

A Guide to Writing the Statement of Purpose for Graduate School Applications

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Erin Todey

Iowa State University Digital Press
Ames, Iowa



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This book is published by

*Iowa State University Digital Press
701 Morrill Rd, Ames, Iowa 50011, United States*

www.iastatedigitalpress.com

DOI: <https://www.doi.org/10.31274/isudp.2025.199>

Iowa State University is located on the ancestral lands and territory of the Baxoje (bah-kho-dzhe), or Ioway Nation. The United States obtained the land from the Meskwaki and Sauk nations in the Treaty of 1842. We wish to recognize our obligations to this land and to the people who took care of it, as well as to the 17,000 Native people who live in Iowa today.

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Introduction

The graduate school application is high-stakes, and it can feel overwhelming because the expectations, materials, and processes are not always clear to applicants. To address these challenges, this resource is intended to be an introduction to the graduate school application process and the required materials, with a specific focus on the statement of purpose (SoP), an essay that is usually a required, and important, part of the application. The framework introduced in this resource is based on empirical research (Todey, in progress) which has analyzed the structure of 192 statements of purpose for master's and doctoral programs across 32 disciplines.

The naming of this essay can be confusing because several different terms are used to refer to the same essay. Some applications refer to this essay as a personal statement while others call it an academic statement of purpose or letter of intent. There are a few instances where an application might require both a statement of purpose and a personal statement which indicates that these terms are referring to different types of essays. For our purposes, this resource will distinguish between statements of purpose and personal statements and will intentionally use the term statement of purpose.

Please note that this book is intended to be a guide for individuals applying to master's (e.g., M.A., M.S.) and doctoral (e.g., Ph.D., Ed.D.) programs, both research and coursework based. It is *not* intended for those applying to professional degree programs, such as an MBA, JD, or MD/DO. While professional graduate program applications might have some overlap with master's and Ph.D. application materials, there are differences, and these differences are beyond the scope of this resource.

Section 1 provides an overview of the graduate school application process and the materials which are typically required. It then provides an overview of the statement of purpose (SoP), the SoP framework, and sample prompts. Section 2 discusses the motivation component of the framework, Section 3 discusses the experience component of the framework, and Section 4 introduces the final section of the SoP framework, fit to program. Section 5 pivots to a discussion of the writing process, and how an applicant can move through this process when writing the SoP. In Section 6, four additional SoPs are provided and annotated as model texts. Finally, Section 7 provides words of wisdom from individuals who have successfully navigated the graduate school application process and Section 8 offers some guidance from graduate faculty who review graduate school applications.

You are encouraged to use the resource as it serves your needs and writing process. This resource will hopefully help you think about the expectations and structure of the SoP and guide you in starting to write. You are strongly encouraged to seek feedback from mentors and to work with the writing center at your institution.

As you use this resource, I hope that you find increased confidence in your application as you reflect on your motivation for applying to graduate school, how your experiences have informed this decision, and your fit to particular graduate programs.

Acknowledgements

An enormous thank you goes to all the students, and especially the McNair Scholars, who have shared their stories with me over the past several years. I am deeply grateful for the Scholars who agreed to share their statement in this resource so that future graduate school applicants might benefit from these models. Thank you also to Iowa State University's Miller Open Education Mini-Grant Program for the funding to develop this resource, Abbey Elder and the ISU Digital Press team for their help in development, the four peer reviewers who offered kind and meaningful feedback, and especially to Dr. Elena Cotos and Dr. Sarah Huffman for their support in the development of this framework. Finally, I would like to thank Thelma Harding for first welcoming me into the ISU McNair Scholars Program.

A note on permissions

The 10 statements of purpose used in this resource were written by Iowa State University McNair Scholars who were accepted into a graduate program. All 10 Scholars granted me permission to use their materials in this resource as models, and they were asked how to handle attribution; therefore, you will see some full names, some first names only, some initials, and some pseudonyms, all of which reflect the Scholars' attribution preferences.

Section 1: An Overview of the Graduate School Application Process and Materials

1.1. An Overview of the Graduate School Application Process and Materials

What is graduate school?

Graduate school is advanced study on a particular topic and includes master's and doctoral degrees. Master's programs are typically 1-2 years and include coursework; there are thesis- and non-thesis-based programs. If you are interested in doing research and in pursuing a Ph.D., then a program with a thesis is recommended. Ph.D. programs, also called doctoral programs, are research-based degree programs that might include some coursework but heavily emphasize an individual research component, called a dissertation. In some fields, you must earn a master's degree before applying to a Ph.D. program. In other fields, you can be admitted directly into a Ph.D. program; in that case, you would essentially work through the master's degree and then Ph.D. degree sequentially without needing to reapply to a program. This depends both on fields of study and specific programs and institutions.

The graduate school application

Applying to graduate school has many similarities with applying to an undergraduate degree program as there is an online application and you will need to provide a variety of materials which demonstrate your academic experiences and preparation to be successful in the degree program. However, there are substantial differences. For example, graduate school applications are reviewed by a committee within each program or department. This is important to keep in mind as your audience for the graduate school application is faculty who are experts in the field of study and who are considering you for their graduate program and research.

The materials you will likely need to submit as part of your graduate school application include:

- Online application
- Transcripts
- Curriculum vitae (CV)/resume
- Graduate Record Examination (GRE) scores
- Letters of recommendation
- Personal, diversity, and/or research statements (possible, but not always required)
- Writing sample or portfolio (possible, but not required for all majors)
- Statement of purpose (SoP)

The focus of this resource is on the statement of purpose; however, before we can discuss that essay, we need to have a more complete understanding of all the materials required in the graduate school application. The following pages will discuss each of these parts of the graduate school application.

1.2. Online Application

Applications to graduate school are submitted online. You will first be required to create an account before you can see all the materials you need to submit and the specific prompts. It is recommended that you open these online accounts when they become available in September. It is important to create and open your account for each program early because there might be additional information than what was communicated on a program's website.

In the United States, the typical application season runs from early September to December/January. Some programs accept applications on a rolling basis through the spring. International application dates can vary from US dates so be sure to check the program website well in advance. Additionally, concurrent programs can have different deadlines as they might accept students at different points throughout the year while many graduate programs start new cohorts only in the fall.

Be sure to check the program's application deadline and give yourself enough time to complete all the materials. Allowing yourself a minimum of 2-3 months to work on the materials is strongly recommended.

1.3. Transcripts

Transcripts are required, but schools will vary on whether they require an official or an unofficial transcript of your undergraduate (and any graduate) coursework. Be sure to pay attention to what the school requires. If you are able to upload an unofficial transcript at the time of application, you may be asked to provide an official transcript at a later date.

Be aware that in many cases, official transcripts cost money and can take some time to procure; this, of course, depends on the institution and the system used. At minimum, double check what is required and the time it takes to access these materials well in advance of the application due date.

1.4. Curriculum Vitae (CV) or Resume

The curriculum vitae (CV) is a comprehensive overview of your professional and academic experiences. While a resume is typically limited to one page, a CV can be as long as necessary (unless the online application says otherwise). Your experiences should be listed in reverse chronological order within each section (newest to oldest), and you should describe your experiences as you would in a resume.

For graduate school, you will want to include the following information:

- Contact information
- Education
- Research experience
- Teaching, mentoring, and/or tutoring experience
- Internships and/or professional experience
- Publications (if applicable)
- Presentations (if applicable)
- Honors and awards
- Volunteering experience
- Leadership and extracurricular experience
- Skills (e.g., laboratory skills/procedures/tools, programming languages, computer software/hardware)

Your experiences do not need to be listed in the order above, but it is common to begin with your contact information and education at the beginning of the CV.

As with your other documents, you are strongly encouraged to visit the career and/or writing centers at your institution for constructive feedback.

1.5. Graduate Record Examination (GRE) Scores

For many years the GRE, a standardized test which assesses verbal reasoning, quantitative reasoning, and analytical writing, has been a required component of graduate school applications regardless of discipline and degree program. However, after the COVID-19 pandemic, there has been a shift away from the GRE as a requirement, yet this varies widely across institutions, programs, and disciplines. You are strongly encouraged to look into the program's updated requirements as this can change on a yearly basis. If it's unclear if the GRE is required, reach out to the graduate program's office for more details.

More information about the GRE and test preparation can be found on the GRE website: <https://www.ets.org/gre.html>

1.6. Letters of Recommendation

Graduate school applications typically require that you submit the names of three people who will write you a letter of recommendation. These individuals should be able to speak positively about your academic and/or research experiences and your ability to be successful in a graduate program. Professors who know you well are the best choice. You could also ask support staff, lecturers, or others who know you in an academic and professional context. You should not include personal references such as friends or family members.

Be sure that you request your letters of recommendation well in advance of the due date as a strong letter can take time to write. Ask your recommenders what materials you can provide; they might ask you to share your CV/resume and statement of purpose to get a better sense of your experiences and motivation.

In the online application, you will typically be asked to provide the recommender's name, email, and relationship to you. Requests for a letter can then be sent immediately through the online system, but in some cases, the request is not sent until the application is complete. It is very important that you pay attention to this to give your recommenders time to write and upload the letter.

1.7. Personal, Diversity, and/or Research Statements

As mentioned in the introduction, one of the biggest sources of confusion for graduate school applicants is around the naming of the essay. At times applications will use the terms statement of purpose and personal statement interchangeably. If an application only asks for a personal statement, it is quite possible that the SoP framework discussed in this resource will apply. Some institutions ask for both a personal statement and a statement of purpose; if that is the case, the prompts provided in the application should distinguish between the two.

For some applications, a personal history and/or diversity statement may be required. The prompts for these statements vary greatly, and it is not always clear how they are used in the application process. Sometimes the statements are used for fellowship programs to support individuals who identify as first-generation, low-income, and/or underrepresented. These essays are typically short, ranging from 300-500 words. Pay attention to the questions you are asked and be sure that you respond to the prompt. These statements are personal in nature, and you should only include what you feel comfortable sharing.

You might also be asked to write a research statement. This might overlap with the statement of purpose or it might be completely different. It could ask about your past research experiences and/or your research interests, goals, and proposed thesis or dissertation topics. Start by reading the prompt to ensure you understand what you should address in this statement.

1.8. Writing Sample/ Portfolio

Some graduate programs require a writing sample, typically an individually authored piece of academic writing completed in a course, a summer research experience, or as an undergraduate independent research project or senior thesis. This should be a strong piece of writing that demonstrates your ability to communicate complex information (including citations) in a logical, meaningful way.

Other graduate programs might require a portfolio of your work from your undergraduate courses or projects you've completed. Again, be sure to consult the graduate program's website and application for specifics on the content, page length, file format, etc.

1.9. Statement of Purpose

The statement of purpose (SoP) typically ranges from 500-1,000 words (and in some select cases, up to 1,500 words); this word limit varies greatly depending on the graduate program and institution. Sometimes it is called a “personal statement” or “letter of intent.” Some institutions divide the essay into a statement of purpose AND a personal statement; if this is case, more detailed prompts are often provided to help the writer distinguish between the two essays. This again speaks to the importance to paying attention to the prompts, especially if there are special directions for your program. For our purposes, the term statement of purpose (SoP) will be used because this name is more logically aligned with what reviewers expect to see in the SoP.

But what are you supposed to actually write about in the SoP? Sometimes applicants think that their statement of purpose should be a summary of their CV (Swales, 2009), but why would readers want a summary if the CV is also provided in the application set? What purpose would that duplication serve? Think about the CV and SoP working together in your application. The CV is the comprehensive overview of your experiences, and the SoP provides context and demonstrates the impact of these experiences to show why you are interested in pursuing a graduate degree given your career goals and research interests.

The SoP is one of the more challenging aspects of the graduate school application which is why this resource is dedicated to explaining the SoP and guiding you through the writing process of brainstorming, outlining, drafting, revising, and editing.

To get us started, let’s start with a short activity to orient ourselves by reviewing several SoP prompts.

Activity



An interactive H5P element has been excluded from this version of the text. You can view it online here:

<https://iastate.pressbooks.pub/statementofpurpose/?p=98#h5p-12>

SoP Prompt Example 1 – Colorado School of Mines

The purpose of this requirement is to briefly introduce yourself to the Graduate Admissions Review Committee by sharing your professional, academic and personal goals and why you believe Colorado School of Mines is the best place to achieve those goals. In addition, any skills or experience that you have and believe are applicable to a Teaching Assistantship or Research Assistantship award should be addressed in the statement. Please keep your statement to one to two pages in length, at the most (~500-750 words).

SoP Prompt Example 2 – Georgetown University

An Academic Statement of Purpose is required for your application. Be sure to check your academic program of interest for any specific requirements regarding the statement. If there are no specific program requirements, your statement of approximately 500 words should address your intellectual interests, academic and professional objectives, and proposed topic(s) of graduate study. Some points to include, as appropriate, are: your preparation and motivation for graduate study, including your academic, research and work experience; how the Georgetown program of interest aligns with your preparation and experience; for Ph.D. candidates, how particular faculty interests in your desired program align with your educational goals.

