

GRADUATE SCHOOL TIPS: Writing the Statement of Purpose or Personal Statement

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Graduate study is not for slackers. It takes focus and determination to pursue an advanced degree.

That's why admissions committees examine your statement of purpose very closely—they want to see whether you have the right stuff to succeed in graduate school.

What are they really asking anyway?

Different schools will give you different prompts for the statement of purpose. Nonetheless, they're all asking for the same four pieces of information:

- What you want to study at graduate school?
- Why you want to study it?
- What experience you have in your field?
- What you plan to do with your degree once you have it?

Admissions committees look for candidates with clear, well-defined research interests that arise from experience. With that in mind, your statement should reveal that you care deeply about your chosen discipline and that you have the background to support your ideas and sentiments. It should also demonstrate that you're a diligent student who will remain committed for the long haul.

However you approach these points, it's imperative that you answer the questions asked in the essay prompt. Being substantive and direct is much better than being creative or flashy.

Avoid this mistake

Grad school applicants commonly make the error of including a paragraph about how well-rounded they are: They're avid ultimate-Frisbee players, they write short stories or they love to cook. Colleges are interested in this stuff; graduate schools are not. Grad schools are looking for great minds who will achieve mastery of a specific subject area. They don't care that you make a great chicken casserole or play intramural bocce ball 😊

They do care about those activities that speak to your suitability for graduate work. As a graduate student, you'll be called upon to do difficult coursework and research. You may have to teach undergraduate classes within your field and conceivably even design a course. And you'll have to get along with a diverse group of colleagues who will sometimes work very closely with you. Any experience in school, work or your extracurricular life that speaks to those abilities is worth talking about.

Make your statement of purpose unique

While it's important to be focused, there's no need to be boring. To distinguish your essay, add unique (yet relevant) information. One of the best ways to do this is to discuss, briefly, an idea in your field that excites you intellectually. It's an effective essay-opener, and it lets you write about something besides yourself for a bit.

Remember, the idea you choose to talk about can tell an admissions committee a lot about you. And it demonstrates your interest in your field, rather than just describing it.

Don't forget

Be sure to show your statement of purpose to someone you respect, preferably the professors who are writing your recommendations, and get some feedback on the content before you send it in. If you need to revise it, do so and then ask for more feedback.

Have someone else proofread your essay for spelling and grammar. A fresh set of eyes often picks up something you missed. Better yet, if you have enough willing friends, have a couple of people proofread each statement.

Finally, don't just reuse the same statement of purpose for each school to which you apply. You can recycle the same information, but make sure you change the presentation to fit each school's individual program.