Statements of purpose (SOPs)

When applying to graduate schools, you have to provide an SOP, which explains your reasons for applying, why they should accept you, and why you want the degree. You essentially need to sell yourself to an admissions committee consisting of professors in that department. This guide explains the basic expectations and contents of an SOP. An SOP should conform to the following guidelines, and address the following issues and questions.

1. Style and structure

1.1. Length and format

SOPs follow a hybrid business document style, in that they are traditionally single-spaced, in block paragraph style (no beginning paragraph indentations, with an extra line space between paragraphs). The font should be a normal 12-point font (or a font that looks 12-point, such as Arial 10 pt. or Garamond 13pt., since some fonts scale differently than normal). The heading usually contains a title consisting of just the phrase “Statement of purpose.” You can have a simple heading with just your contact information at the very top, like on a business letter. Otherwise, the document format should be simple, like a business letter – no text decoration (no bold, italic, underlining, or extra-large text), text art, borders, section headers (this document, for example, has section headers in boldface: “1. Length and format,” etc.). These are avoided, unless the particular department that you apply to expects them. Normal page layout, margins and font types should be used. After the concluding paragraph, there is usually no signature.

The length varies, and often different departments or schools may tell you their particular length requirements. If they do not specify a length, then the standard length is 1-2 full pages, single-spaced, or 500-1000 words. If you are to enter your SOP into an online form, it is best to compose it first in a word processor document to check the contents, length and style. The style and wording are like a formal business letter or an academic essay.

1.2. General structure

An SOP often begins with a direct statement of what you are applying for, and why. This is often followed by a brief explanation of the particular subfield or study specialization that you want to do. This may be important for the admissions committee to quickly know whether your interests match theirs, whether they have room for you in a particular subfield, and to assign an initial advisor to you. This may then be followed by more about your background, which can lead to your specific research plans and future plans. Thus, a typical structure that is easy to follow would look like this. Of course, your SOP can vary, if you know what you are doing as a writer.
1. Introduction
2. Opening statement of intent
   a. Rationale for applying to the program
   b. Statement of study specialization (subfield)
   c. Summary of undergraduate or previous graduate studies (optional)
3. Academic, professional (and personal) background
4. Specific research interests and plans
5. Future plans

2. Purpose

   Keep in mind your main purpose throughout the document, and avoid contents that are not relevant to the main goal. Your purposes may vary according to whether you are applying for [1] a Ph.D. program, including a combined Master’s and Ph.D. program; or [2] a terminal Master’s degree – only an M.A., M.S., or such.

   Some Master’s programs are designed primarily as a terminal Master’s program, such as MBA and related programs, and degrees in other practical fields like TESOL (Teaching English as a Second/Other Language) and architecture. In this case, the focus of your SOP will be your intellectual and academic background and strengths, career plans, and potential for future success after the program. You do not need to sell yourself regarding what you might “contribute to the program,” as you would in an SOP for a Ph.D. program.

   Some programs will give you particular questions to answer, especially for MBA applications. For such SOPs, it is important to carefully read and understand the questions, and to respond persuasively. For example, if asked about your strengths and weaknesses in setting goals and working with people to achieve your goals, you need to address the following: your strengths in setting goals, your weaknesses in setting goals, your strengths in achieving goals, your weaknesses in achieving goals, your strengths in working with others in achieving goals, and your weaknesses in working with others in achieving goals. Otherwise, you can follow the guidelines below for the contents.

   Most SOPs are for a Ph.D. program, including a combined Master’s and Ph.D. If you apply to such a program, your chances are best if you plan to go all the way to the Ph.D. If you are certain that you only want a Master’s degree, you should indicate this, but keep in mind that the better schools may not accept you, as they would prefer to invest their time in someone who fill finish a Ph.D. If you are not sure, at least indicate a desire for a Ph.D. - not that you should lie, but after you are accepted, you might actually like it enough to go all the way for a Ph.D.

   An admissions committee of professors at the department where you are applying will evaluate your SOP and application based on the following criteria.

   • Clear motivation
   • Knowledgeable of the field
   • Professional
   • Has clear potential as a graduate student and in a future related career
   • Focused; knows what s/he wants to do
3. Introduction

The introduction generally indicates what you are applying for, and why.

