

How to Write a Successful Statement of Purpose for Graduate Schools in the U.S.

**Based on a presentation in Madras by:
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The personal statement is a difficult piece of writing, maybe the most difficult piece of writing you will ever do, and therefore you have to do it very carefully. It is an opportunity for you to give a picture of yourself. It may take a great deal of time and energy but at least you will have written something you are proud of, which says something important about you. So I would suggest first of all: write it for yourself as much as for graduate schools in America; do a job that you like, something that has integrity, which says something important about you. If things don't turn out the way you hope, at least you will have written something difficult but satisfying.

Importance

How important is the essay part of the application? This depends on your marks to a certain extent. If your marks are very high, then it may not be as important as it is for someone whose marks are not so good. Nevertheless it is important. A person with high marks can spoil his/her chances of admission with a bad essay. At highly competitive schools, where most applicants score at the 97th percentile level on standardized tests, a winning personal statement may be the deciding factor in admission.

What Are Universities Looking For?

First of all don't second guess. Don't try to figure out what you think they want and supply it because you won't be able to do that. Nor can you understand the mind of a 50 year old American who is living 10,000 miles away from you and may have woken up that morning with a headache and then was bitten by a dog on his way to the office. There is no way you can second guess, you cannot read their minds. Having said that, I can tell you some things which all college admissions officers want to see in the application:

- **A Picture of Your Overall Personality**
How will you give a picture of your personality? I would suggest that you imply rather than state the facts. For instance, don't say 'I am a smart person.' Demonstrate it, imply it. Don't say 'I am energetic.' Give evidence by the fact that you worked after school for six hours every day and still had time to play on the volleyball team.
- **Academic Background and Work Experience**
It would be a mistake to talk about your high school. Start with your undergraduate career. School records may be worth mentioning if there is something extraordinary about them.
- **Continuity**
Admissions officers are looking for some continuity in what you have done, what you want to do in the near future and what you hope to do in the distant future. So, connect them.

- **Commitment and Motivation**
Rather than simply saying 'I am committed', find a way of inferring that you are indeed highly committed and motivated to your proposed field of study.
- **Communication Skills**
They will be looking at your writing skills - how well you can present yourself clearly and intelligently when writing, hence the importance of spending considerable time on the statement.

These five points are very general but almost every university wants to know about them. They may be too general but if you miss one of them you are probably missing something important.

General Do's and Don'ts

Do's

- **Do take a lot of time.**
Don't do this at the last minute. Plan to spend a month or so preparing for the essay. Plan to let it rest for a week, so you have time to mull it over and get a perspective on it. Don't be hasty and sloppy.
- **Do read the question carefully.**
If they ask you why you want to go to law school, answer that. If they ask what your career goals are, answer that. Don't go off on a tangent or get too verbose.
- **Do write the length of essay they ask for.**
If they ask for 200 words, give them that or 190 or 220. You don't give them a 1000 and, you don't give them 50.
- **Type your final draft unless they tell you not to.**
Type it well with no mistakes. Buy some good paper. If you're writing it, see that it is clear and legible.
- **Do write a separate essay for each university.**
There is no reason why you can't take a paragraph from one essay and apply it to another. Your essays don't have to be every word different but each university would like to think that you are especially interested in their program. Each university is different. Make something about your essay distinctive to that university and mention its name. Don't write an all-purpose general essay. Admissions faculty don't like that.
- **Do as much research on the university as you can.**
If you can get hold of a catalogue, read it. If you can find someone who went to the university, talk to them. Find out as much as you can about the university. You don't want to say 'I have always wanted to go to Harvard because I wanted to find out about the Great American West'. As most of you know, Harvard is not in the Great American West. It is in Massachusetts.