SoP Prompt Example 3 – Rochester Institute of Technology

Personal Statement of Educational Objectives: Please upload a personal statement describing your educational objectives. You may wish to address: (1) why you are applying for the program, (2) how your degree program will relate to your long-range career objectives, (3) what personal or “non-academic” qualities you will contribute to the learning environment in your program, (4) what prior experience you have with respect to your chosen program, and (5) specifically why you want to attend RIT.

SoP Prompt Example 4 – University Colorado Boulder

Please upload a personal statement (1,000 word maximum) that describes why you are choosing to pursue a coursework- or research-focused master’s program in biomedical engineering and what has prepared you for this challenge. You should consider including the following information:

- Your academic and research interests, including what motivated you to apply to the Biomedical engineering program at CU Boulder.
- Your long-term scientific and professional goals and how a master’s degree in biomedical engineering from CU Boulder will help you meet your career goals.
- Your research experiences such as publications, theses, research in progress, and other scholarly activities.
- Relevant past experience, including industry work, teaching, challenging coursework, non-course educational experience, etc. How did the experience prepare or motivate you to pursue a master’s degree?
- Your personal experiences and contributions to support diversity in your education, service activities, or research experiences.
- Any relevant information that is not included in the other application components, such as leadership ability, perseverance, and commitment to justice.

SoP Prompt Example 5 – Iowa State University

Primarily, explain: 1. Your purpose for starting or continuing graduate study, 2. Why you want to study at Iowa State University, 3. Your professional plans, your career goals, and your research interests, and 4. Any experience that is particularly applicable to the program for which you're applying.

Secondarily, elaborate on: 1. Any irregularities or special circumstances applicable to your application, 2. Your special abilities, awards, achievements, scholarly publications, and professional history as it relates to the program of interest, and 3. Any prior research information, or contact with specific Iowa State program faculty. Length: 500 words or less.

1.10. Overview of the Statement of Purpose Framework

Within each graduate school application, you will likely see a variety of writing prompts for the statement of purpose; while these prompts will vary, what you might notice after reading is that the prompts ask writers to address their motivation for applying to graduate school, their relevant experiences, and their fit to a particular program. What's especially exciting is that this way of thinking about the SoP aligns with empirical research about the statement of purpose (Today, in progress) which shows that SoPs across disciplines and degree programs are similar in their underlying structure. This structure can be summarized in the following framework which includes three goals which writers work to achieve and which are typically communicated in this order:

- **Goal 1. Experiences:** The relevant experiences you've had which have informed and prepared you to pursue a graduate degree.
- **Goal 2. Motivation:** Your purpose for wanting to pursue a graduate degree which is often related to a specific research interest and/or career objectives.
- **Goal 3. Fit to Program:** A discussion of why a particular graduate program is right for you given your motivation (and especially your research interests and objectives).

You might think of these goals generally as your past (experiences) informing your present (motivation) which further informs your future (fit to program). Each of these three goals will be discussed individually in the following sections.

Section 2, Identifying and Writing About Your Motivation, will start with discussing motivation because it really functions as the heart of the statement of purpose. It is important that we

address this goal first because without a clear sense of your purpose for applying to graduate school, the SoP will be especially challenging to write.

Section 3, Identifying and Writing About your Relevant Experiences, will help you think about which experiences you should discuss in your SoP.

Section 4, Identifying and Writing about your Program Fit, will guide you through determining which graduate program is right given your research interests and career goals.

Section 2: Identifying and Writing About Your Motivation

2.1. Identifying and Writing About Your Motivation

Let's review what was just introduced in the previous section. The statement of purpose (SoP) is a required part of the graduate school application. This essay typically ranges from 500-1,000 words (and in some cases, can even be up to 1,500 words), and it should address the following:

- Goal 1. Experiences: The relevant experiences you've had which have informed and prepared you to pursue a graduate degree.
- **Goal 2. Motivation: Your purpose for wanting to pursue a graduate degree which is often related to specific research interests and/or career objectives.**
- Goal 3. Fit to Program: A discussion of why a particular graduate program is right for you given your motivation (and especially your research interests and objectives).

This section will discuss options for how to engage in identifying and discussing motivation within the SoP. We will focus on the motivation section of the framework first because it is the heart of the SoP and functions as the lens through which you'll think about your past experiences and your fit to a particular graduate program.

This section will talk about specific strategies you can use to discuss your motivation including, personal experience and/or identity, research interests, academic and/or professional objectives, and the need for continued education. The following pages include two opportunities for brainstorming and an example SoP.

2.2. Motivation in the SoP: An Example

Activity

Let's look at a statement of purpose written by a student who was accepted into a Master of Public Health program. As you read the statement, see if you can identify any sentences where you understand that the writer is communicating their **motivation** to attend graduate school.

Example

Lal Thangi

Master of Public Health, Health Management and Policy, Emory University

SoP Prompt: 1,500 Words or less, summarize relevant experience, explain what you hope to achieve with your public health degree; explain the reason why you would like to attend Rollins School of Public Health.

My initial interest in healthcare started from witnessing Myanmar's lack of medical care and the urgent need for healthcare workers. Being born in a third-world country comes with many challenges. On top of food and water scarcity, we immensely lacked access to medicine. We did not have over-the-counter medicine for emergency use. We had to travel hours by bicycle for treatments just to get in an endless line. Prices for medications were unaffordable. Due to the civil wars, my family was forced to leave Myanmar in 2010. I was ten when we settled in Malaysia with the United Nations Asylum as refugees. That's when I faced the most adversity and navigated the unknown as a child. Everything was foreign to us. My parents made incredible sacrifices for my education by working from early morning until night, seven days a week. Because my parents did not have a high school education, they had limited language skills. I was responsible for communicating in different settings, such as grocery shopping, clinic visits, and job interviews. For instance, I remember my mom suffering from severe stomach pain due to appendicitis. We took an hour bus ride to the hospital and stayed in the emergency room all night. I took on the role of translating without the knowledge of medical terms. Unfortunately, we could not afford the operation and my mom was only given painkillers to help with the pain. She did not get her appendix removed until we arrived in the United States in 2015. Unfortunate circumstances like this have enhanced my passion for gaining knowledge and skills in public health to help those who face similar issues. Since arriving in the US in 2015, I have lived in a refugee community where most elders do not speak English or know about their healthcare resources, specifically insurance policies. I have served as a translator for many individuals to overcome existing language barriers and express the importance of medical knowledge for my community. Through these experiences, I have recognized my passion for addressing the healthcare system and issues that impact immigrant communities.

In 2019, I completed my advanced CNA training as I graduated from high school. Working as a CNA at a hospital and nursing home, I gained an understanding of the complexities of the medical system. For instance, I met many patients who were not able to speak English, and I noticed the differences in the quality of care they received compared to patients who could advocate for their own needs. In nursing homes, minority elders who were not able to express their basic needs, such as requesting blankets, pillows, and food, were perceived as needier than others when asking for assistance. I'm convinced it is our responsibility as healthcare workers to advocate for those at a disadvantage.

Additionally, my experience working at the Methodist Medical Center Hospital during the rise of COVID-19 taught me the importance of good collaboration among all healthcare

workers. For instance, we had an older adult from my community who was admitted to the floor where I worked. While I wasn't assigned to her, I overheard the nurse asking if anyone spoke the Mizo language because she couldn't communicate in English, and I immediately went to help. By speaking Mizo, I was able to help the patient and providers communicate to ensure the patient's concerns were properly addressed. When it comes to saving lives and improving population health, everyone has a vital role to play, especially healthcare providers from diverse backgrounds. My direct patient care experience has taught me that I aspire to increase diversity in healthcare and have more minority-owned facilities. Thus, improving healthcare literacy among immigrant communities has been my focus throughout my educational journey to acquire the necessary skills and knowledge.

During the summer of 2020, I was accepted to the Summer Health Professions Education Program (SHPEP) at the University of Iowa. While participating in SHPEP, I was introduced to public health and its role in improving population health. I was intrigued to learn about the various health management sectors, and it was confirmation that I would be fulfilling my purpose by pursuing a degree in HMP. Coming into college as a first-generation student, this was the first time I learned about the field of public health. In fact, because of this experience, I changed my major from psychology to community and public health within the Kinesiology Department.

In the summer of 2022, I was honored to participate in a 10-week intensive summer program, the Future Public Health Leaders Program (FPHLP), at the University of Michigan. In FPHLP, I acquired in-depth, fundamental knowledge of public health and other healthcare professions. It equipped me with various skills necessary to succeed in a professional career. Meeting underrepresented students like me, who are passionate about improving their community and advocating for health disparities, left me more inspired to pursue a career in healthcare administration. I want to understand more about policy and solve healthcare issues, such as healthcare management regarding language barriers and advocacy, as well as education in healthcare competency among underrepresented communities. Here, I interned at the Wayne County Health Department. I worked as a COVID-19 Case Investigator to reduce the spread of COVID-19 in Wayne County, Michigan. This field placement introduced me to working with quantitative data, as I was assigned 5-8 cases to investigate daily. I utilized two databases: the Michigan Disease Surveillance System and Patient Education Genius. These databases allowed me to record investigated Covid-19 case data, which assists other investigators in contact tracing. The uploaded data were later used to acquire general epidemiologic data. To obtain data, I reached out to confirm positive cases via a phone call for further investigations. This data was to inform and update the public on

the latest trends. Additionally, I had the opportunity to present a research poster about mitigating the spread of COVID-19 at the CUPS Expo Showcase 2022 and the University of Michigan's School of Public Health.

I also gained qualitative research experience as a McNair Scholar. For our team research project in the McNair Program, I conducted a study exploring the impact of mentorship among multicultural and underrepresented undergraduates in their pursuit of graduate degrees. Our methodology included interviewing our graduate and faculty mentors about their educational journeys. Our findings showed the benefits of mentorship during the undergraduate degree. Those who had mentors in their undergraduate years gained more general knowledge about graduate school and more confidence while applying for programs. They also had more resources for funding and other necessities. At the end of the year, I presented a poster on this research at the McNair Symposium. My experience with this research inspired me to be a mentor for undergraduate students.

I believe my research experiences have prepared me for the Health Management and Policy program in terms of working with focused communities and developing effective strategies. When working with target populations, I can use my knowledge of qualitative research to follow proper methods and protocols. I can also incorporate the teamwork skills I gained from this experience when working on group projects in Management and Policy coursework.

After completing a public health degree, I plan to establish my own healthcare facility, whether assisted living or a walk-in clinic. Thus, I am open to all the possibilities granted by the School of Public at Emory University. I envision myself representing the community I come from within the healthcare system. Using my public health degree and skills, I hope to provide space for underrepresented communities to feel acknowledged and prioritize their sense of belonging in a healthcare facility. As I aim to represent my community in healthcare and medical decision-making, health management and policy courses at Emory University will help me to succeed. For example, a degree in HPM will grant me an opportunity to work with CDC and other leading companies which will advance my acquisition of a public health job after completion of the degree. Additionally, the specificity in management classes will broaden my skills in leadership, decision-making, and healthcare management, which will prepare me for my career goal of being a successful health manager or an administrator. The required internship will expose me to administration duties and roles more in-depth. Therefore, I believe that Emory University's HPM will add tremendous value to my pursuit of a career that aims to make positive societal changes.



An interactive H5P element has been excluded from this version of the text. You can view it online here:

<https://iastate.pressbooks.pub/statementofpurpose/?p=115#h5p-9>

2.3. Brainstorming About Your Motivation

Part I

Notice in the previous example how the writer intentionally indicates her motivation to pursue this particular degree throughout their statement. The motivation comes from both her unique personal experiences and have expanded into specific research interests and career objectives. By starting her statement saying “My initial interest in healthcare,” she prepares the reader to understand the purpose of the personal story in a direct way. This motivation appears throughout the SoP in the form of her personal experiences, research interests, and career objectives.

Do you have a sense of how you might communicate your motivation for pursuing a graduate degree in your SoP?

Activity

Brainstorming (Part 1): Take time to respond to the following questions. It might be helpful to remember that at this point in the writing process, there are no right or wrong answers. Be honest with yourself and think fully about your responses to these questions. These notes are just for you; your purpose here is not to evaluate the ideas, but to explore your motivation as it pertains to applying to graduate school and your larger career objectives and research interests. If you’re struggling to respond to the questions, talk through these ideas with a friend or mentor.

Important! Make sure that you save a copy of your brainstorming by selecting the “Copy” button below and then pasting the text into a Word document.

This activity can also be downloaded: [SoPBrainstormingQuestions \[DOC\]](#)



An interactive H5P element has been excluded from this version of the text. You can view it online here:

<https://iastate.pressbooks.pub/statementofpurpose/?p=117#h5p-1>

2.4. Personal Experience and/or Identity

Motivation is key to discuss in your statement of purpose, and there are several strategies you can use to indicate your motivation. The first strategy we'll discuss is Personal Experience and/or Identity.