3.1. Statement of Intent

The SOP often begins simply by stating your intention – that you are applying to program X, with little personal introduction beyond that, unless you want to state your current status, e.g.:

I am currently a student in a Master's program in TESOL at ABC University, and would like to apply to the Ph.D. program in English Education at XYZ University.

Occasionally, writers start with their academic and intellectual background, though it is easier for admissions committees if you first state your purposes in applying.

The introduction might contain a brief summary of what you studied and accomplished as an undergraduate, and/or in your previous or current graduate program.

3.2. Rationale

Usually the next thing to do in the introduction is to establish your rationale for applying to the particular school and program. You should be able to provide good reasons for applying to the particular program or university. In doing so, your answer will indicate how much you know about the program. For example, your reasons for applying to a department at XYZ University might be because it has one or more professors who specialize in the area that you want to study, it is known for the subfield or specialization that you are interested in, and possibly other reasons like having the resources for the research that you want to do.

Wanting to go to XYZ because your boyfriend or girlfriend is studying there is not a good reason. There might be other valid secondary reasons, e.g.: the school's reputation; the school's library or research facilities; family considerations (such as family members living in the area); or transfer credits between cooperating universities or programs. These might be valid reasons for a terminal master's program, but stronger academic reasons beyond these secondary reasons are needed in applying for a Ph.D. program.

4. Academic and Professional Background

In order to “sell yourself” to an admissions committee of professors in the department, you need to provide a convincing explanation of your strengths, background and potential. This would include why are are interesting in a particular subfield or research program.

4.1. Intellectual and academic background

Explain your intellectual growth and development, your intellectual biography, mainly since college. Explain how you became interested in your field of study, and why you are interested in it. How have your interests evolved or changed over the years, and why? What particular issues in your current field have you explored and developed interests in? How did you develop a particular interest in the subfield or specialization,
and/or your potential research topic? What areas of the field would you might like to explore further in a Master’s or Ph.D. program? However, avoid simply listing courses that you have taken, or reciting a grocery list of topics of interest. If you mention different courses or topics of interest, you should provide some explanation for a reasonable number of items. Try to avoid giving the impression of superficiality, by simply listing things without discussing them; or of being unfocused, by listing a number of things without logical coherence or relationship for these. Explain how these led to or connect with your current study interests, research interests, proposed specialization, and (if applicable) likely doctoral research topic.

For example, you could discuss several different areas of research that you have pursued over the years, and how these all led to your current area of interest. You could mention a few relevant courses that you took (in your master’s program, or your junior and senior year of college) that gave rise to these interests.

4.2. Intellectual and personal strengths

This ties in with the above, and you might include this along with your personal intellectual narrative, or as a separate section. You want to explain your academic potential and why you are a good student – why they should accept you. If applying for a Ph.D. program, you can also explain what strengths you have that you could contribute to the program or to the field later (but be reasonable; avoid bragging or sounding pretentious). A few key relevant intellectual and personal strengths can be described and exemplified. Personal strengths such as analytical or leadership abilities might be relevant. You might discuss how you have overcome past obstacles as an illustration of your strengths. Also, discuss relevant work and teaching experience, or other relevant factors. If you have some gaps in you record or shortcomings (like some bad grades in your transcripts), you could explain those as well. For example, if you’ve had some bad grades, it may have been due to personal problems or external circumstances (e.g., you were taking care of a sick relative), or because you challenged yourself with some very difficult courses in a new area (just be honest here).

4.3. Non-academic experience

Some applicants might have experience in the work world. You can talk about your responsibilities, accomplishments, how you grew through your professional experience, how this contributed toward the development of your academic interests, or such.

Other personal experience might be relevant, if it actually contributed toward your intellectual growth and academic interests. Be careful not to spend too much time on this, so that you do not sound too personal or subjective. Appropriate topics might be experience abroad, volunteer work, or overcoming personal adversity. Make sure this is discussed in a professional, intelligent manner, and directly relevant to your academic goals in the SOP.