- **Accentuate your positive qualities.**
If you had the highest mark in class, make sure that they know it. Make sure that they know that you were able to hold a full-time job while going to school. Make sure that they know that you won any awards. Make sure that they know that you were captain of a team.
- **Mention your positive achievements as they apply to your graduate admission.**
The information you provide about your important achievements must be related to your field. If you are applying for medicine and you have won a poetry prize, don't mention your poetry prize because you may not have space. It is a good thing, but you may need to fill your application with more relevant information. On the other hand, you could mention your work as organizer of blood donation camps or your internships as a psychiatric care worker.
- **Do mention your work experience, or volunteer work that you may have done or extra-curricular activities if they relate to your field.**
For example, if you are going to apply to business school and you were on the basketball team you may think that it is not relevant. However if you learnt leadership qualities, if you learnt how to endure defeat, if you learnt management skills by being captain of the basketball team, then it is relevant. You have to show the relevance. If you had a job after school, working in the college bookstore or you have done volunteer work at a hospital, this is relevant - you have learnt management skills at the shop. You have learnt to interact with people while you worked in the hospital.
- **Be definite in your application.**
Don't say - 'I hope to do this', 'I might like to do that'. Say 'I want to do this', 'I am planning to do this', 'I intend to do that'. Your language is definite. It is not hesitant and indecisive.

Don'ts

- **Don't try to second-guess admissions faculty, as I have already said, and don't flatter them.**
Don't say 'I've always wanted to study at the University of Montana because I have heard that it is the best university in the world to study medicine.' It may not be and even if it is, it sounds like flattery.
- **Don't be phoney.**
Be honest. Admissions faculty can spot a dishonest essay a mile away. It would not be to your advantage to be dishonest as you might get into a university and then find it was not the right place for you.
- **Don't glorify yourself.**
Don't say - 'I was the best tennis player in the whole city of Madras'. That is boasting. However being modest and subtle are also not good qualities. There is a medium between being modest and boastful.
- **Do not repeat materials that are already on the application.**
Don't say 'My major is Physics' because you have already said that somewhere else. Instead say 'While I majored in Physics I also took ...' or 'My Physics major enabled me to take special courses in... and...'. Do mention your knowledge and experience in the field at the university level. It is usually a poor idea to mention your high school experience unless

something exceptional happened at that time that changed your life or affected your career choice.

Tips on Writing Style

- **Write simply, not in a flowery and complicated manner.**
- **Write in a straightforward way.**
In other words don't be subtle or cute. Write in a clear and logical manner. If you have to be creative, that is fine, but do so in a straightforward way. These people are really interested in your vocation. They don't want to read something that is in the form of one act plays nor do they want to read three adjectives per noun. They want you to be direct and straightforward.
- **Be clear in what you are saying.**
Make sure you are logical. Explain yourself with great clarity. Finally, most important of all, be specific, not vague. Don't say - 'My grades were quite good' but say 'I belonged to the top 5% of my class'. Don't say - 'I am interested in sports'. Say 'I was captain of my hockey team'. Don't say 'I like poetry'. Say 'I did a study of Shakespeare's sonnets and wrote a twelve-page bachelor's degree dissertation on Imagery'. Don't say - 'I want to be a Supreme Court Judge, which is why I want to go to law school'. Say things like 'I was an apprentice in a court' or 'I often went with my father to the courts to listen to cases' or 'I wrote a legal column for a school newspaper'. That is being specific.

Writing the Essay

Stage 1: Preparation

Brainstorming is an important part of preparation. Take some time and write down in note form the important events and facts about your recent life - from the time you graduated from high school. List the things that you have done and the things that have been important to you. For example:

- Won a poetry contest
- Got A's in Physics and Mathematics
- Member of volleyball team
- Worked after school in shop
- Won a contest
- Worked with a social welfare group on a slum project
- Went to Hyderabad for six months to stay with an aunt because she was sick

Write out the answers to some questions. Write them out in some detail, being as specific as you can.

- What have you learnt about your field that has stimulated you and given you the conviction that you are best suited to that field?
- How have you learned this? Classes, important reading, work experience, extra-curricular activities...
- How have your work experiences contributed to your personal growth?
If you have not had a job, don't worry about it, but mention it if you have - even if you were not paid for it. Perhaps you took care of neighbor's children for a number of years. If you are applying for graduate study in social work, psychology or education, you can make this relevant.

