

Tips for writing your *Statement of Purpose*

by Gordon Haas, SFOS

Most ‘statements of purpose’ or ‘letters of intent’ are fine. However, unless you have a funded project and a supervisor lined up, or the rest of your application is impeccable and remarkable, then put substantive efforts into this letter. It really is your only chance to present some personal insights and life beyond the dry numbers provided by your transcripts, GREs, and other such documents. Nowhere else can you directly demonstrate personality, motivation, maturity, interest, enthusiasm, diligence, commitment, and so on. The importance of this letter and its personal attributes become amplified in an application that is in any way ‘marginal’, or that has no specific faculty supporting or justifying it. Your letter must then be even more able to stand, and be noticed, on its own. Most reviewers are unfortunately (and perhaps understandably) not going to work hard at finding reasons to accept you.

This letter is also your opportunity to account for anything about your ‘data’ that would benefit from further explanation. You can assist reviewers in their interpretations of your ‘record’ by highlighting your strongest and most relevant points, especially any not well covered elsewhere in your application. Similarly, you can work to prevent reviewers’ misinterpretations or oversimplifications by being candid about any minor shortcomings and by indicating how you are, or will be, addressing those. You can even help by doing things like recalculating your GPA minus a particular course you did poorly in. Such clarifications can, and in some instances should, include extenuating external circumstances, but then be cautious, concise, and do not overdo it. Basically, be clever in, and work at, presenting yourself favourably, but also always remain honest and never promote yourself beyond reasonable reality. Remember that there is the proverbial fine line between saying too much and not saying enough.

What to include in your statement

The rest of your letter should ideally be largely devoted to convincing reviewers that you are amply qualified for, or even better that you will excel at, graduate school. Under more realistic circumstances, you at least want to demonstrate that you understand those qualifications, that you are working well towards them, that you know what you are getting into, and that you want to and have the capacity to succeed. Keep in mind that the letter should be focused on you because reviewers already (should) know their own schools, colleagues, and themselves. You ideally want to demonstrate:

(1) clear well-defined research and/or career interests that do not end with graduate school:

- what are your short term (graduate degree) goals?
- what are your long term (career) ambitions?
- link these goals and ambitions, and also with all the following points.

(2) good related academic, employment, and life experience in your chosen or related fields:

- what in your past (especially recent events) is directly relevant to these goals and ambitions?
- what fostered your interest?
- particularly relate any experiences that suggest you will be successful.

(3) an understanding of, and perspective on, ‘science’, research, and completing graduate school:

- why are you interested in this field of study, and what excites you about it?
- be explicit and demonstrate knowledge, while avoiding just trying to impress (eg. jargon).
- perhaps try to discuss an idea rather than just describe it (usually more convincing).
- but then also make sure you are getting it largely ‘right’.
- keep in mind that this information could attract and repel potential supervisors.
- express yourself without coming across as uninterested in other and general topics.
- this can also be a good opportunity to differentiate your application from others.
- why have you chosen this particular university and school?
- be specific and demonstrate knowledge—faculty, curriculum, approach, etc.?

Some technical considerations in writing your statement

There are other technical aspects that both facilitate writing a good letter and its review. The letter is a sample of your ability to write and communicate. Be absolutely meticulous about:

(i) brevity

- make effective use of a single full page.
 - shorter can be seen as indicative that you had little to say or did not take time to say it.
 - if cannot fill one page, then keep it shorter as that is better than fluffy verbosity.
 - two pages are harder and time-consuming to read and interpret unless very well written.
- leave out or limit discussions of the commonplace.

(ii) clarity

- show an ability to think, to express ideas effectively, and to keep reviewers interested.
- immediately, readily, and consistently make your case for acceptance.

(iii) spelling

- just get this write...

(iv) grammar and style

- put all and any advice from here and elsewhere into your own style ('personal uniqueness').
- this comment may initially appear contradictory, but you do not want to sound the same as everyone else or to come across as anyone but you. Keep this in mind throughout.
- good writing counts!
- perhaps try to create and follow an outline that lists possible components of the letter.
- for some modest help, see my [course web pages](#).

(v) other information can be worth examining, but do not get overwhelmed or bogged down.

- carefully consider applicability and relevance (eg. read reviews at [Amazon.com](#)).
 - Asher, D. 2000. **Graduate Admissions Essays: What Works, What Doesn't and Why**. Revised Edition. Ten Speed Press, Berkeley, CA, USA.
 - Jerrard, R., and M. Jerrard. 1998. **The Grad School Handbook: An Insider's Guide to Getting and Succeeding**. Berkley Publishing Group, New York, NY, USA.
 - Mumby, D.G. 1997. **Graduate School: Winning Strategies for Getting in With or Without Excellent Grades**. Proto Press.
 - Richardson, J. 2000. **Mastering the Personal Statement**. Richardson Press,
 - Stelzer, R.J. 1997. **How to Write a Winning Personal Statement for Graduate and Professional School**. Third edition. Petersons Guides, Lawrenceville, NJ, USA.
 - Stewart, M.A. 2002. **Perfect Personal Statements: Law, Business, Medical, Graduate School**. Petersons Guides, Lawrenceville, NJ, USA.
- general 'fisheries' — [American Fisheries Society—Guidelines for Finding a Fisheries Graduate Program](#).
- and finally, do take the [Unvalidated Graduate School Potential Test](#).

This 'advice' is at least partly based on other similar documents that I have read over the years. I cannot recall those details, but would like to acknowledge that work. Good luck, and best wishes.

Cheers,
Gordon