

How to Write Personal Statements and Application Essays



BASIC FORMAT FOR ESSAY

Introduction and thesis statement (Say what you want to do)

Before writing an essay you must have a thesis statement. This is one sentence announcing the central idea of the paper. It must be specific and should sum up the meaning of the essay and signal what is to come.

- The first sentence is the most important because it gets the reader's attention.
- The first paragraph (introduction) is very important. It should "hook" the reader, i.e. make him or her want to continue reading.

The body of the paper (Do it)

Each paragraph should deal with one central idea. This idea is introduced early in a topic sentence, telling the reader what to expect in the paragraph. Several ideas in one paragraph will only confuse the reader. If the central idea has several supporting points, break it into several paragraphs rather than having one very long paragraph.

It is not enough to simply state ideas, you must support them. By giving evidence, you convince readers of the truth and accuracy of your ideas. If you successfully prove your statements, the reader should agree with your conclusion.

As a writer, you must structure the sequence of ideas carefully and logically. You are mapping a course, leading the reader through the points that support your thesis. You do not want to confuse the reader. *Transitions between paragraphs link them logically. These "connecting sentences" help the paper flow smoothly.*

Conclusion (Say what you have done)

Restate the thesis and main points supporting it. You should give some new ideas or information to challenge the reader to think further.

WRITING THE STATEMENT OF PURPOSE

"Graduate schools and competitive undergraduate programs want students who are able to think clearly, without confusion. The statement of purpose will demonstrate, fortunately or unfortunately, whether you possess that quality. When one reads a proposal that is poorly organized, filled with EXTRANEIOUS details, and foggily focused, one gets the immediate impression that the mind that produced such confusion can never be disciplined enough to regard facts

objectively and present them logically." (Leedy, Paul D., *Practical Research Planning and Design*, MacMillan Publishing, Co., New York, 1993.)

Step One: Know Yourself

With the statement of purpose you persuade the admissions committee to accept you. To convince them, you must be convinced yourself. You must be sure of what you want and why, and why that particular program can help you. Why should the school select you over someone else? Know your strengths and weaknesses. Before beginning to write, review your intellectual and personal development over your academic career. When you can clearly articulate the history that led you to apply to a particular American program, you are ready to begin writing.

Step Two: An Outline

This does not need to be written in complete sentences. The outline below is just an example. The points can be in a different order, but you should have an introduction, body, and conclusion. Decide what order of ideas is the best for your essay. You want the strongest and most logical essay that you can write.

Introduction / Your goals

Body of the Paper

- Explain background (Prove that you are prepared for this program)
 - Where and what studied
 - Past research/diploma project
 - If applying to a program in a different field of study, explain how skills learned in earning your degree can be applied to the new field.
- Description of professional goals
 - Why that field of study is interesting/what influenced you to choose that field
 - Any related experience/research after university
 - Future plans after receiving degree
- What study in graduate school
 - What your specific interests are in your field
 - Why this program is needed for your professional development
 - Why U.S.? Why that particular university - courses, faculty, research projects/facilities?

Conclusion

- Summing up the main points
- What you can contribute to the program

Step Three: Writing the Statement

If you have done a good job with steps one and two, the writing should come easily. Keep the following points in mind:

1. The first sentence is the most important one. You want the reader's attention.
2. Cut out any sentences that are not absolutely necessary. Every sentence should be important and clearly stated. Most points can be made without a lot of necessary background.
3. Be self-confident. Frame everything positively. Use phrases such as "actively participated in" rather than "although I was only an assistant". Even if your English is horrible, do NOT tell them. Your TOEFL scores will indicate your English ability. *Do not write any negative statements.* If you need to describe a difficult situation make sure to emphasize your strengths in a positive way and how you handled it ("Although my supervisor was initially skeptical about the project, the results were so convincing and she came to support it fully" sounds better than "My supervisor did not like the project but I did it anyway and she later saw I was right" - how you frame the situation and your actions is crucial).
4. They are looking to see if your background and expectations matches what they offer. The more specific you are about why you would be a good fit, the more convincing you will be.

A good statement of purpose shows that you are goal-oriented, you can identify what you want, and you have taken steps to reach those goals.

Step Four: Editing

Run your text through a grammar and spell-check. Make absolutely sure that you have it looked over by someone else, preferably a native speaker. You should not have any major grammar or spelling mistakes! The DAI offers an application service("Bewerbungs-Service") by appointment to check through your essays for content and style.

DIFFERENT PROGRAMS

The emphasis in your statement of purpose depends on where you are applying.