In this strategy, the writer might demonstrate that their interest in a particular field of study comes from relevant personal experience, including, but not limited to: cultural and familial experiences, significant life-changing events, and unique personal circumstances. Part of these personal experiences could also be tied to social identities, such as racial/ethnic identities, gender identity, physical abilities, veteran status, sexual orientation, etc.

In discussing a personal experience, it will be useful to highlight the value of the experience and show a direct connection to the field of study. Sharing personal experiences is not required in the SoP (of course, pay attention to any questions in the prompt). If you decide to use this strategy, make sure that there is a clear connection between your personal experience and how it has motivated you to pursue a particular degree, topic of research, and/or professional objective.

If you choose to use this strategy, please be thoughtful with the personal information you share. You are not required to divulge personal information. You are writing to people you don't know, and you do not owe them your story. You get to decide what boundaries you set and how much you share of your lived experience. You'll notice that the example SoPs in this resource share a diversity of information – some are more vulnerable than others. But what is most important is that you feel comfortable and safe sharing your story. If you don't want to share it, you don't have to do so.

Below are some examples of how writers use the Personal Experience and/or Identity strategy:

Example

I gained a keen connection to the environment in Jackson, Mississippi, where I've spent most of my life. There, I understood how each person played an important role in maintaining the health of their local environment. My experiences later solidified this mindset after witnessing the effects of the Deepwater Horizon oil spill in the Gulf of Mexico.

Example

My realization that being Black meant being different occurred early in life. Growing up in Marshalltown, Iowa, I was one of only a handful of Black kids in my grade and had no Black teachers. I was surrounded by whiteness everywhere other than at home and at my church. This experience alone resulted in racial challenges every day. One way my family battled these challenges was by being heavily reliant on our religious beliefs and involved in a majority Black church. My experiences at my home church were some of my most enjoyable times growing up. This was a place where I could forget about my worries and challenges and congregate in a spiritual environment that brought me peace.

2.5. Research Interests

Another way you will want to indicate your motivation is by using the strategy of discussing your Research Interests.

In this strategy, writers discuss their current research interest(s) by suggesting research directions, showing commitment to research, or stating the potential value of prospective research. This can be done by identifying general and specific research topics, possible future research and/or thesis/dissertation topics, and the implications and value of the research. This strategy is especially important for those applying to doctoral programs as articulating research interests can start to show a direct connection to a program and professor. Given the role of research in graduate programs, discussing research interests is considered a required strategy.

Below are some examples of how writers use the Research Interests strategy in their SoPs. Notice how the writers use the language of the discipline in conjunction with key phrases such as “I am interested in studying,” “I would like to study,” and “I would like to center my research on” to directly identify their research interests.

Example

I am interested in studying gene expression and regulation in plants to synthetically reprogram their behavior to create solutions to dietary and sustainable issues. I am also fascinated by genetic and epigenetic protein-DNA interactions, as well as gene editing and cryo-EM techniques.

Example

While pursuing a Ph.D. and beyond, I would like to study breast milk in order to understand how hormonal makeup is different across different communities. Specifically, I would like to center my research on the ecology of lactation, particularly in topics such as variation in lipid content of milk between populations living in different environments.

2.6. Academic and/or Professional Objectives

Another required strategy is to address Academic and/or Professional Objectives.

In addition to discussing research interests, writers also need to share their short- and long-term objectives. This does not mean that you need to provide a 5- or 10-year plan of exactly what you intend to accomplish or do professionally. Instead, you want to identify your objectives that will help you decide the trajectory of your professional career. You can do this by identifying objectives both during and after graduate study, such as teaching, mentoring, research, outreach/extension, and service. You could also discuss your plans for applying knowledge to practice, how your research can have broader impacts, and your hopes for the future of the discipline. Some writers prefer to connect their objectives with their research interests which is perfectly acceptable. Whether linked to research interests or separate, discussing academic and/or professional objectives is a required component of the SoP.

Here are some examples of how writers have communicated their objectives in their SoPs. In some of the examples the writer is specific about their career path, and in others, the writer has a more general idea of what they hope to accomplish. Note that the last example combines two strategies – Research Interest and Academic and/or Professional Objectives.

Example

Following the completion of a Ph.D., my long-term goal is to start a business to develop assistive devices and technology to help not only my sister but children of all abilities to create a better more inclusive world for them.

Example

I want my research to be used not only to understand how our oceans are changing, but also to understand what we can do to combat that change and preserve one of our most precious resources. In the future, I would like to work as a marine policy analyst or science advisor for a governmental agency. I want to collaborate with multiple stakeholders to evaluate the effectiveness of current marine conservation strategies and develop dynamic management practices that benefit everyone involved.

Example

By continuing to explore various areas in microbiology and in research in general, I have found that I am most interested in the gut microbiome. I have the specific goal of trying to improve the health of people by manipulating the gut microbiome whether that be through diet, probiotics, or even fecal transplants.

Example

After obtaining my Ph.D. I would like to either work for a university or a private laboratory where I can mentor other first-generation and underrepresented students. Since we are living in an increasingly digitized world where different narratives are being pushed onto women regarding their own health, I hope to help others make informed decisions and further understand the power of their own bodies. By empowering women, I hope to inspire other young women who question themselves in a STEM field to push boundaries and their own beliefs to show that they can stay true to themselves.

2.7. Need for Continued Education

A final strategy that can be used is Need for Continued Education.

Some writers like to make an argument for their need to continue their education and broadly justify the choice of pursuing a graduate degree. This is not required but depending on your motivation for pursuing a graduate degree, it could be helpful to articulate. Some examples of this might be the value of gaining advanced educational or professional experience or the realization of the need to pursue a graduate degree, often because of past experiences or because of the requirement of an advanced degree for a particular career path.

Example

A master's degree would give me the tools to work for a company and develop new approaches for improving the ability of machines to perceive our environment.

2.8. Motivation in the SoP: Another Example

Activity

Let's look at another statement of purpose. As you read the statement, identify any sentences where you understand that the writer is communicating their **motivation** using the specific strategies outlined in the previous pages:

- Personal experience and/or identity
- Research interests
- Academic and/or professional objectives
- Need for continued education

After you've identified these sentences, check your answers by clicking on the highlighted text or by opening the Hypothesis tab on the righthand side of the screen.

Example

Derrick Garth

Ph.D., Counseling Psychology, Iowa State University

SoP Prompt: Primarily, explain: 1. Your purpose for starting or continuing graduate study, 2. Why you want to study at Iowa State University, 3. Your professional plans, your career goals, and your research interests, and 4. Any experience that is particularly applicable to the program for which you're applying.

Secondarily, elaborate on: 1. Any irregularities or special circumstances applicable to your application, 2. Your special abilities, awards, achievements, scholarly publications, and professional history as it relates to the program of interest, and 3. Any prior research information, or contact with specific Iowa State program faculty.

My realization that being Black meant being different occurred early in life. Growing up in Marshalltown, Iowa, I was one of only a handful of Black kids in my grade and had no Black teachers. I was surrounded by whiteness everywhere other than at home and at my church. This experience alone resulted in racial challenges every day. One way my family battled these challenges was by being heavily reliant on our religious beliefs and involved in a majority Black church. My experiences at my home church were some of my most enjoyable times growing up. This was a place where I could forget about my worries and challenges and congregate in a spiritual environment that brought me peace.

The challenges of racism and oppression that I will continue to face in my life are shared challenges that all Blacks face. Given the significance of religion and spirituality in the Black community, it crucial to examine this intersection. I am interested in how they can promote coping and psychological well-being in the lives of Black people more generally. The literature investigating the intersection of religion and spirituality and Black psychological well-being is limited, and I am committed to bridging this gap. Through my research, I hope to understand and reveal the protective factors for preventing and reducing psychological distress in Black communities, leading to prevention and intervention measures resulting in Black resilience. It is to achieve this goal that I am applying to Iowa State University's Counseling Psychology Program.

I have solidified my research interests throughout my undergraduate career across various research experiences. At the beginning of my junior year and my first semester as a McNair Scholar, I collaborated with my faculty mentor, Dr. Nathaniel Wade, in the

Network Community Counseling Lab at Iowa State University. With this being my first in-depth research experience, I was enticed to work with Dr. Wade due to his research on multiculturalism, religion, and spirituality in psychology. Together we examined the roles that parental communication, childhood sexual abuse, and other adverse childhood experiences play in later relationship quality among Black women. I discovered that parental communication about sex through ages 10-18 was associated with greater warmth in romantic relationships later in life. Throughout this project, I discovered my passion for researching the Black community through psychological research and looking into protective factors of healthy relationships in Black families. The ability to reveal protective factors in this research project could, in the future, contribute to prevention measures regarding healthy relationships in Black communities. This project highlighted the value of parental communication about sex and, more specifically, communication about sex in relation to religious values in mother-daughter relationships within the Black family. This is where my interest was sparked in looking deeper into the role religion and spirituality play in the psychological well-being of Black people. I was intrigued due to my prior knowledge of how spirituality and religion can bring a sense of security and meaning to the Black community. Being able to conduct and present this research project helped to define my purpose and provided my “why” for studying the field of psychology. I was inspired by how much this profession might help my community. The ability to contribute and research this area of psychology that is commonly forgotten or dismissed is all the justification I needed to pursue this field.

My participation with Dr. Wade’s lab inspired my current independent research project further exploring resilience factors in the Black community. Specifically, this project examines the intersectionality of religion and the Black experience revolving around discrimination and racial identity. As this project is ongoing, I am in the process of examining the role of religious commitment and racial identity as protective measures against the psychological distress that often results from the discrimination and racism that Black individuals endure. This project is important in my transition from undergrad to graduate school because it provides an opportunity for me to conduct my own research based on my specific research interests.

In addition to my strong commitment to progressing in research, I have also dedicated myself to campus involvement, where I am involved in serving culturally diverse students. I am employed as an ISU Resident Advisor, and I also serve as a diversity, equity, and inclusion programming (DEI) resident advisor. My DEI position grants me the opportunity to provide initiatives and programs in which I provide a safe environment for all residents from various social backgrounds. Additionally, I work closely with campus organizations and staff members to provide resources available to students to best

support their experiences in college. This experience alone has provided me with various opportunities to impact my campus.

My undergraduate research experiences and a strong commitment to Black psychological well-being rooted in Black identity development, culture, and racial justice, have influenced my research interests and career goals. My interest in Iowa State University's Counseling Psychology Program is rooted directly in its faculty and the program's emphasis on training in research and becoming a practitioner. This setting would best prepare me for an academic career involving research, teaching, and work as a practitioner. I would like to work under the supervision of David Vogel because of his research examining stigma and attitudes regarding psychological health and therapy seeking. I plan to research protective factors of Black psychological well-being and the stigma associated with seeking psychological help in the Black community in relation to religious and spiritual beliefs. Studying this intersection would result in a better understanding of the effects and stigma associated with spirituality and religion, given the historical role it plays in the Black community. Examining potential protective factors would prepare me to create community planning and outreach that would lead to prevention measures among the Black community.

Upon completing a doctoral degree in Counseling Psychology, I intend to work as a professor exploring the intersectionality between the Black experience, religion, and spirituality while also applying my findings through clinical supervision. Iowa State University's Counseling Psychology Program will best maximize my development in the field of psychology and prepare me to achieve my goals. Ultimately, I want to be in a program where my identity is valued, and Iowa State University seems to fit just that.

Notice in this SoP how the writer uses several of these strategies multiple times throughout the statement. This is the author's way of continually coming back to their central objective and research interests and helps to make a strong argument about their overarching motivation to attend graduate school.

2.9. Brainstorming About Your Motivation

Part II

Activity

Brainstorming (Part 2): Now that you've learned a bit more about how you can communicate your motivation in the SoP, go back to the brainstorming you did in the Brainstorming Activity Part 1. Think about what you wrote and consider what else you might add or expand upon.

- How can you be more specific about your career objectives and research interests?
- Is there more to your personal experiences and/or identities that are important to share?
- What is the connection between your personal experience and your motivation to pursue a graduate degree?
- In each of these strategies, how can you engage in addressing the “what?” along with the “so what?”, “why”, and “how”?

Important! Make sure that you save a copy of your brainstorming by selecting the “Copy” button below and then pasting the text into a Word document.

This activity can also be downloaded: [SoPBrainstormingQuestions \[DOC\]](#)



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Section 3: Identifying and Writing About Your Relevant Experiences

3.1. Identifying and Writing About Your Relevant Experiences

In Section 2 we learned about one goal of the SoP framework, motivation, which is the core of the statement of purpose. It is also important to discuss the experiences which have informed this motivation. This section will include options for how to engage in identifying and writing about the experiences that have impacted your decision to pursue a graduate degree.

