writing an effective statement of purpose

your statement of purpose is a brief piece of writing in which you will describe who you are and what you want. it simultaneously operates as . . .

• an interview
• a sales pitch
• a letter of intent
• a prospectus
• a writing sample
General Guidelines

Know the application process

√ understand the role of the statement of purpose in the application packet
√ consider your audience (members of a selection committee)
√ follow the directions given in the application packet including page lengths, font size, etc.

Pre-writing (brainstorming, researching, outlining, listing, free-writing, clustering, etc.)

The Institution and Program

Sometimes a statement prompt will ask you to say why you are applying to the particular program. For academic MA or PhD programs, this information is particularly important. For each program to which you are applying, make a list of things you like about that program. Select the most important ones to put in your statement. Here’s how to find out what they are:

√ read catalog information about the institution & the program
√ read departmental web sites
√ review lists of course offerings
√ read course descriptions & course syllabi online
√ read faculty profiles & recent faculty publications to find out what their research interests are
√ read web pages of current students to find out about the kind of work possible at the school that you are considering
√ find out the structure of the program. How much coursework will you do? How much independent research?
√ talk to faculty at UCSB, especially those who did graduate or undergraduate work or formerly taught at the school to which you are applying
√ talk to students in the program & student advisors to find out what the strengths & weaknesses of the program are
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√ talk to department staff or look online to find previous years’ admissions statistics such as #applied #enrolled #admitted demographic information

The Application Packet

Usually includes
• the application form itself
• undergraduate transcripts
• letters of recommendation
• the Statement of Purpose

And sometimes includes
• a vitae or resume
• an essay other than the statement of purpose

Note what transcripts show & do not show about an applicant’s academic performance

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Pre-writing (more brainstorming, researching, outlining, listing, free-writing, clustering, etc.) about little old you

You should devote several hours to brainstorming about what to include in your statement. Cast the net wide. Think about many experiences that you might want to talk about in your statement that you will ultimately narrow down to five or six or even fewer.

Some ideas . . .

✓ interview people who know you in different contexts--family members, peers, friends, employers, professors, teaching assistants, tutors. This works better for people applying to professional (as opposed to academic) programs for which the statement can focus more on personal qualities and aptitudes than specific research interests.

✓ draw on personal resources--letters, journals, emails, your blogs, photographs--to fill in the gaps in your personal history.

✓ make a detailed timeline of your life, especially your life during undergraduate study (use details from your life to fill in the timeline below)

✓ use your transcripts and whatever sources you have at your disposal--the UCSB catalog, your textbooks, the papers you wrote, the exams you took, class notes, notes in the margins of books--to help you to remember details about your coursework that your transcripts don’t show. This academic material is most important for people applying to academic MA and PhD programs.

Note what transcripts show & do not show about an applicant’s academic performance

<table>
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<th>grades</th>
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<td>Spring</td>
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<td>Spring</td>
<td></td>
<td>Fall</td>
<td>Winter</td>
<td>Spring</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Show

Grades

Units taken
courses taken credit/no credit
major(s) & GPA
term course load & performance
course names & number
upper & lower division work
number of years in school
name of institution(s) attended

Do not show

Why grades were received
what grades mean
difficulty of courses taken
course requirements
course format
descriptive course titles
specific work performed in courses
information about faculty
applicant's relationship with faculty
√ make a cluster of your personal qualities

√ make a map of the different parts of your super-fabulous life

√ make a map of the different parts of your super-fabulous life

√ read statements of purpose written by people in your field of interest
  • if you have any graduate-student friends, ask if they will let you read their statements
  • compare notes with peers who are writing statements of purpose
  • ask the graduate advisor in your department if sample statements of purpose are available
  • look online for sample statements

PLANNING YOUR ESSAY

√ Choose the most relevant & most vivid examples from your brainstorming

√ Draft in sections in the order easiest for you

√ Practice page visualization
what you write

√ Develop a set of thematics that you want to carry through the whole essay (advanced understanding of a current debate in your field, commitment to public health, multicultural understanding)
√ Discuss experiences that illustrate these thematics
√ Assess or explain each concrete detail in terms of its meaning for you. These explications of meaning should be consistent with your thematics.
√ Tell the truth

DANGERS LURKING JUST BENEATH THE SURFACE

- little white lies
- empty flattery
- overgeneralizations
  - the philosophical
  - the one-dimensional
  - the juvenile
  - the painfully obvious
- narratives of discovery
- autobiographies

this program is my first choice ...
this program is the finest in the country ...
life in the universe is ever-changing ...
my only goal in life is ...
I have always wanted to be a doctor ...
I believe that my undergraduate education has prepared me for ...
at that point I knew I wanted to ...
and when I was twelve my family moved to ...

√ Show; don’t tell

WORDS AND PHRASES THAT TELL RATHER THAN SHOW

ADJECTIVES

stimulating    significant
enthusiastic    interesting
valuable     challenging
exciting   rewarding
helpful   gratifying
remarkable    meaningful
appealing    responsible
important    useful
fascinating

VERBS

like
enjoy
appreciate
help people
means a lot to me
can contribute
feel good

TELLING

My work as a teacher’s aide was challenging.

The program is appealing to me because of its excellent faculty.

I will put my writing and analytical skills to good use at Boalt Hall.

SHOWING

My work as a teacher’s aide in a bilingual third grade classroom included planning and implementing lessons in English and Spanish, organizing recess activities, and working individually with students who needed extra help with reading and writing skills.

I have chosen Princeton in part for the opportunity to work with and learn from Professors Joshua McCormick and Sharon Reed. Professor McCormick’s realignment of contemporary understandings of the economics of shelter informed all of my data analysis in my work on homelessness in Washington D.C. Professor Reed’s work on poverty among women, of course, aligns closely with my own concerns about the sex of homelessness.

I also plan to use the analytic skills developed in my undergraduate studies in Philosophy and the critical reading and writing skills developed in my studies of Literature to contribute to the law school’s journal and to teach legal writing in the undergraduate pre-law program.
And now the real fun begins: Revision Strategies

√ Revise

• For Content
  --- check evidence for detail and accuracy
  --- are you expressing a clear set of thematics?
  --- are you explaining the importance of the experiences that you describe in the statement?

• For Structure
  --- check paragraph order, breaks, and transitions

• For Style & Presentation
  --- check for clarity, conciseness, grammar, spelling

• Look at your word choices
  --- are any of your words vague or imprecise?

√ Get Feedback

• list 5 people whose opinion and/or writing ability you trust to ask for feedback
  1. _________________________
  2. _________________________
  3. _________________________
  4. _________________________
  5. _________________________

• ask for feedback from different people

• ask for feedback at different stages of the writing process

• ask each reader a limited number of questions

• ask each reader specific questions

• ask each reader to describe their reactions rather than evaluate or assess

For additional information about the writing process, see the following CLAS handouts:

  Prewriting Strategies
  Transitions and Logical Cues
  Revising Sentences
  Clarity
  Style
  Punctuation Pattern Sheet
  Passive Voice

For individual assistance at any stage in the writing process, drop in or sign up for an appointment with a CLAS writing tutor--open Monday-Thursday 9 to 5, Monday-Wednesday 6-10, and Fridays 10 to 3 in SRB 3240.