

Statements of Purpose

A statement of purpose is a paper that explains an applicant's goals and reasons for pursuing a specific program, scholarship, or other opportunities. This is most commonly used when applying for graduate programs, alongside personal statements. It also allows you to share your academic objectives and interests, and you will include any relevant academic background and training. These statements are read by the admission committee of whatever program(s) you are applying to.

What's the difference between a statement of purpose and a personal statement?

A personal statement is also asked for in many applications, but it serves a different purpose. Both personal statements and statements of purpose are used to tell an admissions team more about yourself, and it's important in both to highlight training and achievements from your past that don't show up elsewhere in your application.

A personal statement often has a narrative prompt in which you tell a story about yourself to demonstrate your skills, key characteristics, etc. A personal statement showcases your achievements, interests, unique traits, abilities, and experiences. There is room for some artistry in a personal statement, but it's best to keep flowery language away from your statement of purpose.

A statement of purpose is a more academic genre of writing, and it needs to show your *objectives and goals* for the program. *Why* would you benefit from this program? *How* would you further research in this discipline? *How* would you use what you learn in this program in your future career?

How do you organize a statement of purpose?

If you are writing your statement of purpose for a college program, they will often provide a prompt; it's usually best to present your ideas following the order of the questions/ideas within the prompt itself. Colleges tend to pose their questions in order of importance, so keep that in mind as you are planning your statement.

How should you organize statements that don't have a prompt (or that simply instruct you to write a statement of purpose)? You can organize your ideas in a way that suits the content you want to include. Let's say you want to highlight achievements, objectives, and academic interests. Your academic interests section could be put in as early as the introductory paragraph

since it will highlight why you are interested in the given program. The following paragraph could focus on achievements and what you bring to the table (to showcase what you've already done). You could then end with your goals and objectives as you move forward into the program, focusing on what the program will allow you to accomplish.

There is often a word limit, but statements of purpose are often about two pages in length (~500 words). You don't want to overwhelm the committee, but make sure to include the most important information!

How can I decode the prompt?

Sometimes, prompts that are given by any source can be confusing. That's why it's important to note how to decode what is being asked of you. Let's use this prompt as an example: What are your professional plans and career goals? How will pursuing graduate studies assist you in reaching those goals?

Let's break it down! This college wants you to write about your goals in the professional world—not your goals in regard to the school—which is something to note. The words “career” and “professional” are key here.

The second question is asking about what the college can do for you. It's asking you what they can do to help you reach those “career goals.” This type of question is often included in a statement of purpose prompt so the college can determine if your goals align with what the college offers. Ensure you've done research so you're familiar with the program and college, so you can then highlight that knowledge in your statement.

What about this prompt? Describe your research, scholarly, or creative interests. What topics are of particular interest to you? Reviewers know that interests change over time, but try to be as specific as possible.

This prompt is asking you to provide background information about your research and scholarly papers, but they also want to know what topics are interesting to you. This question can be a bit deceiving. They aren't asking you to give them hobbies, but they are instead asking you to write about topics *relevant to their program*. Are you interested in how the English Department might utilize physical art? Include that detail instead of saying that one of your interests is physical art.

The same principle applies to topics. Topics of interest for STEM majors will differ from topics of interest for art majors, and that's okay. What you need to keep in mind, regardless of major, is that the college is looking for *what they can provide you* and *what you can provide them*, so try to keep the topics related to the major/your objectives.

What should a statement of purpose include and what should it exclude?

What to Include

The most important information in a statement of purpose is what the college wants from you. If you do not address the given questions/topics in your statement of purpose, your application will likely be declined. If they ask for achievements, you must include relevant achievements. If they ask for your reason for wanting to attend their school, you need to include it. This response also shows that you did research on the school, along with its programs and professors. Show your genuine interest and motivations for attending this school.

Your objectives and academic interests are also important components. Your objectives should tell the college what you hope to accomplish while attending their institution. You can discuss what you want to do after the program (especially if the prompt asks for it), but you must tell them what you hope to accomplish there first. They care about what you plan to do for them. Your academic interests are important because they show what you want to study. This part is where you can show off your knowledge! Mention a professor you want to work with or a course you want to take.

It's also best to mention your previous achievements. If you won an award in your industry, mention it! College boards love to see what you've previously done because it gives them an idea of your capabilities. However, make sure to not brag or be overly humble about your accomplishments. Achievements, like awards, need to be stated, but you must ensure that you only include achievements that are relevant to the program.