Additionally, this section will help you identify the possibilities of what you might write about while also being selective in which experiences should be included (or not) in your story. This section is intentionally placed after discussing motivation to help you stay focused on your motivation and use that to reflect on your relevant experiences.

- **Goal 1. Experiences: The relevant experiences you've had which have informed and prepared you to pursue a graduate degree.**
- Goal 2. Motivation: Your purpose for wanting to pursue a graduate degree which is often related to specific research interests and/or career objectives.
- Goal 3. Fit to Program: A discussion of why a particular graduate program is right for you given your motivation (and especially your research interests and objectives).

This section will discuss strategies you can use to talk about your relevant experiences including, your educational experience, research experience, professional experience, academic and professional successes, and discipline-specific knowledge. The following pages include two opportunities for brainstorming and an example SoP so you can see how a writer has used these strategies.

3.2. Experiences in the SoP: An Example

Activity

As we did in the previous section, let's start by looking at a sample SoP. This time, as you read the SoP, consider how you see the writer discussing their **experiences**.

Example

Aline

Ph.D., Chemical Engineering, California Institute of Technology

SoP Prompt: Provide a brief statement of your scientific and professional interests and objectives. Include a description of your past accomplishments that are not evident from the examination of other documents submitted, including any research in progress. We are interested in how your personal background has equipped you to work within diverse research communities, the most influential science or engineering experience you have had, and in situations where you faced and overcame a challenge. The statement must be written by the applicant in English. It must not be written in another language and translated for the applicant by another person.

I was taught to always reach for ginger tea before ibuprofen. In the small, rural Brazilian town where I grew up, pharmaceuticals were always used as a last resort. My agronomist parents were well-versed in herbal remedies, many of which were generational traditional practices. When moving to the United States, I learned to respect the conventional use of synthetic drugs but was frequently confused about the cultural and health differences between natural and synthetic medications. This curiosity grew when I joined my high school's Science Olympiad team, studying and competing in subjects such as genetics and chemistry, in tandem with creatively engineering working models of vehicles such as boats and helicopters. After obtaining a full-ride academic scholarship to Iowa State University, I confidently decided to pursue a B.S. in Chemical and Biological Engineering to jumpstart my scientific career.

My time at Iowa State has been spent carefully developing and validating my interest in research, which has prepared me for graduate study in Chemical Engineering at Caltech. My research involvement began within my first month as a college student. Since then, I have worked with six different research professors. My laboratory positions equipped me to learn proper experimental procedures and machinery operations, but they differed in how involved I could become in the research; however, I was never able to determine the future of the research and was left unfulfilled. This motivated me to join Dr. Sashital's laboratory to conduct my own project with the assistance of Ph.D. student Yukti Dhingra.

Dr. Sashital's lab studies the function of RNA-protein complexes involved in CRISPR-Cas systems by understanding the activation of CRISPR systems in surveying the complex milieu of the cell and targeting invasive nucleic acids for destruction. I have struck a new path in the lab by venturing into the investigation of newly discovered and uncharacterized immune systems such as Septu, and my work will be the first to characterize the biochemical activity of this system. My research goal is to determine how the Septu proteins work together to provide defense. To test this, I employed Gibson cloning techniques to build the individual proteins and their corresponding co-expression. Then, I transformed the proteins into E. Coli cells and studied them *in vitro* using phosphate and enzyme-coupled assays to determine whether the two proteins indeed function as ATPases and helicases. Challenges were presented during protein expression, which required a methodical structural analysis of the proteins' predicted AlphaFold heterotetramer models to determine folding habits. Due to the Septu system's dimerization habits and corresponding hydrophobic R-groups, we modified the plasmids and cloning techniques used to further advance in the experiment.

It was through my involvement in Dr. Sashital's lab that I became familiar with Caltech

due to Dr. Gözde Demirer's talk at the 5th International Conference of CRISPR Technologies. I also enjoyed her papers on the prospect of administering CRISPR reagents to flowers and testing in vivo sgRNA efficacy with nanomaterials to do so. My interest in Dr. Demirer's lab encouraged further research on other CCE professors and I was amazed by the ingenuity and creative problem-solving performed by Drs. Shu-ou Shan and Frances Arnold in seeking solutions to high-impact issues. This further encouraged me to apply to Caltech for graduate study.

In addition to my research involvement in Dr. Sashital's laboratory, I sought out and excelled at other opportunities, and my hard work has not gone unnoticed. Academically, I have received top honors from the Chemical Engineering Department every semester since my freshman year, earning me several scholarships. My sophomore year, I was a First-Year Honors leader and taught a class of 12 students. Because of my success in the classroom, the director of the Honors Program offered me a paid position to teach 2 leadership classes and give trainings to 72 FHP leaders about emotional intelligence. And last year, I took a stand-up comedy course and was asked to be the opening act for two professional comedians based on my performance in the class. These experiences granted me the confidence to present my ideas and to work collaboratively in a team towards a common goal.

Opportunities didn't always come easily, however. The summer after my sophomore year, my internship was cancelled because of the COVID pandemic. Motivated to continue advancing my studies and research abilities, I began working at the start-up biotechnology company Skroot Laboratory Inc., founded by the Chemical Engineering professor Dr. Nigel Reuel. Working at Skroot allowed me to build the technical skills needed to continue performing biological research. I learned to quantitatively study cell growth patterns and how to predict them based on environmental and chemical perturbations, and their effects on the cells' emitted electromagnetic waves and corresponding frequencies. Using this knowledge, I helped design and 3D print the sensor prototypes and used them to perform optimization experiments.

Conducting my own research project allowed me to more deeply explore the subject matters I enjoy most. While my classes never directly taught me the biochemical differences between natural and synthetic drugs, my research involvement gave me tools to seek more information. My involvement in biological and biochemistry research helped me combine my Brazilian agrarian lifestyle with an industrial one, allowing me to conjoin the different ways I was taught to think in order to solve problems. I eagerly seek to continue finding innovative ways to approach research questions at Caltech. I am interested in studying gene expression and regulation in plants to synthetically reprogram their behavior to create solutions to dietary and sustainable issues. I am also

fascinated by genetic and epigenetic protein-DNA interactions, as well as gene editing and cryo-EM techniques.

It is because of my wide range of interests that I am applying to the Chemical Engineering Ph.D. program at Caltech. This program's cutting-edge technology, facilities, and a community of innovative thinkers will allow me to progress in my learning and succeed at the highest possible level in my future research endeavors. I also look forward to working in a collaborative environment that encourages leadership and teamwork. Due to my research interests, I am most interested in working in the laboratories of Drs. Gözde Demirer, Shu-ou Shan, Linda Hsieh Wilson, Douglas Rees, and Frances Arnold; however, I aim to be an open-minded and diligent contributor to any research group that I'm given the opportunity to work with.

Thank you for considering my application to the Chemical Engineering graduate program at Caltech.



An interactive H5P element has been excluded from this version of the text. You can view it online here:

<https://iastate.pressbooks.pub/statementofpurpose/?p=127#h5p-10>

3.3. Brainstorming About Your Experiences

Part I

Wherever you are in your educational journey and/or professional career, you have a unique set of experiences which have prepared you for graduate study and have informed your decision to pursue a graduate degree. But what kind of experiences do you think the readers want to learn about? They might be genuinely interested in who you are as a person, but readers (i.e., professors in the graduate program) want to understand what academic and professional experiences you've had which have prepared you to be a successful graduate student. For many disciplines, especially STEM, this experience will rely heavily on research experience, but it can also be equally as valuable to talk about teaching, mentoring, internships, and professional experiences.

Remember that the SoP is *not* a summary of your CV/resume; instead, think of these two documents as complementing one another. The CV provides the overview of your experiences while the SoP allows you to go in depth in a discussion of past experiences, how you engaged in the experience, the skills you learned, and, importantly, how this experience has prepared you for graduate school and/or helped you understand why you would want to pursue a graduate degree. When you write about your qualifications and experiences, think about both answering the question “what?” and also “so what?” about the experience.

For most SoPs, relevant experiences will be related to educational, research, and professional experiences during college, internships, or other professional employment. This does not mean that you are forbidden from writing about experiences in high school; however, stronger SoPs typically focus on experiences during and after college.

Activity

Brainstorming (Part 1): Take time to respond to the following questions. It might be helpful to remember that at this point in the writing process, there are no right or wrong answers. Be honest with yourself and think expansively about your responses to these questions. These notes are just for you; your purpose here is not to evaluate the ideas, but to simply explore your experiences as they pertain to applying to graduate school and your larger career goals. If you're struggling to respond to the questions, talk through these ideas with a friend or mentor.

Important! Make sure that you save a copy of your brainstorming by selecting the "Copy" button below and then pasting the text into a Word document.

This activity can also be downloaded: [SoPBrainstormingQuestions \[DOC\]](#)



An interactive H5P element has been excluded from this version of the text. You can view it online here:

<https://iastate.pressbooks.pub/statementofpurpose/?p=129#h5p-2>

Like the previous section, there are also a set of strategies which writers can use to engage in writing about their experiences. Remember, these are a list of options, not a required checklist. Let's look at some of the strategies you might use to write about your relevant experience in your SoP.

3.4. Educational Experience

When discussing relevant experience in the SoP, many writers will include some Educational Experience.

In this strategy, writers demonstrate that they have relevant learning experiences, and they highlight the value of that experience. Examples of this might include an anecdote or story related to an educational/classroom experience; a discussion of coursework or course projects; a reference to influential literature, courses, and/or professors in the field of study; study abroad experience; or a realization from an educational experience. If applicable, you might even address challenges which you experienced during your undergraduate degree program and what you learned from the experience or how you overcame a challenge.

The two examples below demonstrate how writers can reference what they learned in their coursework and how it has impacted how they think about a given topic. Notice, however, that writers do not simply list the courses they took – this would be unnecessary given that you will need to upload a transcript as part of your application. Instead, this strategy might be useful if you want to identify the “so what?” of an educational experience.

Example

It wasn't until I was in college that I began to understand the extent to which the Gulf Coast's water quality had been compromised beyond the oil spill. In my classes we learned how poor agricultural practices led to the Gulf Coast's “dead zone”.

Example

During my undergraduate career, my coursework and readings have exposed me to the cultural and biological diversity present within our species. The combination with my lingering desire to learn more about the human diet led me to my current interest in the anthropology of women's health as it is understood within cross-cultural and evolutionary perspectives.

3.5. Research Experience

Another important strategy writers use in the SoP is discussing their Research Experience.

While your research experience might be tied to an educational context, this strategy is separate because of its importance in the SoP, especially for STEM disciplines and doctoral programs across disciplines. Here, you will want to demonstrate that you have relevant and meaningful research experience. Such examples of this strategy might include: work in research groups/labs, collaboration with a professor, lab experience, independent research, thesis or capstone project, conference attendance and presentations, internships if research-focused, results from research, implementation of results, interest/enjoyment of the experience, and/or a realization from the experience. If you have research experience, you are strongly encouraged to write about your involvement in your SoP. For an application to a doctoral program, this will be a required strategy in the SoP.

Notice in the examples below how the writers do not simply list what they did during their research experience, but they share what they learned from the experience. This is an example of moving beyond simply summarizing your CV/resume, and instead, giving context and creating meaning out of a given research experience.

Example

My participation with Dr. Wade's lab inspired my current independent research project further exploring resilience factors in the Black community. Specifically, this project examines the intersectionality of religion and the Black experience revolving around discrimination and racial identity. As this project is ongoing, I am in the process of examining the role of religious commitment and racial identity as protective measures against the psychological distress that often results from the discrimination and racism that Black individuals endure. This project is important in my transition from undergrad to graduate school because it provides an opportunity for me to conduct my own research based on my specific research interests.

Example

A year later, I began as a master's student under Dr. Zuniga's mentorship. Throughout the master's program, I have been able to learn and grow as a student and scientist by leading EMG data collections, utilizing MATLAB for data processing, and advanced statistical analysis related to my project meanwhile designing and developing 3D-printed prosthetics for children with upper limb reductions and understanding the changes in muscle activity over time through prosthetic use. The coursework challenged me to understand the mechanisms underlying motor control and learning.

3.6. Professional Experience

Research experience, however, is not the only relevant experience which you might discuss in your SoP. For some applicants, discussing your Professional Experience could be an important strategy to use.

Whether you are going straight from an undergraduate program into a graduate program or whether you're applying to graduate school after several years of working, you have experience that informs your decision to pursue a graduate degree. This might include: teaching/mentoring experience, extra-curricular and/or leadership experiences, volunteer opportunities, internships, any full- or part-time professional experience, challenges encountered and how you persevered, and/or a realization from or excitement about the experience. What you decide to be a relevant professional experience will largely be related to your research interests and career objectives.

In the example below, notice how the writers talk about their leadership experience. They do not just simply list the experience but discuss their involvement and the impact.