- What are your career goals?
Be as specific as you can be. Not all students are clear about what they want to do ten years from now. If you don't know it, don't fake it. Be as specific as you can be. Not everyone can be clear - some students are not old enough or experienced enough to know what their future goals are.
- Explain any discrepancies or gaps in your record.
If you dropped out of university for a year to take care of your father who was ill, that will show up in your student record or transcript. You will have to explain that. You don't have to make a big deal about it. However admissions faculty will want to know why you were not at university for a certain period. Suppose you had poor marks in the first two years and then your grades picked up and the reason you had poor marks is because you were not sure what you were doing or you were sick a lot or you were moving from one city to another. Explain that. For example, 'My marks in the first two years were not up to my expectations but once I got settled into a new home, they improved remarkably' or 'My father was ill at that time and I had to take care of him. After his death, I had to face university again.' If such experiences have influenced your record you should mention them. Don't make silly excuses. But if something really needs explaining, don't skip over it.
- Have you overcome any special obstacles?
Some of you may have faced troubled times in your life - financially, medically or have had family problems. If they are really obstacles explain how you have overcome them. This makes you appear like a person of considerable character.
- What personal characteristics do you have that will enhance your prospects for success in your field?
Can you demonstrate that, give evidence? If you can't give evidence that you are a hard-working person then don't say you are hard-working. If you are a hard-working person and you have worked ten hours a day at a job and studied, that is worth noting. Again inference may be the best way of stating it.
- What special skills do you possess?
Ask your friends. You may have special skills in communication, articulation, or are you especially good at leadership, do you have sharp analytical skills, or are you creative. This is where your autobiography would be useful. You acted in a college play and people thought you were terrific. What does this mean in terms of applying to a graduate school of law? It means you are able to get people to pay attention to you. Being a good actor can make you a good lawyer. Actors have gone on to become lawyers and politicians as we all know, so look over your life. What special skills do you have? Perhaps you have a technical skill, a pilot's license or you know how to repair motors.
- What are the most compelling reasons the committee should be interested in you?
What is so great, so wonderful about you? If you have done a good job with your autobiography and you have done a good job answering these questions half of your work is done. It takes time to do this. Spend time on it.
- What is special and impressive and unique about you?
This is not an easy question to answer. You should ask someone 'Hey what

is so special about me'. Your mother may not always have the same ideas you have: 'You eat well'. That's not going to help you figure out an answer. Ask a friend.

- What details in your life have shaped you and influenced your growth? What details in your life have made you the person you are and have influenced your choice of career goal?

Stage 2: Writing

Write several outlines and decide which you like best. Remember the essay has an introduction, a body and a conclusion. Outline the things you want to say and from all the material you have written, select the material which you think will go well in your essay. Select the most significant details. Put that into your outline. Make your outline useable, make it neat and leave lots of space. Now you are ready to write the essay. Write on lined paper, double spaced, using only one side of the page.

The first attempt at writing the essay is going to be terrible, but don't worry; it is only the first draft. Do not edit as you write. Write it out. Make it too long.

Stage 3: Revision

Let the essay sit for a day or two. Then go over it with a red ink pen making little lines; cross out words or sentences. Revise it carefully and write your second draft. This may also be disappointing. Don't expect too much from your first attempts. It takes a lot of work. I have often put in a lot of work, put it in an envelope, taken one last look and said 'Oh hell, I have to do it again' and I did it again. Do as many drafts as you feel is necessary.

Spend time on the first paragraph. Make sure that first paragraph is terrific and interesting. Don't make it cute or flowery. Don't say anything less than fascinating. You won't get it on your first draft. You will probably get it on your sixth or seventh try. Also pay attention to your last paragraph which may be only one sentence - make it a snappy last sentence.

Be clear, specific and interesting.

You are likely to be exhausted, fed up and sick of the whole project. At that time don't push yourself. Let it sit. Give the essay to somebody else to look at. Someone who is older, perhaps a former teacher; not a friend who is afraid to criticize you. Somebody who cares enough to be critical and tell you the truth. Then write it again.

Once you think you have got the final draft, what do you do? Proofread it as if you were the editor of India Today or Times of India. Not a single mistake must survive - spelling or grammatical. Look every word up in the dictionary that you are not absolutely sure of.

Remember that content and style are both important (60%:40%). Make sure that the essay looks perfect.