5. Goals and plans

You will need to explain your specific interests and plans as a graduate student. Often, your desired subfield or specialization is indicated in the introduction or soon afterward. At some point, you should explain why you want to focus on that area. Somewhere in the SOP, Ph.D. applicants need to go further by explaining a more specific
research topic or question, such as a potential dissertation topic.

5.1. Study specialization

Near the beginning of the SOP, it helps to indicate your study specialization, so they can match you with an appropriate advisor, at least an initial advisor, if they accept you. If applying to a linguistics program, for example, indicate whether you want to do syntax, phonology, Chinese linguistics, or such; for a biology program, indicate whether you want to do herpetology, entomology, climate ecology, language evolution, or such. In some programs, your admission may depend on whether a suitable advisor for your subfield is free to take on more graduate students.

It is possible that your interests may change after you start a graduate program. It may be possible that you are not entirely sure about which specialization you want to do. Many departments at American universities can be flexible, so that if your interests change, you can move to a different specialization. To some degree, this is not unusual, especially at the Master's level. Nonetheless, your SOP should indicate a clear specialization, as departments are interested in the type of student who can identify and articulate a clear specialization, even if your interests change later. They would prefer the type of student who seems mature, well informed, focused, disciplined, and with a clear idea of what s/he wants to do, rather than someone who seems unfocused or unclear.

In addition to a specialization, Ph.D. applicants should indicate a specific research topic, e.g., for a potential Ph.D. project (see below). The research topic can be explained here with the specialization, or later after explaining your background. Again, Ph.D. students' interests can change, but again, departments prefer the type of student who can identify and articulate a particular research topic, rather than someone who seems unfocused.

5.2. Specific research plans or proposal

If you are or have been a Master's student or Ph.D. student, and you applying to a Ph.D. program elsewhere, you should indicate a research topic or specialization. If you are applying only for a terminal master's degree, or only have a bachelor's degree and want to apply for a master's program or combined master's and Ph.D. program, then it is usually sufficient to describe your preferred study specialization (as described above). Otherwise, Ph.D. applicants should discuss a specific research topic, particularly a potential doctoral dissertation topic. Again, it is possible that your research topic and interests might change later. However, an admissions committee is interested in the sort of person who seems mature, focused, and sufficiently knowledgeable in the field that s/he can identify and articulate a good potential dissertation topic.

For example, if applying to a Ph.D. program, you might want to suggest topics that sound at least as specific as these. Those under ‘vague or weak topic’ would be insufficient for a doctoral research topic; they would only be sufficient in indicating a study specialization in the opening paragraphs of an SOP. Of course, you need to provide sufficient explanation about why you want to focus on this topic, and why the topic would be of interest or importance.
<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Ph.D. program</th>
<th>vague or overly general topic</th>
<th>better topic</th>
</tr>
</thead>
</table>
| Biology       | language evolution            | [1] evolution of phonological categories from perceptual categories  
|               |                               | [2] connectionist based models of syntactic evolution |
| Economics     | reasons for economic growth / problems in a country or region | [1] regional cross-cultural business factors in economic outcomes of W. Asian CIS states  
|               |                               | [2] environmental impact of desertification on West Asian CIS economies |
| Engineering / AI | speech synthesis           | [1] overcoming phoneme segmentation problems in machine recognition of different voice types  
| English       | better grammar teaching methods | [1] CLT methods based on cognitive grammar in secondary education  
| Education     |                               | [2] semantic categories in teaching definite articles: a comparative pedagogical study |
| English (Literature) | American female poets | [1] the concept of landscape in Dickinson's poems  
|               |                               | [2] influence of sociocultural factor X on Y's poetry |
| Linguistics   | German syntax                | [1] syntactic right dislocation in German  
| Philosophy    | philosophical proofs for the existence of God | [1] Alternative, scientifically grounded formulations of the Kalam cosmological argument for God  
|               |                               | [2] The moral argument versus sociobiological objections |
| Physics       | How many dimensions are there in the universe? | [1] constraining the number of dimensions needed in theory X  
|               |                               | [2] finding experimental evidence for prediction X from theory Y for nano-dimensions |
| Psychology (cognitive) | how people read | [1] confounding factors in sentence-final integration in reading  
|               |                               | [2] semantic vs. phonological information in reading Chinese characters |

For your study specialization and/or research plans, you should explain convincingly why you are interested in the topic, and why it would be interesting or valuable. The value of a research topic may lie, e.g., in its specific, potential theoretical contributions or practical applications. Your research might arguably provide evidence for a model or theory; it might show how an existing theory can be extended to something new; it might propose a new theory, with some specific, persuasive evidence for your theory; or it might lead to new applications in education, technology, or research methods.

