

How to Write a Statement of Purpose

A **statement of purpose**, also called a personal statement or an “SoP,” is a document often required for applications to graduate programs, internships, or other academic programs. It is important to recognize that a statement of purpose is a particular type of **genre**, which is a type of text that has become common enough to acquire its own set of conventions. Effective statements of purpose tend to adhere to these conventions. Audiences for these texts (an admissions committee, in this case) expect them to follow these conventions and will likely not respond favorably if the conventions are not followed.

This resource aims to familiarize you with the conventions of the statement of purpose genre and some of the “do’s” and “don’t’s” of writing them. However, keep in mind that every program has its own preferences for what to include in the document as well as requirements for formatting, length, etc. **You should always read your program’s requirements for the SoP very carefully and adhere to their expectations.**

What’s the purpose of a SoP?

Broadly speaking, a statement of purpose aims to explain why the applicant is interested in the program, what they can bring to the program, how the program aligns with their academic goals, and how they plan to use the experience and knowledge gained through the program after completion. The keys to a successful SoP are **specificity, synthesis, and alignment**.

Specificity

A statement of purpose should be highly specific to you and the program to which you are applying. Consider that you are likely competing against dozens, if not hundreds, of other applicants, and you need to stand out among them. Avoid making statements that anyone could say, and show that you have given careful thought to why you want to join this program. While you might not yet know what exactly you want to do once you finish it, you should at least signal that you are applying to the program with **intention** and genuine interest.

Weak: **I have always been interested in composition studies.**

Anyone could say this. It doesn’t say anything special about the applicant, and it is unnecessary: it should go without saying that someone applying to a composition program would be interested in the topic.

Better: **My four years of studying composition, particularly how practice plays a role in improving writing skills, motivates me to further my understanding of the field.**

This sentence is much more specific about how much experience the applicant has in the field and where their unique interests lie. It is more likely to resonate in the admissions committee’s memory.

Synthesis

Synthesis is the ability to combine multiple texts or ideas. In this case, your objective is to synthesize your academic goals and interests with the features of the program to which you are applying. To do this, you will need to research the program thoroughly to gain a solid understanding of what features it offers. Also, consider that this is a two-way street: just as you are looking to get something from *them*, they are looking to get something from *you*. How could your skills and expertise contribute to the program?

Weak: **I have a lot of experience researching composition practices.**

This is not measurable (how much is “a lot”?) and does not tell the admissions committee what unique skills or experiences the applicant would bring to the program.

Better: **My undergraduate degree in English equipped me with the primary and secondary research skills expected in your program. For example, in my senior thesis, I...**

The applicant is more specific about what they can bring to the program, and they are about to give an example of how they developed those skills. Hint: “For example” are two of the best words you can use!

Alignment

A common mistake is to write essentially the same statement of purpose for multiple programs. While it is often advantageous to apply to more than one program to increase your odds of acceptance, it is unwise to use identical or highly similar statements of purpose for each one. Most admissions committees will be able to tell, and it does not signal genuine interest in the program. Instead, you should make sure each SoP you write **aligns** with or is “tailored to” its respective program. Refer to specific features, such as courses and instructors, that align with your goals and interests.

Weak: **I am hoping to gain more experience in the composition classroom.**

This does not suggest that the applicant has done any research into the program. By now, they should already know whether the program would give them that experience!

Better: **Your program’s two-week work study seminar with Dr. Alamar offers an attractive opportunity to gain hands-on experience in the composition classroom.**

This applicant shows that they have done their homework: they explicitly refer to a particular feature of the program and why they find it appealing.

How do I organize a SoP?

While many programs will provide explicit instructions on how to structure the statement of purpose, many others may have very minimal guidelines. Therefore, it often falls on the applicant to determine the most effective way to organize the SoP. The following model tends to work well:

- The applicant broadly explains their goals and how the program aligns with them (Why am I applying?).
- The applicant gets more specific about that alignment, identifying particular features of the program and distinguishing it from others (Why did I pick *this* program?).
- The applicant explains what skills and experiences make them uniquely qualified for the program. (Why should you pick *me*?).
- The applicant summarizes their overall interest in the program and thanks the admissions committee for their consideration, assuring them that they will represent the program well. A good conclusion looks toward the future, so the applicant considers what they will do upon completion of the program.

Note: It is absolutely essential that you say “thank you” or otherwise show appreciation when you conclude your statement of purpose. It is also a good idea to reiterate this appreciation after the admissions process ends, even if you were not accepted. Always extend **good will** to the audience.

This resource was prepared by the Cottey College Writing Center.

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