

What's a Good Statement of Purpose?

Your application to any graduate program at GSE requires you to submit a statement of purpose. We attach great importance to the statement. A thoughtful and well-written statement often makes the difference between admission and denial. But applicants frequently fail to do justice to themselves in statements of purpose. In what follows, I offer a few tips to help you to make your best effort.

Your statement should clearly have the purpose it's supposed to have.

That sounds too obvious to be worth saying, but many statements fail on this elementary criterion. The statement should be narrowly focused on convincing the intended reader - i.e., a professor at GSE who teaches in the program to which you are applying - that you have a serious and well-considered purpose in applying to that program. A compelling statement will convince the reader that you are the kind of student likely to thrive in the program to which you are admitted and who would contribute to (and not merely benefit from) our academic community. Too often, statements of purpose are poorly focused, vaguely autobiographical essays, in which case they become inadvertent disclosures of purposelessness.

A statement of purpose is not a narrative of your accomplishments.

The reader of your file will make a judgment about whether you merit admission on the basis of many considerations, and your file will include much material including your transcripts, what your referees say about you, etc., that reveal your academic and other accomplishments. There is no harm in mentioning a particular accomplishment in passing in your statement when this is relevant to explaining your purpose in applying to the program. But statements go astray once the author assumes that his or her purpose is to persuade the reader that he or she is highly qualified for admission. Remember that we will be quick to deny admission if we have insufficient evidence that the candidate is well-suited to the program by virtue of his or her interests and ambitions, regardless of how intellectually well qualified the applicant might be. The statement of purpose is usually the only part of the applicant's file where one can find strong evidence of whether the program will really mesh with the applicant's interests and ambitions. If you devote the statement to a list of the things the great things you have done, then you will merely exasperate the reader.

Your statement should be the right length.

The Stanford on-line application says that the statement should be two pages. Many applicants pay no heed to that stipulation and submit something substantially longer. That is a mistake. Succinctness is a virtue in academic as

in other writing. When your file is being read by members of the faculty, they will be reading it alongside many other files, and they will typically be reading under severe time constraints. People tend not to be especially tolerant of verbosity under these circumstances, to put it mildly. If your reader has evidence that you will take ten words to say something that another, equally qualified candidate will say in six, you might well find that the other candidate will be preferred over you.

Sometimes a statement can be overly concise by failing to give a sufficiently detailed account of the applicant's purpose in applying to the program. If your first draft of the statement is merely a page, then it is probably insufficiently detailed.

Make absolutely sure that your statement contains no misspellings, grammatical or factual errors, and that your prose is as lucid as you can possibly make it.

Your readers will reasonably expect that your statement is an example of your writing at its very best. After all, if you are really serious about applying to graduate school, then you will have devoted a lot of time to your statement, and what the reader sees is presumably the outcome of multiple drafts and prolonged effort. Poor writing and factual errors are very strong evidence that you are not yet ready for graduate school.

A statement of purpose for a doctoral program is different than one for a master's program.

A master's program is not inferior to a doctoral program; it is merely different. Therefore, it would be wrong to infer that standards for a statement of purpose in an application to a doctoral program are higher than the standards applicable to master's applications. But the standards are certainly different. For example, in a statement of application to our master's in the Social Sciences in Education (SSE), an excellent statement of purpose might or might not indicate any particular research topic that the student wishes to pursue in the program. The student might also be unsure about which particular social sciences would be the most important ones in his or her studies. Being unclear about these matters is not inappropriate when one is applying to a broadly focused master's program. But being unclear about them would certainly be a liability in a doctoral application. Academic programs are more intensively specialized at the doctoral level, and a corresponding degree of specialization and precision in the way applicants specify their academic purposes is reasonably expected. Evidence of your familiarity with the educational research currently under way at GSE is probably a good thing to see in any statement of purpose, even at the master's level. But in a doctoral application, it is extremely important to show that your interests converge closely with the current research of faculty who work in the program to which

you are applying. Other doctoral applicants will certainly do this, and if you don't, you will forfeit an important competitive advantage to them.

Your statement should be tailored to the particular institution to which you are applying.

This is not strictly necessary at the master's level, but even there it is a good idea. Of course, it's only commonsense to apply to several similar programs at different institutions, and so your statement of purpose in applying to a program at GSE may be 80% the same as the statement you submit to three or four programs elsewhere. But the few sentences that address why you are applying to *this* institution in particular can be very helpful. A student's application might be quite strong overall without making it clear to the reader why Stanford in particular would be an excellent fit for the student, as opposed to some other institution to which the he or she has applied. A statement of purpose can stand out by addressing that question directly and persuasively.

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