THE STATEMENT OF PURPOSE

In this piece we will review the nature, elements, and best practices of the Ph.D. Statement of Purpose (SOP). We will do our best to dispel a few myths regarding this very particular piece of writing in an effort to quell a few anxieties you might face as you sit to write your SOP.

First, a few "truths" regarding the Statement of Purpose.

The Statement of Purpose is the single most important part of your Ph.D. application. It is often the first document an Admission's Committee member will read when considering your application.

You will have to write and rewrite and edit and rewrite your SOP many, many times. Schedule a ten-draft process.

The SOP is the single most frustrating part of your Ph.D. application.

The SOP is a marketing document. You are the product.

It's only purpose is to get you into a Ph.D. program.

The person you promote is you as a researcher, potential colleague, and cohort member, which is slightly different from but not necessarily totally apart from, who you are as "a person" outside of the academy.

The SOP is not a "growth narrative."

This is a very formal—as in, it has a defined structure—piece of writing.

You will not be held to the research project you detail in your SOP.

Once you're accepted to a program, you never have to look at your SOP again—we promise.

The Selection Process . . . Possibly

Though the selection process varies by department and university, we can say, with some confidence, that you should expect your application to go through at least three to four rounds of consideration before being accepted into a Ph.D. Program.

1. Applications are distributed to committee members (sometimes by specialty) with the mandate to select the best 10-15%. There's usually some sort of ranking system.
    a. Please note, readers often receive a large quantity of applications in round one.

2. The merits of the chosen 10-15% of applications are discussed and debated by the committee. Often, some sort of applicant ranking occurs. A percentage of these applications are then rejected.
3. The remaining applications are distributed to different Admission Committee members for further consideration.
   a. Usually, readers receive far fewer applications than they did in round one. Here, committee members again rank their applicants.
4. The committee meets again. Further debating, ranking, and culling. If a consensus is reached, then the Admissions Committee extends fellowship invitations and waitlist notifications to the applicants. If no consensus is reached, which is usually pretty rare as the semester is about to start and applicants are getting antsy, then another round of debate tends to put a pin in the process.

The Audience . . . Usually

Sign-posting matters.

Like most pieces of writing, it helps to understand your audience before beginning the drafting process. Most Ph.D. program Admissions Committees are a mix of faculty and elected student volunteers. Often, serving on an Admissions Committee is one of the most onerous, time-consuming service assignments in the department. Ph.D. applications are long, complicated documents that tax the reader's psychic bandwidth. Admissions Committees meet over winter break, in the few short weeks between the New Year and the beginning of the spring term. Most people who volunteer to serve on an Admissions Committee care deeply about the future of the program, otherwise they would not surrender their vacation time to free academic-labor.

Most programs ask their committee members to read many applications in the first round of culling. Because elite programs often have somewhere between 300-400 applications for anywhere from 6 – 15 spots; it's not unusual for a committee member to be handed a stack of forty applications with the mandate to select four or five candidates for entry into the second round of culling. **This requires readers to Read Fast and to Read To Say NO.** This is vital. The SOP readership lives in the rarified world of the academic committee motivated not by the desire to help you and your ideas grow but by the need to say "no." There's just no way to read 30 - 40: 2–3-page SOPs, 15–20-page writing samples, CVs, transcripts, and three 2–3-page letters of recommendation per application without reading quickly and with intention. The time constraints of the application process and Admissions Committee scheduling preclude readers from giving their complete attention to every word of your SOP with eyes conditioned by a desire to say yes.

The nature of your reader's attention—quickened, considerate, and critical—demands clean and clear sign-posting throughout your SOP. Every paragraph of your SOP needs a compelling

Topic Sentence that clearly articulates the purpose of the paragraph. Ideally, each paragraph's Topic Sentence supplies an argument that conveys what makes you an ideal applicant.

When reading your SOP, committee members tend to keep a few big questions in mind. Below we list what we believe to be the most important questions to your readership followed by the part of your SOP that engages with the question.

1. What makes the applicants work matter?
   a. Your research plan and intervention.
2. Are they prepared for the rigors of Doctoral Studies?
   a. Relevant academic experience and knowledge of field of study.
3. Will you finish?
   a. Motivation, long-project completion, relevant alt-ac experience.
4. Who are they
   a. Subject position, especially if relevant to research.

The Formula . . . Very Likely

A quick note on the structure of the rather formulaic outline provided below . . . we used the questions listed above as the organizing principle of our SOP blueprint. We believe beginning with the present, moving into the future, then supporting your claims with respect to your potential with evidence of past academic and alt-ac experience creates a more compelling narrative than one that begins with "I first fell in love with . . ." In our experience, the most successful SOP's engage with each of the questions listed above. The sections marked "Introduction" and "Conclusion," though important, do not necessarily answer the questions above and should be the first cuts you make when editing your SOP.

Schematic at 2 pages—approximately 1100 words. Note: the outline below operates to scale.

- Introduction: 1 paragraph, locate yourself and research

- Section One: 1 – 2 paragraph(s), current work

- Section Two: 1 – 2 paragraph(s), research plan

- Section Three: 1 paragraph, academic experience

- Section Four: 1 paragraph, life/service experience

- Section Five: 1 paragraph, fit

- "Conclusion:" not always necessary

Introduction

This relatively brief paragraph—call it three to four sentences—locates you and your research. Here, let your reader know where you are as a scholar (i.e., a recent grad of an MA program, a returning student who took five years off from academic life, an analyst at a hedge fund looking to transition into academic life). You may also consider briefly outlining—your elevator pitch— what kind of scholarship you are currently working on or a recent project that you completed.