Example

As President of Iowa State University's Anthropology Club, I have engaged students with anthropologically themed activities and experiences that are not a part of our undergraduate curriculum. I have collaborated with other students and faculty to create new lesson plans and do extensive outreach to get more students involved within the community. I have involved more students in leadership roles by creating new officer positions to help represent each subfield and to ensure that we are serving the whole anthropology community to the best of our abilities. Through my positions, I have been dedicated to helping students to achieve their goals and to presenting tools, resources, and guest speakers to help the students achieve them. While president, I have also worked with different companies and organizations to raise money for increased personal development within the club. I have striven to ensure that all of the members inside of the club have felt heard while maintaining a fun atmosphere.

Example

Learning more about the science behind environmental change led me to get more actively involved with various sustainably-minded local and campus organizations. As the Director of Sustainability for Iowa State's student government, my committee and I provided funding for student-led projects, developed our own initiatives, and often collaborated with the university's Office of Sustainability. The project I am most proud of is the Climate Commitment Plan, a call to action for the university which encouraged them to commit to transitioning to 100% renewable electricity by 2035 and prioritize sustainable development. The plan passed the student government senate unanimously, and we received around 1,500 student and community member signatures on a petition supporting the plan.

3.7. Discipline-Specific Knowledge

In addition to writing about your relevant experiences, another strategy some writers find helpful is to discuss Discipline-Specific Knowledge.

In writing your SoP, there might be discipline-specific knowledge that you want to communicate for a variety of reasons. The purpose here could be to demonstrate your knowledge of the discipline or your ability to think critically. For example, you might discuss a problem in your field of study, offer a summary of relevant research which has informed your developing research interests, or identify a gap in the literature that motivates your research interests. This is not a required strategy, but it can be useful depending on how you want to contextualize your motivation, especially your research interests and academic and/or professional objectives. Often this strategy is a jumping off point for your motivation.

Notice in the examples below that the writers are pulling from information they have learned during their course of study and how it is immediately tied to an articulated interest.

Example

The way that these organisms communicate and collaborate to survive in one of the most extreme environments on earth is both captivating and inspiring. However, the more I learned about marine life, the more I learned about the ways human society harms it.

Example

My specific interest in lactation began after I read an article about the relationship between breastfeeding and childhood illness. The authors found that children who were breastfed did not get as sick when they were in daycare because they received nutrients to fight off bacteria from the breast milk they were given.

3.8. Academic and/or Professional Success

A final strategy which you might use is an identification of your Academic and/or Professional Successes.

In this strategy, writers share their success to explicitly demonstrate their competence and abilities. This could be done through identifying degrees, certificates, honors, awards, scholarships, grants, conference presentations, publications, GPA, tests scores, promotions, and successful outcomes in specific situations (like research). It is absolutely acceptable to identify and account for these successes in your SoP; however, be mindful of how frequently you use this strategy.

The CV and the SoP are self-promotional – the entire purpose of these genres is to promote yourself and make an argument for your ability to be successful in a graduate program. Self-promotion can be explicit or implicit, but overuse of explicit self-promotion could be perceived as self-aggrandizing and can be off-putting for readers. The line here is a bit unclear and differs between people. The bottom line? Share and account for your success, but make sure that you provide evidence to support the claims you make.

In the example below, the writer accounts for a success (a publication) from participating in a research experience; by embedding a discussion of his success through engagement a research opportunity, we can start to see the applicant's commitment and ability to follow through, a key quality needed to be successful in a graduate program.

Example

A key outcome of my participation in Dr. Juárez's lab that summer was the prototype construction and collection of data incorporated into a manuscript published in the Experimental Thermal and Fluid Science Journal.

What you might start seeing at this point is how inextricable your experiences are from your motivation, particularly your research interests and career objectives. This is because our past experiences inform our decisions and future pursuits. Part of your “goal” in writing the statement of purpose is to make these connections between your past experiences and present interests explicit for the reader, and this really is value of the SoP within your application. To reiterate, the CV/resume will provide the breadth of your experience, but what it lacks is the depth of what you’ve done, how you’ve grown as a researcher/scientist/scholar, and what a given experience has done for you intellectually. That depth is what you are working to achieve with this goal.

3.9. Experiences in the SoP: Another Example

Activity

Let's look at another SoP written by a student who was accepted into a Ph.D. program. Pay attention to how the writer talks about their **experiences** using the strategies discussed:

- Educational experience
- Research experience
- Professional experience
- Discipline-specific knowledge
- Academic and/or professional success

After you've identified these sentences, check your answers by clicking on the highlighted text or by opening the Hypothesis tab on the righthand side of the screen.

Example

Antonio Alvarez Valdivia

Ph.D., Mechanical Engineering, Purdue University

SoP Prompt: A statement (no hard limitation on length, but it's better to keep them within two pages) is encouraged concerning your interest in undertaking or continuing graduate study, your reasons for wanting to study at Purdue, and your professional plans, career goals, and research interests. You also may explain any special circumstances applicable to your background and elaborate on your special abilities, awards (including fellowships), achievements, scholarly publications, and/or professional history. The graduate program to which you are applying may have additional requirements.

I grew up in Mexico, a country where scientific research is limited, and academic personnel in science and technology are considerably scarce. I was unfamiliar with graduate education. I knew that scientific research was a thing from movies and cartoons, but I did not know that I could become a scientist if I wanted to. With the goal of becoming an engineer, I started my high school education at the Center for Technical and Industrial Education (CETI) in Guadalajara, Mexico, where I worked towards an Engineering Technology Degree in Automation and Instrumentation. The curriculum at CETI prepares students to join the workforce right after high school. Although there were no opportunities to get involved in research there, this formative experience shaped my current interest in mechatronics and robotics. I enjoyed my vocational education at CETI, but my curiosity was pushing me to go further. I wanted to explore and understand advanced engineering technology and participate in its advancement. After moving to the US and pursuing undergraduate education at a research university, opportunities to get involved in research opened up, and my path to becoming a scientist took shape.

Since the beginning of my undergraduate education at Iowa State University, I have been continuously engaged in academic research by participating in summer REUs, performing research for credit, and joining the McNair Scholars Program, for which I was awarded as the 2019 Outstanding First-Year Scholar. From my participation in these research activities and my McNair preparation work, I experienced engineering research environments. I learned how to communicate research by performing multiple oral and poster presentations and worked on both independent and team-based research efforts. Considering my academic journey, extracurricular activities, and research experiences, I am confident that I am ready to become a graduate student in the School of Mechanical Engineering at Purdue University.

In my first research experience in the summer of 2018, I participated in the Multiscale Sensing Actuation and Imaging REU Program at Iowa State University. I worked with Dr. Jaime Juarez conducting research on developing a portable microscopy device for microrheology, bioanalytical sciences, and healthcare monitoring. A key outcome of my participation in Dr. Juarez's lab that summer was the prototype construction and collection of data incorporated into a manuscript published in the *Experimental Thermal and Fluid Science Journal*. I continued my work with Dr. Juarez as my faculty mentor by participating in the McNair Scholars Program. This program has prepared me for graduate school through my involvement in research activities exploring topics such as microfluidics, interface and colloid science, additive manufacturing, and flexible electronics. Recently, we submitted another manuscript based on my work on 3D printed self-propelled composite floaters at Dr. Juarez's lab to the *Additive Manufacturing Journal*. The variety of topics and research projects that I conducted under Dr. Juarez's supervision has helped me understand the applicability of mechanical engineering studies, which enabled me to refine my research interests. From all of the projects, I especially enjoyed working on flexible electronics when we explored a simple fabrication method to produce flexible circuits using 3D-printed patterns to fabricate microchannels formed in polymer mixtures and filled with liquid metals, such as EGaIn and Gallium. From this project, I familiarized myself with different approaches to the fabrication of soft and flexible electronics, such as textiles, flexible plastic substrates, microfabrication and nanomaterials, origami and kirigami, and microfluidics/liquid metals. These strategies can be summarized in two categories: materials innovation, for which research is focused on developing stretchable and soft materials, and mechanical design, which aims to create unique structures that make non-stretchable materials deformable by strain. I am more interested in working on structural and mechanical design. Still, I also understand that a sophisticated mixture of material innovation and mechanical design would be a better approach for creating soft and flexible electronics.

My exploration of flexible electronics and its implications for soft and flexible robotics continued during the summer of 2019 when I participated in the Summer Undergraduate Fellowship in Sensor Technologies REU Program at the University of Pennsylvania. I worked under the supervision of Dr. Kevin Turner, performing research on flexible capacitive force sensors for robotic grippers. For this project, I worked independently on prototyping and testing flexible, parallel-plate capacitive sensors using polymers in different concentrations as both the dielectric material and substrates to hold copper electrodes that were cut using a mechanical cutter. The capacitance produced by the sensors ranged in between 1-20pF for dielectric layer thicknesses of 400 μ m-1.2mm. To measure and interpret such minuscule changes in capacitance, I had to test multiple

electronic measuring systems, from a simple 555-timer circuit and a voltage divider capacitive circuit to a capacitance-to-digital converter. These sensors' fabrication processes are more cost-effective and straightforward than other sophisticated methods that require microfabrication techniques. Sensors like these could potentially be used in robots for gripping applications. The sensors would provide feedback about whether the force applied to the object is adequate, hence controlling the grippers' adhesion or pressure.

From my participation in both Dr. Juarez and Dr. Turner's research groups, I have developed an interest in soft/flexible robotics and electronics. These recent technologies, inspired by the human body and other living organisms, may diversify the applications of robotics and electronics. I plan to continue my education towards a Ph.D. in Mechanical Engineering, focusing on material innovation and mechanical design for soft/flexible robotics and electronic system for manufacturing, healthcare, and wearable technology. As a graduate student, I am interested in exploring solutions that look at nature as an inspiration for new mechanical/robotic designs and functional materials. I want to target my research work to applications that could provide sensing capabilities to robotic grasping technologies, potentially delivering better gripping and allowing for a broader range of robotic motions, manipulation tasks, and sensing capabilities. Because of my interests in developing soft robotics and flexible electronics, I would like to work with Prof. Chortos, Prof. Lee, Prof. Blumenschein, and Prof. Arrieta. Ultimately, I envision myself developing a professional career as an engineering research scientist, preferably in an academic setting, leading research efforts to innovate soft robotics and flexible electronics. One of my goals is to study and provide innovative solutions for applying flexible electronics and soft robotics on grasping systems and wearable technology that can be used by both robots and humans in environments where human-robot interaction is (or will be) implemented.

Another critical factor for my motivation to pursue graduate education is my desire to support students from underrepresented backgrounds. I appreciate diversity and understand its importance for the advancement of society and the promotion of new ideas. As a graduate student, I am interested in becoming a mentor for undergraduate minority students wanting to get involved in research. In my own experience, networking with faculty and graduate students from underrepresented groups inspires me to one day become a role model and a source of inspiration for future generations of scientists from underrepresented groups. I am fully committed to providing my enthusiasm and energy to reduce educational disparities for minority students by actively participating in any STEM community outreach and undergraduate research programs at the School of Mechanical Engineering.

I believe my research and academic experience, in addition to strong values such as discipline, patience, integrity, and passion for my research interests, have prepared me to become a successful doctoral student. I am eager to have a positive impact on cutting-edge research at the School of Mechanical Engineering. I am excited to begin this next chapter of my life and career with a doctorate from Purdue University.

Notice in this SoP how the writer talks extensively about their various research experience and several outcomes (publications); they then go on to talk about how these experiences have informed their motivation, specifically their research interests and larger professional objectives.

3.10. Brainstorming About Your Experiences

Part II

As you start thinking more holistically about your various experiences, you might realize that it's not possible to talk about all of your relevant experiences in your SoP. Remember that the CV/resume will complement the SoP and your goal in writing the SoP is not to simply summarize all of your experiences. If you need guidance on where to focus, you might start identifying how your relevant experiences have led you to your current research interests and career objectives. This cause and effect will not be present in your CV, so it could be useful to include in the SoP.

If you're feeling a bit stuck, you might skip ahead and read Section 7: Words of Wisdom from Applicants.

Activity

Brainstorming (Part 2): Given that most SoPs range from 500-1000 words, it's usually the case that you won't be able to talk about all your experiences – that's okay! Remember that you'll include your CV and/or resume in your application. In the first brainstorming activity in this section, you were asked to make a comprehensive list of your experiences, what you've learned, and how they impacted you. Now, think about curating that list and creating explicit connections with your motivation.

Important! Make sure that you save a copy of your brainstorming by selecting the "Copy" button below and then pasting the text into a Word document.

This activity can also be downloaded: [SoPBrainstormingQuestions \[DOC\]](#)



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Section 4: Identifying and Writing About Your Program Fit

4.1. Identifying and Writing About Your Program Fit

Up to this point we've talked about the first two goals of the SoP framework: experiences and motivation. You might think of these goals as having a cause-and-effect relationship – that is, how your past experiences have influenced your current research interests, career objectives, and your overarching motivation to pursue a graduate degree. The next step is to identify your fit to a specific graduate program. This is one of the most important components of the SoP that is often overlooked by writers.

