

Tips on Writing a Statement of Purpose

by CEU's [Center for Academic Writing](#)

Of all the different types of text you will have to write in the academic world, the statement of purpose is one of the most difficult, not least because it is about you. We spend our time trying to eliminate ourselves from other academic writing, from research proposals or from term papers. Now you have to write a paper about yourself. Like any other academic genre, a statement of purpose has a logical structure and development, and its purpose is to simultaneously show why you are the best candidate for a given course or grant, and why this course or grant is the most suitable one for you. This page will tell you how to do this.

Do Answer the Question!

Before you start writing your statement of purpose, look careful at any instructions you have been given. If, for example, you have been asked to specify why you want to study at this university, make sure you answer that question, and that your paragraph starts with a sentence that will signal that you are answering it (e.g. "My reasons for studying..."). Do not omit to answer any of the questions you are asked, and consider carefully before providing information you were not asked for. If you have 500 words, they expect you to spend most of them answering their questions, not volunteering other information. Frequently, however, universities do not give any guidance as to what they want, perhaps wanting to test if you are intelligent enough to work it out for yourself. If so, the guidelines below are designed to help you.

Attracting the Reader's Attention

When you write a statement of purpose, you need to remember that you are just one of many, perhaps even hundreds of applicants for your chosen study place. The person who reads your statement will have read dozens of others. If yours does not stand out in some way that shows that you are original, different and interesting - which of course you are (but at the same time not eccentric or peculiar - which you may be, but don't emphasize the fact!), it will be consigned to the heap of also-rans, the people who may get a place if there are some left over at the end.

If a statement of purpose fails to catch the reader's attention, it may be due to one or more of the following problems:

- It starts with flattering comments about the university they are applying for - the person who reads your statement already knows how good their institution is: they don't need you to tell them.
- It provides an entire life history, starting from birth, - by the time you reach the important bit, your reader will have lost interest. Unless your high school days are especially interesting, concentrate on your university career.

- It starts off by explaining exactly how the writer heard about this particular course - unless this information shows something important about you, leave it out.
- It begins by providing personal details that can be found on the résumé, such as age or place of birth.
- It begins by trying to second-guess the reader's thoughts, for example: 'You are probably wondering why a specialist in... should be applying for a place at...' This strategy might possibly work, but it will probably be more effective if you go ahead and answer the question.
- Although they do grab attention, the sort of statements that are least successful are those that use over-theatrical and silly introductions that are inappropriate for an academic environment. If you start with 'I am a really special person', or 'Ever since I was a baby, gazing happily at the world...', you shouldn't be surprised if you get rejected.
- Some statements dive straight into the complex field of the specialist, immediately discussing obscure areas of theory. Remember that while you are expected to show familiarity with your subject, not all readers may be specialists in your chosen field. If they can't understand you, they may not realize how good you are.

Capturing the Reader's Attention

Look at the following two efforts and see which you think would be more likely to capture the reader's interest:

Example A

I am applying for the Central European University, based on the reputation this University has in the academic community world-wide. I have also spoken to several alumni of your university. I am very interested in admission to the graduate program in Economics. I know that research programs in Economics are very diverse and this is the main reason why I prefer this university.

Example B

Recent Moldovan government figures show an alarming 40% increase in mental illness amongst young people in the last ten years. These figures are just one more factor that persuades me that my choice of a career in neuroscience was the right one, and motivates me to study further at Ph.D. level in this field in order to help combat this serious problem.

Sample A has several weaknesses:

- it is too general - one could insert the name of any university
- it does not mention any of the specific features of the university nor does it justify the flattering claim of a 'world-wide reputation'
- it simply says that the university has a good reputation and a range of courses - neither very original nor interesting for the reader

- it does not start by answering the question 'Why economics?' but immediately starts with the more specific question of 'Why economics at CEU'

Sample B, in contrast, shows several positive features:

- it grabs the reader's attention with an alarming piece of information
- it starts with a reference to the real world, thus moving from the general to the specific
- it shows that the writer is aware of the link between academe and the real world and has a desire to put theoretical learning into practice
- it very succinctly expresses the link between the applicant's past studies, proposed studies and subsequent career

How to Start

Ideally you need to start with an interesting fact or detail about you, your situation or your interests which makes you appear interesting and intelligent. You might also try a more general truth or saying, then show how this applies to your situation. You may want to quote someone famous who has said something relevant, but if so, keep it short, quote correctly, and make sure that the relevance to your position is absolutely clear. Don't quote for the sake of it.

Do give enough time to creating a good initial paragraph. It is the first thing your audience will read, and first impressions are quickly formed. If your first sentences are dull, irrelevant, eccentric or pompous, or worse still, full of grammatical or spelling mistakes, your reader will quickly form a negative impression which will be hard to dispel.