Section One—1 -2 paragraph(s), current work

In this section you are, in part, answering: "Are they prepared for Doctoral Studies?" Ideally, you demonstrate to the reader that you are already engaged with advanced graduate level work and have the requisite research skills to navigate the idiosyncrasies of your discipline. This section works best if you can, in some way, set the stage for your future research. Consider summarizing your MA thesis or relevant undergraduate scholarship. Here, especially if you worked in a lab alongside a professor or worked as a GA/TA, you may want to "name drop" a professor or two. This can be a very powerful moment of institutional accreditation, particularly if the professor(s) you mention support your claims in letters of recommendation. We caution against discussing coursework that you found impactful—nearly every applicant can name a course or two that transformed the way they think. **Remember to reaffirm what makes your work matter!**

Section Two—1 – 2 paragraph(s) your research plan

This is your research plan and intervention. This section focuses on the Question: "what makes their work matter;" while also demonstrating your knowledge of your field of study and the current climate of scholarship in your discipline (in part, answering "are they prepared for the rigors of doctoral studies"). You'll want to do some research with respect to what's "in vogue." Consider reading the table of contents of the leading journals in your field to get a feel for what's current. You do not want to find yourself making bold claims regarding the cutting-edge nature of your research only to find that it engages with your discipline in an already established and thoroughly exhausted critical lens.

Section Two is arguably the most important part of your SOP. Ideally, Section Two builds off of Section One (though this is not necessary). Here, you try to articulate the kind of scholarship you'd like to pursue as a graduate student. Remember, you will not be held to what you sketch out in Section Two. The goal of this section is to show your reader that you have some understanding of the kind of work done in your field and the kind of research done in advanced doctoral studies. This is really more of a matter of "how you think" through a possible project than "have you mastered the content of your discipline." Indeed, your readers expect the project you discuss in Section Two to change. You have at least two more years of course work and orals/lab work ahead of you that will undoubtedly effect your scholarship before you even begin to propose a dissertation project.

Section Three—1 paragraph, academic experience

Like Section One and Two, Section Three attends to more than one of the questions listed above. At its best, Section Three will show your reader that you are prepared for the rigors of advanced graduate studies and that you have the will to complete a long-term project. Ph.Ds. take a minimum of five years to complete. Your reader wants to know that you will make it through the program. After all, you represent a significant financial investment by your department (oh and completion rates influence doctoral program rankings).

By the time you apply for a Ph.D. program, you will likely have a series of academic achievements to call on for Section Three. We encourage you to filter your relevant academic experience through a lens conditioned by your future project. Pick the highlights from your academic life relevant to their use-value with respect to the kind of work you plan to do in your doctoral studies. For example, if you intend to study linguistics based on the quant analysis of marginalized indigenous languages, then you should focus this section on your fluency in relevant software programs and data analysis, not your award for best undergraduate English paper in Romantic Poetry. Picking what matters to a semi-realized future project can be tricky. Take the time to really think through what may matter to your future self. Here too, you can discuss work you've done with faculty, though only if it relates to your future studies. Do your best not to turn this section into an "academic biography."

Section Four—Life | Service Experience

This is where you can let your reader know "who you are." SOPs are unique documents. Yes, who you are matters. Your subject position plays a part in everything that you do as a researcher. We are us. That said, your personal narrative is arguably the least important part of your application. What you share about your personal life—your history, subject position, life experience—should be at least tacitly framed by your research project. Remember, the SOP is a marketing document that exists only to get you into a Ph.D. program. It is not who you are or what you believe. Often, students let this section take over their SOP at the expense of their research project. Be wary. That said, there's room in Section Four to show the reader what kind of citizen you will be in the department. Your readers are picking a colleague not a student. Of all the sections in the SOP, Section Four may be the most difficult to navigate.

Side note: if you have relevant alt-ac experience that demonstrates an ability to complete long-term, self-motivated projects, this is the time to talk about them.

Section Five—Fit

The classic finish to an SOP. Here you discuss why the program and you are a match. You'll want to name the program and at least one but likely no more than two professors that you'd like to work with in the department. You'll want to mention a project or article your targeted faculty member is working on. Be sure to do your research. You don't want to talk about projects that your targeted faculty members moved on from a decade ago. Here too, you may want to talk about particular archives or facilities the department has access to that could advance your research agenda.

The Conclusion

This is the first bit of the SOP you should cut if you need to trim your piece. It's your "thanks for reading," "I look forward to joining you . . .," "more information on my scholarship can be found at_____" closing. Indeed, most SOPs end with Section Five.

Further Notes:

You may have noticed that we have not yet discussed when you should talk about a desire to be an educator. The drive to teach can be a boon to an application. Unfortunately, depending on the program, it can also make you seem like a less serious researcher. Sometimes teaching and scholarship live in different academic spheres. We believe there is room to discuss your desire to teach—Sections Four and Five (especially if the program you apply to has a rich, teaching-forward culture, like the GC) are possible locations to articulate your ambitions as an educator.