What to Exclude

As stated previously, it's important to note the differences between a personal statement and a statement of purpose. You're going to want to avoid a narrative and flowery or poetic language; that's better served in a personal statement. Also avoid using phrases such as "I think." Admissions boards like firm language; you don't think it—it's a statement of fact! It's best to be confident in your goals and previous accomplishments.

Statement of Purpose Example

Sample Paragraph: Academic Achievements

This section should detail your achievements and possibly name drop your former professors.

Statement of Purpose

However, college was where my interests and skills flourished. I was mentored by renowned writers, such as Gayle Brandeis and June Saraceno during my time at Sierra Nevada University. Gayle gave me the gift of validating and critiquing my writing, while June gave me deeper insights on literature as a whole, allowing me to learn from writers around the world. While at my university, I was an English tutor. I helped students from every major, whether it was with an

essay, an analysis of writing and literature, or a peer's creative writing piece. In addition, I had a poem published in the *Beyond Thought Journal*, titled "glory be." I was also awarded the "Up and Coming Writers" award, "Outstanding Achievement in Fiction" award, and the "Departmental Scholar in Humanities" award. I earned the "Up and Coming Writers" award due to my hard work within the major, via my quick improvement and willingness to learn. After I finished my senior project, *Memento Mori*, I was awarded "Outstanding Achievement in Fiction" and "Departmental Scholar in Humanities."

~Samuel Michael, "Statement of Purpose"

Sample Paragraph: Achievements Outside of Academics

Here is where you're going to want to show relevant achievements that don't relate to academics, but *do* relate to your degree/field of study.

Outside of academics, I continued to be part of Sacramento's NaNoWriMo chapter, becoming the regional Municipal Liaison in 2022. I coordinated events, helped others, and led thought-provoking conversations. Community is the life blood of Sacramento's NaNoWriMo chapter, so my weekends were always spent with the group, brainstorming and talking about our projects.

~Samuel Michael, "Statement of Purpose"

Sample Paragraph: Conclusion

There are a few things you want to include in your conclusion. For example, you want to make sure you mention the full name of the university and the program title. It is important to not use acronyms here, as it is more formal to spell them out.

With a Master's of the Fine Arts degree from San Jose State University in Creative Writing, I plan on becoming a professor, so I can share my passion and the wonders of writing. I also wish to pursue my own writing, in the fashion of finishing and publishing my novel. Over the years, I've grown in my writing and professional life. My academics have pushed me to go further, with professors who have given me confidence in my abilities. My various leadership roles and continuous writing experiences have prepared me for the graduate work that San Jose State University's program has to offer.

~Samuel Michael, "Statement of Purpose"

Activity 1: Decode the Prompt

Below is a real prompt from Purdue University. Using what you've learned, use the blank space to write out what you think the university is looking for.

The following topics should be addressed in your Academic Statement of Purpose.

1. What are your professional plans and career goals? How will pursuing graduate studies assist you in reaching those goals?
2. Describe your research, scholarly, or creative interests. What topics are of particular interest to you? Reviewers know that interests change over time but try to be as specific as possible.
3. Discuss how your experiences, skills, and abilities have prepared you for graduate study. Relevant topics may include coursework, work and research experiences, internships, presentations, exhibits, publications, and community service. If you describe a research or scholarly experience, include information on the topic, research mentor, your role, and outcomes.
4. Describe how your skills, preparation, and interests are a match for the program to which you are applying. Identify faculty who share your research and scholarly interests. Reviewers will want to know that you have researched the program, faculty, and key focus areas.

~Purdue University, "Academic Statement of Purpose"

Activity 2: Brainstorm Your Ideas

In the blank space below, brainstorm ideas based on the prompt and see what you come up with!

References

Purdue University. "Academic Statement of Purpose." How to Apply-Academic Statement of Purpose-Office of the Vice Provost for Graduate Students and Postdoctoral Scholars. www.purdue.edu/academics/ogsps/admissions/how-to-apply/apply-statement.html.

Reyell, Brendon. "How to Write a Statement of Purpose for Graduate School." Northeastern University Graduate Programs, 15 Dec. 2024. graduate.northeastern.edu/knowledge-hub/how-to-write-a-statement-of-purpose.