The Structure of a Statement of Purpose

The word 'purpose' normally means 'what you want to do', however, it has a secondary meaning, which is the quality of knowing 'that you want to do something'. Purpose in this sense means having a direction, and it is essential that your statement of purpose shows that you do have a direction and know both where you are going and how you can best get there. A good statement of purpose will usually have the following structure:

Your Past

How your studies at undergraduate level and at graduate level, as well as any other work or study experience, has prepared you for the course of study that you wish to take.

Your Proposed Course Of Study

Should be shown to be a logical follow-on from your studies/work to date and to prepare you for your future career.

Your Future Career

Should be something for which your proposed course of study is valuable or essential, and should have some logical connection to what went before.

Of course, your own career may not be as simple as this. Perhaps you started studying biophysics, then later developed a passion for medieval poetry. This is not going to disqualify you, but you need to ask yourself 'why should a university choose me rather than someone who has always been interested in medieval poetry?' If you can answer this question, you have a chance of being considered. If, however, your reader gets the impression you have suddenly for no good reason conceived an interest in a field you have never studied before, they may equally assume you will lose interest just as quickly. Your best chance usually lies in showing that there is a meaningful progression to your career which is driven by your sense of purpose and academic or professional ambition.

The above model suggests that a statement of purpose should move from your past and present studies, to your proposed studies and finally to your future career. If you want to be innovative, you are not obliged to follow this pattern, but the elements and the connection should be there and should be clear to the reader. Before you start writing, draw yourself a clear structural plan, perhaps allowing a paragraph or so for each stage. Obviously, your past will be much clearer and more detailed than your future, but don't neglect the second and third boxes in the diagram above, or you may look like an eternal student, always hunting for something new to study.

How Much Detail to Provide

1. Keep to the word limit

Universities often provide a word limit or a page limit to guide you. Keep to it. If they say they don't want to read three pages, they mean it. Bear in mind that academics have to do an awful lot of reading, not only of statements of purpose but also of essays and theses. If you can't keep to the word limit for a statement of purpose, they may be worrying that you will write a 450 page thesis when 150 pages was the limit. Writing too much is never a way to make yourself popular. If a limit is given, it is good to set yourself a personal maximum limit of 10-15% less than that. And don't feel you have to fill a word limit. If you have said all you want to in 700 words and the limit is 1000, great! Stop. Don't go looking for verbiage to pack in the spaces.

2. Set yourself section word limits

If you have 800 words, have in mind how many you want to spend on each section of your statement. If you use 750 words describing your studies to date, you will have nothing left for the other sections. By setting yourself rough word limits for each part, you ensure that the statement is balanced.

3. Be selective

With any piece of writing where there is a word limit, you will not have enough space to say everything about everything. This means you have to be selective. You have to gather all the necessary information, look at it and throw away the things which are less necessary. It may hurt not to be able to say that you got top grades in your school for physics (when you're applying to study sociology) but you have to be ruthless. Remember that the ability to evaluate and select what to include and what to leave out is valuable academic skill in its own right, and demonstrating that you have that skill can count powerfully in your favor.

4. Use appropriate language

Obviously you need to show you have a good command of the English language: avoid slang, use vocabulary appropriate to your field and show that you can write a sentence of more than five words. At the same time, don't start looking for long words to impress with. If an ordinary word will do, don't go thesaurus hunting for a bigger one, not least because you may use it wrongly.

5. Edit thoroughly

When you have written a first draft, go over it and check whether any of your phrases are wordy or clumsy. Try to re-express them clearly and succinctly. While it is good to use longer sentences sometimes, don't ramble. If your sentence has more than 30 words, read it over and see if it would be better to split it into two. Reading aloud may help you to feel if your ideas are clearly expressed.

Some sample statements of purpose

The following sample thesis statements, though well written and successful, are not perfect and may contain mistakes or weaknesses. They are also not about you. It is not included to show you a model that you can copy but to provide an example of how it has been done by others. You will need to write your own statement in your own words.

Sample #1

My interest in International Relations and my decision to continue my education in this field is the outcome of my profound interest in Asian studies. Majoring in History of India, during my final year I became especially interested in the sphere of International Relations and Foreign Policy of India, writing my thesis on Indian Foreign Policy during Nehru's Government and Indian-Chinese relations. Two trips to India 1997 and 1998 allowed me to become better acquainted with this country, refine my knowledge of Hindi and collect unique data for my research. This unforgettable experience convinced me that I had made the right choice of study, leading me to apply for a PhD Degree so as to extend my research in this field.

