Extracurricular activities not only show dedication to a specific field or interest but also can convey qualities such as leadership and time management.

<b>Paragraphs 5-6: Publications and More Recent Activity</b>	If you have been involved in additional research, writing, or any related activities recently, be sure to include these in your SOP letter.
<b>Paragraph 7: Why are you and the school a good match?</b>	Many applicants to graduate school overlook the importance of discussing the graduate program to which they are applying itself. Be sure to name the school, program, and some resources it offers.
<b>Paragraph 8: Conclusion/Commitment Statement</b>	Include a brief "statement of intent" at the end of the letter to remind the admissions officers that you are intent on entering their program.

# Brainstorming Questions?

## Academic/Professional Interests and Motivations

- What most **interests** you about this area of study?
- **Why** are you interested in this area and topic?
- When did you **first start** to show an interest? How did you **exhibit this interest**?

## Academic Background

- What majors, classes, or other **academic experiences** have you had in this field?
- Which of your work, research, and/or **extracurricular experiences** are related to this field?

## Publications/Professional Accomplishments/Awards

- What work have you **published** or **written** (thesis, dissertation, etc.) related to this field?
- Which **awards** have you received that show my ability?
- What are your short-term and long-term **goals**?
- What do you **hope** to accomplish academically?
- What sort of research or professional work do you want to do in the **future** with your graduate degree or Ph.D.?



# Brainstorming Questions?

## Recent Research/Professional Activities and Preparation

- What work have you been involved in recently that has prepared you for this program?
- What have you been involved in recently to show your interest in this field?

## Why are you interested in this university and graduate program?

- What does this university/program offer you that other schools don't?
- Which courses and professors most interest you?
- What makes you a "good fit" for this institution?
- What will you bring to this program?

## What makes you stand out as a graduate school candidate?

- What other information about you should the school know that will attract them to you?
- Do you have any unique abilities or circumstances?

## Do you have any weaknesses or missing elements you need to explain?

- Do you have any semesters of low grades that you may need to account for?
- Any inconsistencies or big changes in your academic or professional direction?



# General Tips

- Procrastination and overwhelmed?  
Some tips

- Language issues?  
It's okay!

- Follow the requirements

Check the exact requirements on your university's website. Some universities may ask for specific questions/information.

- Be original

Write your own story.

Do not copy and paste the same letter to all the universities you are applying to.

- Be simple and concise

Your writing needs to be concise and to the point. To shorten any text, ask yourself this simple question: "If I delete this word/phrase/sentence, will the meaning of my letter change?" If the answer is "no", delete it.



# General Tips

- **Be personal**

Know whom you are writing for. Do your **research before writing** to them: read their work, learn about their experience and interests.

- **Answer the questions**

When you finish your first draft, **take a break** for a day or two or more; then return to the original prompt and make sure your letter answers it.

- **Write and read properly**

Proofread, proofread, **proofread**. Ask your instructors to give it a read-through. Upload it to Grammarly or the Hemingway App.

# Stay Connected

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