

5 Rules for Writing a Strong Statement of Purpose

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This Version: October 15, 2014

The statement of purpose (SOP) is the single most important part of your application. Fortunately, you have complete control over its contents; you must fully exploit the opportunity this gives you. Think of the SOP as *a tightly woven narrative of intellectual growth*. It should be organized around one or two puzzles, which you want to work toward solving during your graduate studies. Specifically, the readers want to know how you have come to define these substantive interests as puzzles, how you are currently thinking about them, and how you think the resources of the program you are applying to will help you advance your thinking on them. This is hard. Start early and revise often. The best SOPs I have seen went through at least five rounds of revisions. Share your writing with peers, your preceptor, and faculty you trust. The target length of your SOP is two single-spaced pages (ca. 1,000 words), the required length of most programs. Some programs allow for longer statements, some require shorter ones. Refrain from writing longer SOPs, but do observe lower word limits.

As you craft your SOP, observe these five rules:

1 Name your professional aspirations.

It may sound obvious: You must mention that you intend to pursue a Ph.D. in order to become an academic. You must specify what being an academic means to you. Do you want to be a researcher, a teacher, or both? Demonstrate to members of the admissions committee you know what Ph.D. programs are designed to do: train political scientists. Too many applicants send the wrong signal here: By not specifying any ultimate professional purpose, they implicitly suggest that they seek no more than knowledge for knowledge's sake. This may be a laudable undertaking, but it cannot be accommodated by a professional Ph.D. program. Alternatively, applicants may confess to wanting to obtain a Ph.D. in order to “make the world a better place.” To be sure, political activism of one sort or another is a powerful motivating force for entering the academy. You may want to talk about the activist origins of your research puzzle, but do

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make sure you know the difference between an activist agenda and a scholarly one.

2 Identify with a (sub-)discipline.

Like it or not: Political science has become highly specialized. Admissions committees allocate places in Ph.D. programs based on the disciplinary affiliations of applicants. Though no one will treat the SOP as a sacred covenant between yourself and the program faculty once you have been admitted, you must enable readers to sort you. Are you applying as a student of political theory, international relations, comparative politics, American politics, or methodology, to name the dominant sub-fields in political science? Refrain from using empty phrases like “I am committed to interdisciplinarity,” “I believe in methodological and theoretical pluralism,” or “I seek to bring disparate literatures into conversation with one another.” An SOP is not a confession. Let your research interests speak for themselves. If they are of interest to multiple audiences, you do not need to tell readers. They will figure this out based on what you write.

3 Develop a research puzzle.

No one requires you to formulate a full-fledged research project in as little as 1,000 words. In fact, most faculty are biased against SOPs which read like a research proposal, because they worry the student, once admitted, will be immune to new ideas, faculty input, etc. That said, the more common problem is that applicants fail to formulate a research puzzle at all. Readers need to know that you understand what the practice of scholarship is all about: to find a research puzzle, and to come up with a methodologically sophisticated strategy for solving it. Puzzlement is an activity; think of your SOP as the window through which the admissions committee can observe you being puzzled. What constitutes a puzzle? This is for you to decide. More accurately, you may not decide at all, but be intuitively drawn to formulating research questions in a particular way. For instance, are you puzzled by some real-world phenomenon because it offends your sense of right and wrong? Are you puzzled because some theory you hold dear is unable to account for said phenomenon? Or does it bother you that the very terms with which the phenomenon is described do not live up to some linguistic standard of yours? There is no right or wrong way to be puzzled; faculty want to learn about your way.

4 Go deep.

In order for faculty to observe you being puzzled, you must explore one or two substantive problems in some detail. Refrain from jumping from one vaguely specified research topic to another. Don't burden the reader with field-specific jargon. You want to appear in command of the problem(s) you identified. Too

often, jargon is a substitute for understanding. Link your intellectual autobiography to your selection of these problems. Be specific. Was it a book you read? A class you took? Something you watched on TV? A conversation you had? With whom? Provide some texture. Then allow the reader to partake in your reasoning about the problem. How have you been thinking about it? Has your thinking changed? In response to what? How would you approach solving the problem using the tools of social science? Have you already taken a stab at solving it, e.g. by writing an undergraduate thesis? What have you learned? Does social science even provide the appropriate tools for solving your puzzle? What training do you need to work toward a solution? Who in your target program could help you? Why? Needless to say, you may want to do some research on the puzzle(s) you are posing. Ideally, you are drawing on work you have previously done. But don't let your intuitions be overshadowed by some stale review of what you think counts as "the literature." Use references sparingly if at all. Try to articulate arguments you know about in your own words. Do not use short-hand such as "According to Waltz 1979, . . ." There are no rewards for pretending to be good at playing inside baseball.

5 Convey information that cannot be found elsewhere in your file.

Many SOPs devote a lot of space to matters the faculty readers already know. Most commonly, applicants simply reproduce information contained in other parts of their file. Remember that your SOP complements your transcripts, your test scores, and your CV. It is perfectly reasonable to refer, in passing, to some datum on your CV, or some class, provided these details are relevant to narrating your intellectual growth. But do not devote entire sentences or, worse, paragraphs to recounting past achievements. The end result will be the SOP of an overachieving, yet insecure student instead of a promising researcher. Worse, some students turn into sycophants by extolling the generic virtues of their target program. Their writing no more than paraphrases the information programs list on their own websites. Remember who your readers are! They are not interested in you telling them that you have done your research. Instead, they want to see evidence of you linking the program information that is publicly available back to your proposed project. Readers want to know how you think a given course will contribute to your training as a scholar who is interested in x; how being advised by a particular faculty member will untie the intellectual knot you are currently facing; how taking some sequence of methods courses will bring you closer to a compelling answer to your puzzle. If you cannot be specific, be silent.