5.3. Future plans

This is also particularly important. If a program accepts you, they are making an investment in you, so they want to know that their investment is justified. You should explain what you want to do after the program, namely, career plans, research plans (if relevant), and other future plans. If you want to go on for further studies, say, studies in another program or in a Ph.D. program, explain your plans or goals. You should
communicate that you have thought out things well (and yes, plans can change, but they want at least the type of person who has thought things out), and that you would make good use of your degree – that their investment in you will be worthwhile.

For a terminal master’s program, your future plans may be in teaching, working in business or industry, government work, or such. Relevant and thoughtful career plans can be explained here, including how you would like to contribute in that area. For a Ph.D. program, a more detailed explanation of career goals would be expected. In many Ph.D. programs, especially in humanities and social sciences, professors expect their graduate students to become academics like them. Unfortunately, the reality is that there are enough academic jobs for 25-50% of Ph.D. holders in these fields. In science and business, this kind of expectation is probably not so strong, as professors in those fields more often accept the fact that their graduates will enter business, industry or other non-academic fields. If you intend to pursue an academic career after the Ph.D., it will help to show that you have potential, and that you have ideas for where you would like to work and the kind of research that you would like to do after the Ph.D. If you have decided on a non-academic career track, especially if you are in the social sciences or humanities, then you may need to make a good case for your career – an explanation that will satisfy the professors who will read your SOP.

This section often makes for a suitable conclusion. Unlike cover letters for job applications, there is no need to invite them to contact you. Your contact information might be on the heading or at the end of the SOP. A well-written SOP, along with good transcripts and recommendation letters will say enough about you.

6. Errors to avoid

Avoid errors like the following:

- Mundane examples
- Non-relevant details
- Trite sounding comments (like how much of a hard worker or perfectionist you are)
- Vague generalities, especially as an introduction (like how important X is today, or other mundane, uninformative statements that sound like clichés)
- Overly personal details, including political or religious views or activities
- Views on controversial areas in the field. Avoid this unless you know the program’s theoretical orientation, and that you agree with it. Even in that case, avoid sounding polarized, polemical, or unprofessional.
- Negative, polemical, or critical tone
- Vague promises or statements
- Details of your life before college, unless really unique and important
- A laundry list of accomplishments
- A laundry list of things that you would like to study or do – this indicates a lack of focus or depth
- Anything that sounds unprofessional, emotional, or self-centered.
- Bragging, self-promotion, overstatement, or unjustifiable claims about yourself
• Self-deprecating expressions, understatements, or expressions of doubt about your abilities, reasons for applying, or future plans (e.g.: “I may not be that great, but if you accept me, I promise I’ll work really hard)

• Any grammatical or other mistakes – be sure to proofread, or hire a good proofreader. For example, note that ‘Ph.D.’ has two periods, as it is an abbreviation for the Latin term ‘philosophiae doctor,’ or ‘doctor of philosophy.’

• Exceeding the page or length limit. Professors will not want to read overly long SOPs. Conversely, a very short SOP looks like you have little to say, and that you may not be a strong student.

Also, make sure that you properly customize you SOP to the particular school and program that you’re sending it to. Your reasons, study plans and research plans should indicate that you have know the program and department well enough, including its professors and their research, based on the program’s website, publications from the professors that you have read, or maybe conference presentations that you have heard from people from the department.