I have so far completed two years of the PhD program at St. Petersburg State University. My dissertation aims at disclosing those problems which still hinder the process of normalization between the two Asian countries, India and China, reflecting on how Indian scholars perceive these issues. Thus my research covers both Regional Studies and field of International Relations as a global world system where these two countries play an important role.

My presentation of a paper on Indo-Chinese Relations in 1980s at the international conference "East Asia - St. Petersburg - Europe: inter-civilization contacts and perspectives on economic cooperation" held in St. Petersburg a year ago gave me the opportunity to meet many outstanding researchers, including my referee, Marcia Ristaino, who encouraged me to continue my studies focusing specifically on International Relations and Regional Studies. For that reason I applied and was accepted to the MA Program in International Relations and European Studies at Central European University in Budapest with a scholarship from Soros foundation. The courses I am taking here will provide me with a sound background in theoretical issues in International Relations.

The reason of why I am applying for another Master's Degree is that the CEU program, despite its theoretical strength, has very few courses directly related to my major interest, Regional Studies and conflict resolution and peacekeeping. For this reason I would like to deepen my practical understanding of International Relations and relate it to a more focused concentration on conflict analysis and resolution through the program of the Carleton University.

I am aware of the high reputation of your school and the excellent Master's program that you offer at the Norman Paterson School of International Affairs. I believe it will certainly help me with my research and career objectives either through work in diplomatic service or at an international organization where I will be able to apply my knowledge and skills obtained through studies at your University.

Courses such as Conflict Analysis, International Mediation and Conflict Resolution and International Organizations in International Affairs will be very helpful for my analyzing of the problems in the South Asian subcontinent and beyond it and will allow me to deeper understand the reasons for numerous interstate and intrastate conflicts that persist in the region. Moreover these courses will be of particular relevance to my career plans which are to find employment with UN or a similar institution in the field of conflict resolution and peacekeeping. The possibility to combine theoretical studies with practical skills in conflict analysis and resolution at the Carleton University will enable me to become a good specialist who will be able to contribute to the common cause of peace in the world. I am eager to become a professional orientalist, as I believe this field of study will always be important in the changing world where Asian countries such as India and China play significant roles in the international arena. MA at the Carleton University would be a precious experience both in terms of my academic and professional career. I hope you will give me the opportunity to realize my ambition.

(A CEU Student - reproduced here with kind permission)

Sample #2

Having majored in literary studies (world literature) as an undergraduate, I would now like to concentrate on English and American literature. I am especially interested in nineteenth-century literature, women's literature, Anglo-Saxon poetry, and folklore and folk literature. My personal literary projects have involved some combination of these subjects. For the oral section of my comprehensive exams, I specialized in nineteenth century novels by and about women. The relationship between "high" and folk literature became the subject for my honors essay, which examined Toni Morrison's use of classical, biblical, African, and Afro-American folk tradition in her novel. I plan to work further on this essay, treating Morrison's other novels and perhaps preparing a paper suitable for publication.

In my studies toward a doctoral degree, I hope to examine more closely the relationship between high and folk literature. My junior year and private studies of Anglo-Saxon language and literature have caused me to consider the question of where the divisions between folklore, folk literature, and high literature lie. Should I attend your school, I would like to resume my studies of Anglo-Saxon poetry, with special attention to its folk elements.

Writing poetry also figures prominently in my academic and professional goals. I have just begun submitting to the smaller journals with some success and am gradually building a working manuscript for a collection. The dominant theme of this collection relies on poems that draw from classical, biblical, and folk traditions, as well as everyday experience, in order to celebrate the process of giving and taking life, whether literal or figurative. My poetry draws from and influences my academic studies. Much of what I read and study finds a place in my creative work as subject. At the same time, I study the art of literature by taking part in the creative process, experimenting with the tools used by other authors in the past.

In terms of a career, I see myself teaching literature, writing criticism, and going into editing or publishing poetry. Doctoral studies would be valuable to me in several ways. First, your teaching assistantship program would provide me with the practical teaching experience I am eager to acquire. Further, earning a Ph.D. in English and American literature would advance my other two career goals by adding to my skills, both critical and creative, in working with language. Ultimately, however, I see the Ph.D. as an end in itself, as well as a professional stepping-stone; I enjoy studying literature for its own sake and would like to continue my studies on the level demanded by the Ph.D. program.

(Stelzer pp. 40-41)

Some Further Sources:

- [Writing the Personal Statement](#) - Purdue University Online Writing Lab
- Hunter College School Of Social Work Writing Center – [The Personal Statement: Writing A Statement Of Purpose](#)

- [How to Write a Personal Statement](#) - Essay Edge.com
- Text sources for this page were taken from:
- How to Write a Winning Personal Statement for Graduate and Professional School.
by Richard Stelzer (Princeton, NJ: Peterson's Guides, 1989)

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