In this section, we explore how you establish this fit to program. As mentioned earlier in the resource, this guidance does not apply to applicants to professional programs, such as a medical and law school. This is a crucial difference between statements of purpose for master's and doctoral applications and personal statements for professional graduate programs.

- Goal 1. Experiences: The relevant experiences you've had which have informed and prepared you to pursue a graduate degree.
- Goal 2. Motivation: Your purpose for wanting to pursue a graduate degree which is often related to specific research interests and/or career objectives.
- **Goal 3. Fit to Program: A discussion of why a particular graduate program is right for you given your motivation (and especially your research interests and objectives).**

Specifically this section will explore specific strategies you can use to discuss your fit to program including, expressing interest in the graduate program, projecting success, and concluding the application. The following pages include two opportunities for brainstorming and an example SoP to see this goal and accompanying strategies in context.

4.2. Fit to Program in the SoP: An Example

Activity

Let's look at another example SoP from a student accepted into Ph.D. program. As you read, try to identify where you see the writer discuss their **fit to a specific graduate program**.

Example

Toni Sleugh

Ph.D., Marine Biology, University of California, San Diego

SoP Prompt: State and justify your interest in research areas and Scripps faculty. Discuss why you are interested in these areas and how your experiences (academic or otherwise) are relevant to your continuing academic studies. Include any research experience or publications you have and list any skills not otherwise noted in your application. Explain why you chose to become a graduate student and why you chose the Scripps Institution of Oceanography.

A longer version of the prompt can be found here: <https://grad.ucsd.edu/admissions/requirements/statement-of-purpose.html>

Ever since I learned that most of the ocean is unexplored, I have wanted to help expand our limited knowledge of one of the most important and fascinating ecosystems on Earth. Even though I mostly grew up in landlocked states, I devoured every resource about marine life available, and I loved discovering more about the strange, alien-like life that exists in the oceans. The way that these organisms communicate and collaborate to survive in one of the most extreme environments on earth is both captivating and inspiring. However, the more I learned about marine life, the more I learned about the ways human society harms it. My passion for marine biology quickly grew into a passion for marine conservation. I feel called to better understand the ways in which we impact the ocean in our everyday lives and how to reduce those impacts. I am now applying to pursue a Ph.D. in Marine Biology at UC San Diego so that I am better equipped to holistically preserve marine ecosystems in a way that benefits both society and nature.

Throughout my undergraduate career, I have actively pursued opportunities to expand my knowledge about marine science research and its application to conservation. The summer after my freshman year, I completed an REU at the Marine Biological Laboratory in Woods Hole, Massachusetts. I worked with Dr. Aran Mooney at the Woods Hole Oceanographic Institution (WHOI) on a project examining the impacts of increasing temperature and CO₂ concentrations on the swimming behavior of squid paralarvae. I reviewed videos of larval swimming behavior using Matlab, developed methods to quantify their activity, and analyzed data using R to visualize the results. Through that project, I learned about the research process, scientific communication, and applied science. Being able to think like a scientist both confirmed my love for marine science and piqued my interest in the power of science to inform policy around important environmental issues, such as climate change. After my REU, I was excited to get more experience in marine science research, especially focusing on climate change and ocean acidification.

To meet this goal, I applied to the National Oceanic and Atmospheric Administration's (NOAA) Hollings Program. Through the Hollings Program, I worked as part of the Northeast Fisheries Science Center's fisheries ecology branch with Dr. Chris Chambers. Because the in-person portion of my internship was cancelled due to the COVID-19 pandemic, I had to quickly adjust to a new, virtual project that required more independence. I conducted a meta-analysis to determine how simulated ocean acidification impacted the biological responses of marine arthropods. I led a team to design a common approach, reducing discrepancies introduced by different data collection techniques, and developed new questions based on existing research. We collected and analyzed our data, created visualizations, and presented our completed

project. Even though it was virtual, this project examined the impacts of ocean acidification on a broader scale than my previous REU project and allowed me to participate in the scientific process from start to finish. Reading and synthesizing knowledge from over 150 articles gave me the perspective to appreciate the importance of each individual study and their collective informative power. In the time leading up to this internship, I began making plans to attend graduate school in marine science.

To help me prepare for this goal, I also applied for the Ronald E. McNair Scholars Program at ISU which provided me with more research opportunities and resources for graduate school preparation. As a McNair Scholar, I am working with Dr. Kevin Roe to reintroduce endangered freshwater mussels to their native habitat in Iowa rivers using an artificially propagated population. We are comparing propagated mussels to wild populations to determine whether they possess comparable genetic diversity before reintroduction. This research was interrupted by COVID-19, but this fall we have been placing propagated mussels into streams and monitoring the success of their populations. In my collaboration with Dr. Roe, I learned new laboratory techniques, including PCR, DNA extraction, and gel electrophoresis. I have also gotten the opportunity to do field work and monitor the growth of the propagated mussels and water quality in the streams in which they were placed. The applied nature of this project has encouraged me to branch out and learn more about freshwater habitats, a subject I was less familiar with than the marine ecosystems that have captured much of my scientific interest. I also value the wet lab and field experience in conservation research and seeing first-hand how science can positively impact damaged ecosystems.

Learning more about the science behind environmental change led me to get more actively involved with various sustainably-minded local and campus organizations. As the Director of Sustainability for Iowa State's student government, my committee and I provided funding for student-led projects, developed our own initiatives, and often collaborated with the university's Office of Sustainability. The project I am most proud of is the Climate Commitment Plan, a call to action for the university which encouraged them to commit to transitioning to 100% renewable electricity by 2035 and prioritize sustainable development. The plan passed the student government senate unanimously, and we received around 1,500 student and community member signatures on a petition supporting the plan. I have since become directly involved with the ISU chapter of Climate Reality, serving as chapter chair, and became part of the Ames Climate Action Team, a grassroots organization which advocates for sustainable development. Through this work, I was selected by the university president to serve as a member of the University Sustainability Committee which directly advises the president on issues of sustainability. Just this semester, the university approved a plan to cut greenhouse gas

emissions in half as a result of our work. It has been incredibly rewarding to see positive change on campus and in our community as a result of our hard work. Through these experiences, I have learned that environmental science does not exist in a vacuum. While research is incredibly important to conservation, it is essentially meaningless without policy changes and effective implementation. For this reason, I am committed to continuing to use my scientific knowledge to advocate for sustainable policies.

For the past few years, I have grappled with the choice between an academic career in marine biology and a more public-facing career in environmental policy. However, I am determined to merge these two interests and pursue a career in which I apply marine science research to develop effective policy solutions to real world problems. I want my research to be used not only to understand how our oceans are changing, but also to understand what we can do to combat that change and preserve one of our most precious resources. In the future, I would like to work as a marine policy analyst or science advisor for a governmental agency. I want to collaborate with multiple stakeholders to evaluate the effectiveness of current marine conservation strategies and develop dynamic management practices that benefit everyone involved. Earning a Ph.D. will allow me to dive into the specific areas of marine conservation that I am interested in and develop the research and analytical skills I need for my future career. I am specifically interested in Scripps' Marine Biology Program because of the opportunities it offers to integrate my passions for science and policy. Both Dr. Brice Semmens and Dr. Jennifer Smith both do research that closely matches that interest. These scientists work at the intersection of fundamental and applied science. While their research explores different aspects of marine ecology, they both do so in the context of conservation. This research, which aims to improve our understanding of positive and negative human impacts on marine ecosystems, is exactly the type of work that I want to be a part of.

Being a Black, queer woman and a child of immigrants means that I have a unique lived experience and am well versed with the challenges that come with being the minority, especially in the scientific community. I have continuously battled the negative stereotypes and microaggressions that come with existing in spaces with a lack of diversity. Although these experiences can be frustrating and discouraging, they are a large part of the reason why I continue to pursue a career in marine science. I know the value of representation for underrepresented minorities in STEM. My motivation comes not just for my own success or for my family, but also for all underrepresented students who aspire to be scientists. Throughout my undergraduate career, I have worked to build community amongst students of color by founding an organization which connects first year multicultural students with events and resources from other multicultural

organizations. I am determined to improve inclusivity in higher education, specifically in STEM fields, and this is something I will continue to work on in my graduate degree and beyond. Future scientists from all backgrounds should feel confident, welcomed, and safe in their respective fields. I want to attend graduate school because I am deeply passionate about marine science and conservation, but also because I want to be an example to young scientists that their passions can become careers no matter what obstacles they may face. I believe that the diverse community at Scripps is the perfect environment for me to continue to develop both professionally and personally. I am excited about the opportunity to expand my knowledge and start the next step in my journey at UC San Diego.



An interactive H5P element has been excluded from this version of the text. You can view it online here:

<https://iastate.pressbooks.pub/statementofpurpose/?p=149#h5p-11>

4.3. Brainstorming About Your Fit to Program

Part I

Activity

Brainstorming (Part 1): To get you thinking about specific graduate programs that might be of interest to you, respond to these questions for each graduate program to which you are applying.

Important! Make sure that you save a copy of your brainstorming by selecting the “Copy” button below and then pasting the text into a Word document.

This activity can also be downloaded: [SoPBrainstormingQuestions \[DOC\]](#)



An interactive H5P element has been excluded from this version of the text. You can view it online here:

<https://iastate.pressbooks.pub/statementofpurpose/?p=151#h5p-4>

Notice the brainstorming questions asked you to both identify a program and faculty members of interest and also to explain *why* they are of interest to you. Your responses need to be specific to you and should move beyond “It’s a highly ranked program” or “I like the location.” A logical

place to start is by connecting the professor's research focus to your own research interests. This will require you to spend considerable time reading program and department websites to learn more about each program and faculty research. Once you find professors who are doing the research you're interested in, you might want to read their recent publications. You might also ask your current professors or research mentors their advice given your interests, or you could network at conferences, or follow listservs in your discipline's academic associations or graduate professional societies to locate professors and programs.

In order to demonstrate this fit to program, there are three strategies that you can use; these three strategies are discussed in the following pages.

4.4. Express Interest in the Graduate Program

The main strategy writers use to achieve this third goal is to Express Interest in the Graduate Program.

The purpose of this strategy is to intentionally connect the applicant to the specific program and institution. Importantly, you need to demonstrate how the program will help you achieve your objectives, which essentially shows your fit to the graduate program. You can do this by stating the name of the program and school; identifying how courses, research, and teaching opportunities are of interest and will be of benefit to; identifying faculty that you are interested in working with; and/or communicating connections with faculty that have already been established.

In doing this, it is important to not just state the program offers. The faculty know their program, and you don't need to summarize the program website. They want to understand how you see their program connecting with your research interests and career objectives. It is through this that you indicate your fit to a program.

The examples below show different ways to engage in this strategy. Notice that both examples are specific in naming the program and/or professors.

Example

Because of my interests in developing soft robotics and flexible electronics, I would like to work with Prof. Chortos, Prof. Lee, Prof. Blumenschein, and Prof. Arrieta.

Example

As I aim to represent my community in healthcare and medical decision-making, health management and policy courses at Emory University will help me to succeed. For example, a degree in HPM will grant me an opportunity to work with CDC and other leading companies which will advance my acquisition of a public health job after completion of the degree. Additionally, the specificity in management classes will broaden my skills in leadership, decision-making, and healthcare management, which will prepare me for my career goal of being a successful health manager or an administrator. The required internship will expose me to administration duties and roles more in-depth. Therefore, I believe that Emory University's HPM will add tremendous value to my pursuit of a career that aims to make positive societal changes.

4.5. Project Success

A second and optional strategy that you might use is to Project Success.

Another way to show your fit to a graduate program is to propose how you will be successful when attending their program. In using this strategy you can indicate how you will be successful in the program and demonstrate confidence in your ability to be successful as a graduate student. You might do this through identifying programmatic engagement or anticipating specific ways that you will be successful.

This strategy is not required and should be used minimally; if you decide to include these explicit statements of anticipated success, be thoughtful about how you're providing evidence for the claims that you make.

Example

My research and academic experiences have provided me with the tools to be a successful doctoral student in the future, and I look forward to starting my career with a graduate degree from Virginia Tech.

Example

I believe my research and academic experience, in addition to strong values such as discipline, patience, integrity, and passion for my research interests, have prepared me to become a successful doctoral student. I am eager to have a positive impact on cutting-edge research at the School of Mechanical Engineering.

In some cases, you might need to address irregularities in your application (such as a low GPA or GRE score) and address any concerns that you anticipate the reader might have. Here, it is important not to make excuses for a situation or put the blame on someone else. Instead, you

can account for the situation and provide any necessary context. This should not take up a large portion of your SoP because this is not core to your motivation; however, providing this context could be helpful in communicating your motivation, perseverance, and ability to be successful as a graduate student. The example below shows one way a writer has accounted for challenges they experienced.