Avoid using words like these that tend to overused in application materials. It is best to avoid these over-used expressions, unless you can say something meaningful about these.

appealing to me    feel good    incredible    rewarding
appealing aspect  gratifying    interesting    satisfaction
appreciate        helpful      invaluable    satisfying
challenging       helping people important    significant
enjoy / enjoyable  I can contribute meaningful    stimulating
exciting / excited I like it      meant a lot to me useful
fascinating       I like to help  remarkable    valuable

Finally, show your SOP to some graduate students or professors for advice and feedback.

7. Examples

Below is an actual SOPs, which helped the applicants to be accepted into a Ph.D. program by a student with previous M.A. degrees. Many more examples (both good and poor) can be found online.

1 The natural sciences and social sciences all came in some way from so-called natural philosophy, the precursor to modern science.
Statement of Purpose

My goal is to obtain a Ph.D. degree in Educational Psychology through the SLATE (Second Language Acquisition and Teacher Education) program. My research interests would focus on second language acquisition of phonology and grammar, especially of the prosodic system, and I would like to work under Professor Mortimer Snerd in your department as my Ph.D. advisor.

As an undergraduate student at Purdue University, I majored in German, minored in English, studied other languages, and took a number of linguistics courses — phonetics, phonology, anthropological linguistics, descriptive English grammar, dialectology, and Germanic historical linguistics. I then came to the University of Illinois for graduate studies in the Department of Linguistics, where I focused on historical linguistics and phonology, particularly in Optimality Theory, the current paradigm in phonological theory. My M.A. thesis consisted of research on Chinese tone sandhi (tone change) from both diachronic and synchronic perspectives, and applied Optimality Theory for a phonological account of the tonal system.

Around that time my longtime sideline interest in teaching English as a second/other language became a serious interest, and I realized that I wanted to devote my academic and professional career to more practical issues of applied language research and pedagogy, rather than pure theoretical research. I also realized that teaching ESL would be more rewarding for myself and beneficial to others. Therefore I decided to finish studying in Linguistics with my M.A. and to transfer to DEIL.

I have finished the course requirements in DEIL, and have also taken pragmatics and independent studies under Professor Snerd. Currently I am working on my M.A. thesis for DEIL under Stresshart on what is often called sentence or discourse stress. This thesis examines the problems of previous generative and functionalist analyses, and will attempt to provide a consistent, unified approach that can not only resolve the theoretical issues involved in analyzing sentential stress, but also the various cases of sentence stress that do not submit well to current analyses, and to do so by bringing Optimality Theory and Centering Theory to bear upon these problems. I expect to finish this project in May 2000.

Since my department offers no Ph.D., I would like to transfer to Educational Psychology / SLATE for further studies. Not only would it save time doing my Ph.D. in another department at this university, but I could continue working under Professor Stresshart as part of my Ph.D. committee; thus, I could continue in a similar line of SLA research in phonological and discourse issues as before. I also know a number of DEIL graduates who have also gone on to Educational Psychology / SLATE, and from my colleagues I am familiar with the advantages and strengths that this program has to offer.
those of us who wish to continue studying issues of second language acquisition. For my Ph.D. research, I would like to research issues of lexical stress, stress over syntactic phrases (noun phrases, verb phrases, etc.), and the related phenomenon of accompanies vowel quality patterns, by applying Optimality Theory and connectionist perspectives to the analysis, and then developing a pedagogical system from this for teaching stress patterns to ESL students. This would be advantageous to ESL learners who struggle with the accentuation system of English, and often have little formal or communicative classroom instruction to deal with these issues. This would also be helpful to ESL learners and teachers, who have materials that present few if any helpful principles for English stress, or present extremely complicated rules which are difficult to learn in a meaningful way. Thus I would like to develop teaching materials that are instructive, linguistically accurate, learnable, and communicative.

After finishing my Ph.D. degree and SLATE specialization, I plan to teach college/university level ESL in East Asian countries, and in TESOL or teacher training programs here or abroad. I have taught ESL writing, grammar, and pronunciation courses in the Intensive English Institute and in the ESL Service Courses at UIUC, and enjoy it thoroughly, and know that I will be productive and successful in a career of ESL teaching and SLA research. As a linguist with a broad background in theoretical linguistics, applied linguistics, and ESL pedagogy, I know that I can also contribute much and be productive as a Ph.D. student in Educational Psychology with the SLATE focus.