Undergraduate Program

Focus on you as a whole person, not just your academic ability. They are looking for a well-rounded, creative and motivated person who will fit well into the school's social as well as academic community. Be sure to mention sports, volunteer activities, dance or music lessons, hobbies, etc.

Graduate School

The emphasis is on scholarship and research interests. You should focus more on aspects of your personality that relate to intellectual and academic interests and goals. Most schools will ask you to respond to specific questions or to emphasize certain aspects of your experience - be sure to follow their instructions exactly. Do not use a generic statement but make sure it is tailored

to that school. Some relevant questions to consider as you write your statement of purpose include:

- *Why are you interested in graduate study?*

Tell them directly why you decided to continue your education beyond the bachelor's degree. They want to know you are interested for a legitimate reason. Do not try to write what you think faculty want to hear ("to advance the field"); they have heard it all already.

- *Why are you applying to this particular graduate program?*

Is the program known for a particular emphasis, speciality, or orientation? Being specific indicates your interest in them and shows that you did your homework, a good early sign of a serious student.

- *What about you is special?*

Explain your motivations and your goals as well as describing any experiences that demonstrate your creativity, dependability, and independence.

- *Are there items in your application that need special explanation?*

Faculty will look first at your grades, transcripts, test scores, and recommendations before reading the Statement of Purpose. Unexplained problems in your record make you a less attractive candidate. On the other hand, honest explanations make you human and the kind of person with whom others will want to work.

- *Do you add diversity to the program?*

If you are a woman, a member of a minority group, disabled or have another distinguishing characteristic that may be relevant, tell them in an appropriate way.

Common Mistakes to avoid:

- *Do not be overly informal.*

The statement should be formal, direct, professional and appropriately respectful in tone. Undue informality or attempts at irrelevant humour should be avoided as should a stilted, very formal style. Be natural and clear.

- *Do not include irrelevant information.*

Keep to the topics that directly relate to your qualifications and desire for admission to the graduate program. Information about hobbies, outside interests, academic pursuits that are not connected to your success in your chosen field only distract the faculty's attention.

- *Do not write your life story.*

Be brief, yet complete. Do not talk about anything in your life before you began your baccalaureate program, unless it's absolutely relevant. A suggested maximum length is four pages, three is even better.

Grants, Fellowships, and Scholarships

What you include in your essay should depend on the purpose of the scholarship. Whom does the organization want to support?

- If it is a women's organization, emphasize how your goals relate to you as a woman.
- If it is a scientific organization, explain your scientific achievements and future goals.
- If the fellowship is for a business program, your work experience in the business world will be more important than your university coursework.

Internships

Emphasize practical work experience. You want to include your academic accomplishments, but this is secondary. It does not have to be paid work; organizations, committee work, and classroom projects at the university are also important. Demonstrate how that internship will help further your professional goals.

Highlight the qualities that make you right for that job. If the job involves sales, stress your ability to get along well with people. If the job involves research, emphasize your powers of concentration and persistence.

Final Comments

Be honest. Be confident and positive without being pushy or demanding. Do not be discouraged if you are not accepted. Be constructive and analyze the possible reasons for your rejection. Could your statement of purpose have been stronger? Are your academic qualifications strong enough for that program? Maybe it really is not the right program for your goals.

There is a saying, "If at first you don't succeed, try and try again". If you really want to study in the U.S., look into other programs. If you were rejected from a school that you feel is really the best for you, improve your weak points, work on new projects that show you are serious about your goals, and reapply.

Additional Resources

The essays listed below were written by US faculty giving advice on writing US graduate school admissions essays. They give an overview of what US faculties are looking for in the essays as well as do's and don'ts on content and style.

- "Applying to Graduate Schools in the United States: The Statement of Purpose":
<http://www.fulbright.co.uk/eas/studyus/postgraduate/essays.html>
- "How to Write a Successful Statement of Purpose for Graduate Schools":
<http://www.fulbright.co.uk/eas/studyus/postgraduate/essays.html>

These provide general guidelines. At the DAI we have a number of books that go into more depth to help you write excellent essays, including:

- *Best College Admission Essays*
- *Graduate Admissions Essays: Write Your Way Into the Graduate School of Your Choice*
- *The Complete Guide to Graduate School Admission*

Handout adapted from "Statement of Purpose", US Education Information Center, Moscow <http://www.useic.ru/study/apply/statement.htm> and the Fulbright Commission:

<http://www.fulbright.co.uk/eas/studyus/postgraduate/statement1.html>

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