Example

During my first two years of college, I struggled greatly with adjusting to college during the pandemic due to the transition to virtual classes and my own health concerns. I recognize that my undergraduate GPA does not meet Arizona State University's requirements; however, my time spent at Central College and Des Moines Area Community College better reflect my achievements and ability to succeed in my coursework. Overall, my time spent on research, leadership positions, and my collective coursework at different institutions I have attended are a better reflection of my true abilities and determination to be successful in graduate school.

4.6. Conclude the Application

Ending any piece of writing can be a real challenge, and at this stage in your writing process, you don't have to know how you will conclude. However, it might be helpful to be aware of some common strategies for concluding your SoP. You can express gratitude to readers for taking time to review your application; you can share a statement of enthusiasm for joining the program; and/or you can reference the materials included in your application.

Below are two examples of this strategy from actual SoPs.

Example

Thank you for considering my application to the Chemical Engineering graduate program at Caltech.

Example

I am excited to begin this next chapter of my life and career with a doctorate from Purdue University.

4.7. Fit to Program in the SoP: Another Example

Activity

To see how these strategies might be used, let's look through another SoP and focus on how they chose to express their **interest in a graduate program** using the strategies discussed:

- Express interest in the graduate program
- Project success
- Conclude the application

After you've identified these sentences, check your answers by clicking on the highlighted text or by opening the Hypothesis tab on the righthand side of the screen.

Example

Mia

Ph.D., Civil Engineering, Virginia Tech

SoP Prompt: *Why do you want to undertake graduate work? Why do you qualify to pursue a graduate degree?*

I gained a keen connection to the environment in Jackson, Mississippi, where I've spent most of my life. There, I understood how each person played an important role in maintaining the health of their local environment. My experiences later solidified this mindset after witnessing the effects of the Deepwater Horizon oil spill in the Gulf of Mexico. Mississippi residents still live with the social and financial implications of this environmental disaster; many would argue that the quality of the water has still not been restored.

It wasn't until I was in college that I began to understand the extent to which the Gulf Coast's water quality had been compromised beyond the oil spill. In my classes we learned how poor agricultural practices led to the Gulf Coast's "dead zone". Learning this reminded me of the hesitancy I and others still have when swimming in the coastal waters. Due to my connection to the topic, I took an interest in water sustainability research at my school. This work would assist me in further defining my career goal of addressing environmental remediation. This is why I am interested in applying to the Environmental and Water Resources Engineering program at Virginia Tech.

My journey exploring these research topics began with working as a Ronald E. McNair Scholar with Dr. Elizabeth Swanner in a biogeochemistry lab where we studied the role of iron cycling bacteria in an intermittent local stream. Over the course of two years, I assisted in creating a database of the microbial communities present within our creek of study through on-site field sampling and RNA extractions. This project informed me on the uniqueness of small waterbodies, such as streams, and the role that microbes play in aquatic ecosystems. I was most compelled to work on this project after reviewing literature about the growing interest in the usage of iron reducing bacteria to degrade herbicides. Learning the important role these microbes could play in targeting pollutants in the runoff connected me to my overall research and career interest in watershed sustainability.

Beginning my senior year, I became involved with another research opportunity within our Environmental Engineering program working with Dr. Chris Rehmann. This research centered on stormwater management and emerging water contamination. In the lab, I gained experience testing the efficiency of sediment removal from improved bioretention cells used in a local suburban city. In addition to this, I worked through analytical solutions of differential equations to model the fate and transport of PFAS degradation in streams. Though this research was different from my microbiome research, it connected to a similar theme of improving water quality and environmental restoration.

Moving forward, I am excited to pursue my Ph.D. in Civil Engineering in Virginia Tech's

Environmental and Water Resource Engineering program. This program would provide me with integral skills and knowledge to help me apply my research interests in my career as an environmental engineer. My interest in environmental remediation most aligns with Dr. Jingqiu Liao's research which focuses on ecosystem health and sustainability. By working on a similar project involving aquatic microbial communities, I would be able to deepen my understanding of the role that unique microbiomes play within ecosystems. By approaching environmental restoration using microbiology and engineering, I am confident that working with Dr. Liao would assist me in further developing a biological background that I can use in my career. My research and academic experiences have provided me with the tools to be a successful doctoral student in the future, and I look forward to starting my career with a graduate degree from Virginia Tech.

You might notice here that the writer does not use a lot of sentences to indicate their fit to this graduate program; however, the fit is clearly established because it connects to their research interests and career objectives. The Fit to Program goal might not be proportionally a large part of your SoP, but it should still be a clear part of your argument.

4.8. Brainstorming About Your Fit to Program

Part II

At this point, you might be wondering how you find a graduate program that fits your interest. There are a couple of different paths, but the end goal is to review the graduate program's website to learn more about the specifics of the program and the professor(s) of interest. Here are some specific steps you might take:

- Conduct an internet search using keywords based on your research interests. Do not let this be the only place you look as it will not immediately be inclusive of all possibilities. Another resource is [Peterson's](#), an online resource which includes a graduate school search tool.
- Review research articles you're reading in class and/or labs that you've found to be interesting. Who are the authors? Where do they work? What are their interests?
- Talk with your professors. Do they know anyone who is doing the work you're interested in? Or programs/institutions that have labs or facilities that would align with the work you want to do?

Demonstrating fit to program is one of the most forgotten parts of the SoP, but it can be one of the most important parts of your argument as to why a specific graduate program is the right place for you. Many writers have concerns about how to write SoPs with this specific information if they are applying to multiple programs. You will need to revise your SoP for each school, but much of the statement will likely stay the same. What you need to focus on changing is the discussion of why a program is a good fit for you and how it will help you achieve your career objectives and engage in your research interests.

Activity

Brainstorming (Part 2): Return to the brainstorming you did at the beginning of this section. Use the following questions to help you continue to expand your fit to a particular program.

Important! Make sure that you save a copy of your brainstorming by selecting the “Copy” button below and then pasting the text into a Word document.

This activity can also be downloaded: [SoPBrainstormingQuestions \[DOC\]](#)



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Section 5: Putting the Pieces Together and Engaging in the Writing Process

5.1. Engaging in the Writing Process

Now that you've learned about the structure of the statement of purpose (SoP) and have substantial brainstorming for the three goals (experiences, motivation, and fit to program), your job is to move from brainstorming to drafting. But how do you start to put the pieces together to form a coherent and meaningful statement which addresses the prompt and stays within the word limit? One way you might approach this writing task is to think of your entire writing experience as a process which includes various intentional stages of brainstorming, outlining, drafting, revising, and editing.

This section will explore how you can use a process approach to effectively work through writing your SoP.

5.2. Writing as a Process

Writing as a process is a way to recognize that writing is thinking and good writing takes time. In this approach, the emphasis is not just on the final product, but rather on the way that you engage in the process of writing. Writing as a process can be generally divided into five stages which include: brainstorming, outlining, drafting, revising, and editing.

While these stages will be presented separately here, it is important to remember that these are not necessarily linear. You might create a draft and start revising only to discover that you need to go back and brainstorm more. Or maybe you start brainstorming and that naturally moves into drafting. That's okay, and you should choose a process that works for you. The goal, however, is to engage in a writing process makes sense for you and that helps you maintain meaningful progress.

Many writers often feel that they can only write when they are under intense time pressure; this often results in writing up against a deadline, often frantically late at night. While ill-advised, this might have worked in some writing contexts, and maybe it still continues to be an approach for finishing your course assignments. Maybe writing an entire paper the night before it was due worked for you throughout your college career. That approach won't work for the statement of purpose because of the amount of reflection required. Remember, the SoP moves beyond a summary of your CV/resume and into a discussion of experiences, motivation, and program fit. This requires that you've thought about your experiences and how they have influenced your motivation. It also requires you to take time to look at graduate program websites. Whatever your writing process might be, you are strongly encouraged to lean into a process approach when writing your SoP.

Let's explore each of these five stages of the writing process.

5.3. Brainstorming

If you worked through Sections 2, 3, and 4 of this resource, you'll remember that there were several brainstorming activities to get you thinking about your experiences, motivation, and fit to program. These activities were included to help you start thinking about the content that you might want to include. That's the purpose of brainstorming – to guide the development of your content and explore what you could say. You won't necessarily use all of the brainstorming in your SoP, but it is a valuable place to start because it focuses on YOU and YOUR interests (which is what the reader wants to know). Writing is thinking, and brainstorming is a way to document the thinking you're doing at the beginning of the process.

When you are brainstorming, your goal is to explore the ideas, and this means that you want to refrain from evaluating the ideas or becoming overly focused on word choice, spelling, punctuation, or even the logical flow of ideas. At this point, it doesn't matter if you have "beautiful" or "perfect" sentences that are logically ordered; instead, reduce the cognitive load by putting your energy into the exploration of ideas.

If you find yourself staring at an empty Microsoft Word document, cursor blinking, and panic rising, take a step back. Close your computer. Go for a walk and give yourself some space. Maybe try talking through your ideas with a friend or mentor – be sure to record the conversation so that you have the notes for later! You might also want to record voice notes as you go for a walk. Whatever brainstorming tasks you engage in, allow yourself time to think and recognize that this is a meaningful stage of your writing process and a strong final product.

5.4. Outlining

Now that you've brainstormed about each of the goals of the SoP framework (experiences, motivation, fit to program), what should you do with all these notes? You might want to start by organizing and grouping the ideas together to see if you can understand the different parts of your story. What parts fit together? Where is there cause and effect? What might a logical order of information look like?

The outlining stage of the writing process is an important bridge between the brainstorming stage and preparing to share a final product with someone else. When outlining you might start thinking about what the reader needs to know in what order; essentially, you're giving yourself a tentative road map for your SoP.

Many writers find a past – present – future approach to be helpful. If you look at the example SoPs in Section 6, you'll see that many writers choose to start by discussing their academic and research experiences, then move into talking about their research interests and career objectives, and then show their fit to the program. What if you were to loosely take this structure as your starting outline? How would your brainstorming fit into this structure? This structure follows a chronological order which can be a very effective way of writing the SoP.

A chronological order is not the only meaningful way to structure your statement. Is there important information that you need to communicate first? Or is there another more logical way to organize the information based on your experiences? What will make more sense for the reader? What makes the most sense given your experiences and their connection to your motivation? Consider what information is more important for the reader to know first; maybe you want to discuss your research experience and then move onto discussing extracurricular, leadership, and/or mentoring experiences. This might not be a strictly chronological order, but instead more thematic by type of experience.

Other writers like to start their SoP with a paragraph that addresses their research interests, career goals, and fit to program. This approach directly presents information to readers (who can sometimes be impatient). However you choose to start your SoP, recognize that your introduction will take time to develop as your SoP takes shape, and outlining can be a valuable stage to help you establish this shape and logical order of information.

5.5. Drafting

After you've outlined, you're likely ready to take your brainstorming, integrate the ideas into your outline, and start expanding your initial ideas. The brainstorming, outlining, and drafting stages do not necessarily need to be linear, and they can be iterative. How you approach this early part of the writing process should depend on what works for you and moves you from ideas to a final product.

Importantly, when you start drafting the SoP, I recommend first *developing one SoP for one specific program*. If you try to write a general SoP for all your schools, your argument often gets lost, and you'll still have to revise it later for each program. It often is easier to start with the longer SoP and then work to be more concise in a following draft for a different program.

Whether you've engaged in outlining or not, there are many different drafting strategies that you can try. Here are a couple of suggestions (all of which encourage you to consider making incremental progress):

1. Take one idea and try to write one paragraph about that idea (whether it's about your experiences, motivation, or fit to program). You might find that you ended up writing about two different experiences that need to be in different paragraphs, but the goal here is to get ideas from your brain onto paper.
2. If you have crafted a detailed outline, take one section of your outline and write more about one specific part. For example, if you're writing about your experiences, make sure to address the "what" of the experience before intentionally moving into the "so what".
3. One drafting technique is to set a timer for approximately 5 minutes and write (or type) continuously for that time. Don't stop writing during the entire time. Of course, everything you write might not be relevant, but forcing yourself to stay focused for a short amount of time can help, especially if you're experiencing writer's block.
4. Consider writing one paragraph per day to make meaningful, incremental progress. As you're writing, make notes to yourself about ideas, sentences, and/or words that you're finding challenging or that you want to come back and explore later.

Don't try to start writing your draft by writing the first paragraph. Introduction paragraphs are notoriously challenging – how do you know how you want to frame your statement if you haven't

finalized the statement yet? At this point, you might have some ideas about what you want to say, but it might also make more sense to put this aside and come back to it after you've written the body paragraphs.

This might also be the stage in the process where you realize that you need to cut content or you need to elaborate. If you are worried about going over the word limit, I suggest that you not censor yourself at first – get all the ideas down, explore those ideas fully, and then determine how and where you can be more concise or if there is content that can be removed. Remember that you'll provide your CV/resume with your application materials, so readers can always get more information there.

