Statement of Purpose (SoP) writing guide

Broader considerations

1) **Statement of Purpose** (**SoP) – is not a personal statement**. We often tend to write stuff about our journey, how we got started, what were the challenges en-route etc. We also tend to write inspiring stories that sound unique and extraordinary. However, the admissions committee which reads thousands of SoPs each year is not looking for any of these stories. They focus on two things - genuine interest to pursue the subject in grad school + academic/technical background relevant to the degree program (how well you are prepared for this degree program). So, your SoP should narrate your personal story (starting from the days you developed an interest in the field, up to your most recent experiences in that field), and motivation in the areas of the grad school program you are applying to.

2) **SoP is more about the future** – As an extension to the previous point, an SoP is supposed to be directed to the future. It is important that we highlight our experiences and connect them to the goals for the future, and not excessively talk about the challenges we faced in the past. Indirectly, a student should try to demonstrate how he/she can be an asset to their school.

3) **Pay attention to the instructions on the grad school website** – Include all of the information requested by your program of interest in your SoP. Usually, grad schools give pointers on what they are expecting (5-6 prompts). Read the instructions carefully!

4) **Bring out your unique selling points (USP) –** Be unique, but through your experiences. Talk about interesting and relevant experiences. Let your passion for your area of interest come alive in your descriptions and examples. Avoid using too much jargon and too many big words that are not part of your day-to-day vocabulary. For readability, split extremely long sentences into two parts.

5) **Be clear and specific** – Instead of providing broad generalizations such as "my research internship provided valuable experience," write, "By utilizing four different categories of models, I gained a deeper understanding of usage of each model, its significance in determining indicators of malnutrition and …...."

6) **Focus on natural flow** – There must be a flow in your SoP. The reader should be easily able to connect different pieces – starting from connection between a given sentence to the previous one, to connection between different paras, and ultimately your background to your present interests and your future goals.

7) **Write with professionalism** – Organization of information, sentence structure, grammar, and spelling matter! It is not a conversation or a story, it is an official document of your graduate application package.

8) **Do your research on the program and the department you are applying to** – Mention specific names of professors you would like to work with, and what part of their research excites you. Do not be general here. Mention specific research works of professors and their labs, the key ideas that inspire you for a possible collaboration & how your experiences closely align with the research domains of the lab/professor. In fact if possible, mention a problem you are currently researching on (if you are not working on anything right now, you don't need to write it. You should be truthful), or a novel problem you are keen on researching during your graduate research at that lab. For example, I attempted to solve an existing problem with a Bayesian approach during my previous internship. Thus, I mentioned in my SOP that I would like to continue working on this topic under Prof X.

9) **Avoid being too narrow with your preferences** – It's good to have broad interests & not to be very narrow while describing the topic you want to work on during your grad school (unless the applicant has some extraordinary story & explanation for that). One can also mention their 2nd and 3rd choices (if those different choices are somehow linked) in case they don't get accepted by the sub-group of the first choice. But you should never sound as if you are not focussed on your interests. The advantage of mentioning broad interests (multiple choices) is: It is possible that a Prof. may not have funding for a particular work, but have funding for other works. For PhD admissions, when a student mentions multiple areas, often applications are forwarded to those multiple subgroups of the department, which may lead to higher chances of being accepted by any of the groups for admission.

Content of the SoP document

10) **Introduction of the SoP** – Begin with the most common and genuine words. For instance, if you are applying for a masters in CS, it is NOT necessary to demonstrate an interest in the subject from early childhood (in fact, playing the childhood card usually turns out to have a negative effect on your application). You can simply say that you got exposed to CS concepts through an internship a couple of years back and hence gained interest in pursuing a CS-based masters. The introduction should be around 15-20% of your SoP, ideally.

11) **Body of the SoP** – You can start with how your interest grew in your field of study. Accurately describe your coursework/research/internship (if you don't have internship/research experiences, then you can talk about relevant coursework) experiences in a logical order. In your initial drafts, try writing everything you can about a particular experience. Mention the importance and the motivation, your contribution, results (try to give any numbers if you can, such as 'an accuracy of 90% was achieved'), the softwares/techniques utilized, etc. In further iterations, cut down on words, make them short, succinct and powerful using paraphrasing tools. Finally, for every new experience, connect it to the previous one. Use transition words, sentences and paragraphs. Your statement must read smoothly.

12) **Explaining low GPA** – Several websites recommend students to mention any possible causes of why they have low scores in a particular subject, or a low overall GPA. However, **refrain from giving explanations on your low scores unless explicitly asked**. Unless you have an extraordinary story for why your GPA is low, you would pretty much be wasting several of your words in giving explanations. The admissions committee is well versed with the fact that bookish knowledge is different from practical application based wisdom. They know that you can get a B grade in theory examinations but still be good at what you do. Additionally, it is possible that they might not pay much heed to low grades/GPA unless you bring it to their notice.

13) **Closing para** – Aside from having a strong opening paragraph (introduction), one should also focus on closing on a strong note. The closing paragraph should highlight your future goals and aspects of the program that appeal to you. Show eagerness, and request for a possible interactive session (be it personal, face-to-face, or online) to demonstrate your capabilities.

14) **Length of the document** – Most of the programs specify the required length of the SoP. If the length is not specified, try not to exceed 2 pages. Use standard font styles and font sizes.