

**Tips on Statements of Purpose  
for Graduate PhD Applications  
in the Humanities and Social Sciences**

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A graduate application's introductory statement serves these purposes:

- It allows you to introduce yourself to graduate admissions committees and potential advisors as an individual with distinctive intellectual orientations, skills and interests.
- It presents your qualifications for admission, especially by showing your mind at work on specific, significant, field-specific questions.
- It communicates your intended research themes and subjects, as situated within broader fields of inquiry.
- It conveys the possession of significant content knowledge, and the exercise of interpretive skills that characterize the field you are applying to study in.
- It brings together features of your application into a coherent, integrated portrait that might otherwise be difficult to derive from its discrete parts.
- It makes the case for a strong overlap between your interests and approaches, and the strengths and priorities of the department to which you are applying.

An effective statement of purpose for graduate school applications in the humanities or social sciences needs to contain the following key elements:

**Research Interests and Goals**

- Clearly articulate the broad research interests, themes and questions you want to explore in graduate school, as well as potential topics of research. It is especially important to balance specificity and breadth. You don't want your statement of purpose to read like a dissertation proposal; this will convey intellectual narrowness and suggest that you approach graduate training in limited, project-specific ways (as something you need simply to write the dissertation you've already decided on), rather than a context in which you develop as a scholar and thinker, prepare yourself to teach, etc.
- At the same time, you don't want your intellectual profile to come across as gauzy or amorphous: including possible research topics lends your application concreteness and

specificity. Combining larger themes and actual projects will show your ability to move between empirical research and conceptualization.

- Explain the significance of your proposed research and how you hope it might contribute to the field you are applying in. Here you want to make sure that your sense of its potential significance rises above the notion of “covering” a topic that hasn’t been studied before—“filling a gap in the literature.” Instead, emphasize how you hope it might productively engage with existing scholarly conversations, or change scholars’ perspectives. (And make sure your sense of your work’s potential impact is realistic and well-calibrated, with an emphasis on what you *think* or *hope* it might do, rather than what it *will* do.)

- You may want to briefly discuss specific works whose methods or approaches you have found inspiring; it is especially important to make clear what it is that you found helpful or exciting in these works. If a potential advisor or committee members is the author of one of these works, be careful to represent their work accurately, and do not go overboard when it comes to praise, which can come across as pandering.)

### **Academic Background and Qualifications**

- Emphasize highlights in your relevant coursework, research experience, and academic achievements, without reproducing your C. V., which you’ll be submitting separately.

- Discuss any projects you’ve undertaken that demonstrate your readiness for the specific field. The strongest applications convey a clear sense that the applicant is already engaged in the kinds of work that define professionals in the field.

- Explain how your undergraduate studies have prepared you for graduate-level work in your field. You don’t want to laundry-list your courses—you’ll submit your transcript in your application—but you want to demonstrate that you have significant expertise in your fields’ content, and defining skills and habits of mind.

- If you are applying to graduate school in a field that you came late to in your undergraduate studies, you want to communicate why you have chosen the particular discipline you are applying to, and it is essential to highlight the work that you *have* done in your destination discipline. You also want to explore the ways your previous training will benefit your graduate studies: allowing you to bring to bear inter-disciplinary perspectives, concepts or skills, for example. (You should not convey a sense of defensiveness or apology about changing fields; what you need is an affirmative case for why your existing training strengthens you as a candidate.)

- Use your statement to show that you can do the work, based on your existing track record (which will hopefully be attested to by your letters of recommendation.) Some of the most effective applications explore a moment or challenge the applicant has encountered during their research or studies: how they made sense of a primary source, or how they

changed their mind about something they thought they understood, for example. Such narratives can bring the candidate to life and show their mind at work.

### **Motivation and Experience**

- Explain your motivation for pursuing graduate study, including a brief account of what sparked your interest in the field: this can include an inspiring course you took, or book you read, or cultural experience you had.

- You may want to briefly mention relevant personal experiences that have shaped your academic interests. But don't over-emphasize strictly personal factors. Committees will rightly be suspicious of applicants whose interests derive entirely from the desire for personal self-discovery, relative to contributing to knowledge in the broader field, even as these interests can very legitimately coincide to varying degrees.

- Similarly, it's best not to rely heavily on arguments from personal experience in making the case for your admission. Undoubtedly, personal experience can powerfully inform one's point of view and intellectual orientation (for better or worse). But admissions committee will ultimately be evaluating your application for its intellectual acuity and potential.

### **Fit with the Particular Program**

- Explain why the program you are applying for is a good fit for your goals and interests.

- Demonstrate knowledge of the specific university setting you are applying to, especially an awareness of programs, centers or features that align with your interests.

- Mention faculty members whose research connects with your interests, ideally more than one, since you'll be taking many graduate seminars, and will need to build dissertation advising committee and comprehensive exam committee. (In terms of practical matters of admissions committee decisions, you may also need to identify a potential "constituency" for your candidacy, beyond any one advisor.)

- It perhaps goes without saying, but make sure that you represent these faculty members' scholarship accurately, so that they will recognize their work in your accounting of it. Ideally, these brief descriptions of faculty members' research and expertise are matter of fact and positive in tone, but not effusive or flattering.

### **Future Plans**

- Discuss your academic and career goals, and how the program will help you achieve them. You don't need to go into great detail here, but it can be helpful to flag whether you hope to go into academia or some other career path, what you hope to do with your training, etc., so that committees can assess whether their department is a good fit in

terms of content but also professional development, connecting students with the right professional networks and job opportunities, etc.

### **Writing Quality and Style**

- Show rather than tell. It can be tempting to state outright that you are fascinated, enthralled or even obsessed by the field you are applying to, or some specific topic within it. But however sincere these sentiments are, statements like this often come off as amateurish. Instead, communicate your energy to readers through the vigor and freshness of your prose, and through specific information that conveys the time, energy, thought and work you have already invested in scholarly projects.
- Organize your statement with care, so that overall sequence, flow and structure are clear, with a strong introduction and conclusion.
- Use clear, concise, and professional language.
- Proofread carefully to eliminate errors.

### **Get Feedback**

Have professors, mentors, and peers review drafts of your statement, and revise.

- Ask for honest feedback on your statement's content, structure, and style.
- Implement useful suggestions to improve and refine your statement.
- Start early enough to allow time for multiple rounds of revision.

### **General Nuts and Bolts**

- When it comes to overall length, tastes vary, but 2-3 single-spaced pages in Times New Roman font (approximately 1,300-1,600 words) is ideal. Your statement should not be longer than three single-spaced pages.
- It's a good idea to mention your writing sample in passing in your statement of purpose, in order to contextualize it in your larger intellectual trajectory, coursework, etc. Is the sample an excerpt from a senior thesis or M. A. thesis, for example?
- In terms of organization and sequence, there is no fixed rule, but in practice, most statements of purpose begin with one's research interests, then proceed to the candidate's intellectual background and training to date, then end with questions of departmental and advisor fit. (There is no special reason to conform to this, but doing so may make your statement easier for committee members to read.)