If you find that your statement needs to be expanded, ask yourself if you've addressed both the "what?" and the "so what?" of your experiences. Have you clarified how you were involved, what you learned, and how it has informed your decision to attend graduate school and your specific research interests? Or how it has been a valuable part of your journey?

5.6. Revising

You might notice that in this model, revising and editing are separate parts of the writing process. While many people use “revising” and “editing” synonymously, I will distinguish between them. For our purposes, revising refers to considerations of content development, clarity of and connection between ideas, transitions, paragraph structure/development, and logical order of information. Editing, on the other hand, refers to word choice, sentence structure, mechanics, and spelling. These are important to distinguish between because sometimes writers think that just double-checking spelling is sufficient; however, a more robust revising process is usually more important because it’s in that stage where you make sure your message is clear for the reader.

Once you’ve completed a draft of your SoP for one school, consider using this revising checklist. Did you:

- Order the paragraphs logically?
- Use transition words and phrases to guide the reader between paragraphs?
- Order the sentences within each paragraph logically?
- Use transition words and phrases to guide the reader?
- Develop one main idea per paragraph? Meaningfully use a topic sentence which helps the reader understand the central purpose of the paragraph?
- Fully respond to all parts of the prompt?
- Move from summarizing your CV/resume to contextualizing and helping the reader understand the “so what?” of your experience, motivation, and fit to program?
- Specifically identify why the program and professor(s) are a good fit for you and your research interests and career objectives?
- Update the name of the school and program for the SoP?

Even confident writers might struggle with these questions, so you are encouraged to seek feedback from mentors, professors, friends, colleagues, and family members who can give you meaningful feedback. Sometimes it’s helpful to share these questions as a way to guide their feedback and signal that you’re not yet ready to focus on sentence-level concerns, but instead, the content and organization. Of course, as you’re asking for feedback, be thoughtful about how many perspectives you seek. Sometimes too much feedback can be detrimental to your progress; you want to make sure that you maintain your own voice and agency in your writing.

5.7. Editing

Editing can be a challenging part of the writing process. When you have been intently engaged with a piece of writing, it can be hard to take a step back and read your work like a reader would; in fact, many would argue that this isn't possible which is why we need outside readers to provide their perspective.

Editing comes after the content and structure are finalized. In this stage of the writing process, you are interested in making sure that you have followed to standard English conventions as this is an expectation of the reader. If you've intentionally chosen to use different conventions, it can be valuable to talk through your decisions with a reader to get their perspective. If your institution has a writing center, use this resource to get feedback from trained writing tutors!

Consider asking your professors for feedback; when you do this, be sure to include the prompt at the top of the page and include the word count. This way the reader is aware of the constraints and can help make sure you're responding to the prompt. Give people time to review; it might take them several weeks so make sure you build this time into your writing process. When you ask for feedback, be sure that you are clear in what kind of feedback you're asking for.

If you're editing on your own, one way to give yourself some distance from your writing is to slowly read your work aloud to yourself. In doing this, you are more likely to catch sentence-level mistakes such as misspellings, repeated words, incorrect punctuation, or grammatical mistakes. Before you try to edit, give yourself a day or two break after revising. This distance is a healthy part of the writing process.

After you've engaged in a complete writing process and you're ready for the final step, consider following this editing checklist. Did you:

- Follow the required format (such as font, size, spacing, headers, etc.)?
- Spell the name of the program, institution, and professor(s) correctly?
- Stay within the word limit?
- Double check your use of punctuation? For more guidance on English punctuation conventions, consider looking at [Purdue Online Writing Lab's \(OWL\) resources](#).
- Read your work aloud to catch confusing phrasing, repetitive words, misspellings, missing words, missing punctuation, etc.?

However you choose to engage in writing your SoP, give it the time it needs. This might take several weeks or even a few months, and that is a very normal amount of time; this doesn't mean that you are writing for hours every day, but remember that your story is worth telling – give it the time and space it deserves.

Section 6: Annotated SoP Examples

Annotated Statement of Purpose Examples

This book uses Hypothesis, an online annotation tool, to annotate example Statements of Purpose. You can access the annotated Statements of Purpose online at: [Section 6: Annotated Statement of Purpose Examples](#)

Section 7: Words of Wisdom from Applicants

Words of Wisdom from Applicants

As the opening of this resource mentioned, applying to graduate school can be challenging. Hopefully this resource will help you understand the pieces of the application and engage in a meaningful writing process.

To conclude, I'd like to offer you some encouragement and wisdom from several applicants who successfully navigated the application process: Tnsae Mulu, Laurna Evans Lindsay, Vital Nyabashi, Cindy Lara, and Edson Lopez. Below, these applicants talk about how they persevered through writing their materials and offer guidance for others.

Words of Wisdom from Tnsae Mulu

The moment I learned about Occupational Therapy (OT) I felt a profound sense of joy and clarity because I found a career that perfectly aligned with my values and passions. However, as I began preparing my applications and delved into the process of writing my personal statement, I encountered a few challenges that I did not expect. A majority of those challenges were from moments of discouragement, particularly when I struggled to articulate the seamless connection I felt between my story and the pursuit of OT. Although prompts across OT programs slightly varied, they all generally sought to know answers to the following question "What experiences have led you to this point and how have they influenced your pursuit of this profession?" The goal of writing a personal statement, especially for a health science program, is to have applicants reflect and explain the motivations behind choosing that specific profession and the experiences that shaped that decision. Essentially, the programs were asking, "Of all professions, why are you pursuing this one?" Even though I had the answers, I found it challenging to convey the heartfelt impact of my experiences into a cohesive statement. Now, being on the other side of that and being accepted into the University of Southern California Chan's Occupational Therapy Program, I realize the mistakes I made during the writing process and now know the initiatives one should take to avoid them.

Initially, I treated the personal statement like any other essay and tried to complete it quickly just

to get it over with; this was one of my biggest mistakes. Rushing the initial reflection process for the sake of producing backfired. Without allowing myself the time and space to gather and collect my thoughts, my writing lacked coherence and I struggled to express myself, making it hard for me to explain my journey and my interest in pursuing a career as an OT. This resulted in several drafts that dissatisfied and disappointed me. It was through this struggle that I realized the value of pausing to reflect and discussing my thoughts with others before diving in to writing. During a conversation with Erin, who has tremendously supported me throughout my writing process, she asked me a question along the lines of, “Why are you doing this?” As I began to respond to her question, my passions and experience flowed naturally, leaving Erin and me wishing that we recorded that moment of clarity. Recording voice memos, speaking with others, making a bullet point list are all great ways to begin the reflection process, an initiative I wish I took sooner and dedicated more time to.

When writing my personal statement, the process of editing and reading was a lot more time-consuming than the actual writing itself. This physically and mentally exhausted me, so be prepared to invest a lot of time in revising. There were moments I felt so overwhelmed; my eyes grew weary repeatedly going over the same paragraphs and my mind grew doubtful, taking a toll on my well-being. I spent long periods reflecting, reciting, and rewording phrases, often struggling to express the depth of my passion. But what really made a difference was allowing myself to rest, and I did this by giving myself space from writing as well as limiting my computer usage. Allowing myself to rest allowed fresh ideas to flourish, strengthening me and helping me persevere. For this reason, I strongly suggest to include intentional breaks and rest as a part of your writing process. Rest itself, though it may not be deemed as “productive” by societal expectations and demands, is productive because it is restorative.

The support from my community was incredibly empowering. Professors and mentors encouraged me when I felt like delaying my application. Loved ones uplifted me when they noticed my stress. Whenever doubt or the thought of giving up crept in, my community reminded me of my purpose, motivating me to press onwards. I am thankful that I wasn’t isolated in this process.

Here is some general advice to keep in mind as you move forward with your statement:

- Reflect and brainstorm with others, don’t isolate yourself in that process! Reflecting during the writing process allowed me to see how much I’ve grown and to contemplate whether this career path was truly the right next step for me. The deeper I delved into my past experiences, the more clearly I could see how my passions and career aspirations aligned.
- Do not rush the process. Instead, plan ahead of time and aim to submit something that reflects your pride and effort.
- Although this may not be feasible for some, I recommend engaging with people who have been through similar experiences and connecting with professionals in the field that you are

interested in; their insights can provide motivation and hope, especially during challenging times. If possible, connect with a student or professor to gain a better understanding of the institution and determine if it feels like the right fit for you.

- Rather than trying to impress the admissions team, approach your essay as if you are explaining to yourself or a close friend why this path is right for you. I found that when approaching the personal statement process as transactional, one where I'd produce something that would appease others, I began to write solely with acceptance in mind. Inauthenticity, a product of my fear of being rejected, ultimately made the writing process harder. It was when I began to lay out how my experiences and motivations led to my pursuit of OT that my writing became clear. This process also boosted my confidence and assurance because regardless of the outcome, I knew I was on the right path.
- You can learn from others' experiences but don't compare yourself to them.
- Another really important point is to focus on clarity and simplicity. In my experience, worrying about using sophisticated language or jargon got me off track and detracted me from writing about my personal experiences, those that were distinct and intimate to my life. That being said, simple helps you stay on track and helps you directly answer prompts while still being authentic.
- When you ask others to review your statement, provide them with specific questions to guide their feedback, such as, "Does my statement directly answer the prompt?" or "Am I focusing too much on what I have done rather than explaining why I am pursuing this profession and who I am?" (Don't assume your experience speaks for itself). These are questions you should also keep at the back of your head as you are writing and reviewing your personal statement.
- Lastly, never surrender to self-doubt. If I gave in to those negative thoughts, I would have delayed, or worse quit, long ago. Keep pushing forward and remember, you've got this.

Words of Wisdom from Lurna Evans Lindsay

Writing a statement of purpose (SoP) or personal statement for graduate school can be daunting. When I began drafting mine, I underestimated how much effort it would take to present a compelling narrative of my academic and professional journey. Looking back, I realize how crucial the guidance of mentors and peers was in shaping my final product. Without their insight and encouragement, I doubt I would have written with the clarity and confidence required for such an important document.

One of the most challenging aspects of the SoP writing process was learning to talk about myself. Initially, I struggled to articulate my accomplishments because I didn't view them as noteworthy. While I was proud of my experiences in multicultural clubs, research, mentoring,

and working with underrepresented youth, I didn't recognize them as evidence of leadership, academic growth, or professional commitment. It wasn't until open conversations with close friends and mentors that I realized how much value these experiences added to my application. They reminded me that my story wasn't just about academic success but also about my passion for advocacy and community engagement, which made me an asset to any graduate program.

Writing an SoP goes beyond expressing interest in a particular program. It is an opportunity to demonstrate how your past experiences have prepared you for graduate study, why you are passionate about your field, and how the program aligns with your career aspirations. When looking back at the SoP writing process, I realize that it heavily involved introspection, identifying what motivated me to pursue a Master of Social Work, and how my undergraduate experiences equipped me for success.

A piece of advice that shaped my perspective came from my McNair instructor and mentor. During a moment of self-doubt, I shared my concerns about whether I would be "good enough" for the universities I was applying to. My mentor reminded me that, "Graduate school isn't just about you being a good fit for the university; it's also about the university being a good fit for you." This advice truly transformed how I approached my applications. Instead of focusing solely on impressing admissions committees, I researched programs in-depth to ensure they aligned with my values and goals. I closely examined each program's mission statement, resources, and support systems. I looked into student organizations, professional development opportunities, and alumni networks. I sought testimonials from current and former students to gain insight into campus culture and resources that would help me thrive as a graduate student. This shift in perspective gave me confidence—it was no longer about seeking approval but identifying an environment where I could flourish.

Through this process, I learned that an SoP is not merely a reflection of your academic and professional journey but a testament to your self-awareness, resilience, and ability to articulate your goals. Writing it was an opportunity for growth, forcing me to evaluate my strengths and passions, acknowledge my accomplishments, and envision my future.

For anyone embarking on this journey, I advise embracing the process as an opportunity for self-discovery. Be open to feedback from mentors, friends, and advisors. Don't shy away from sharing your accomplishments, as your story matters. Remember, the goal is not just to convince a graduate program that you belong but to find one that will empower you to reach your full potential.

Words of Wisdom from Vital Nyabashi

Applying to graduate school is overwhelming, but it is a process of self-discovery. After going through the process, here are some lessons and strategies that helped me:

Start Early: The earlier you can begin, the more time you can have to reflect on your goals and

craft a compelling statement of purpose (SoP). I underestimated how much thought goes into articulating why I wanted to pursue graduate studies and how the specific programs aligned with my goals. Early preparation gives you time to refine your ideas and avoid last minute stress.

Be Authentic: Some of the best advice I received was to stay true to my story. Graduate admissions committees want to see your motivations, experiences, and ambitions, not what you think they want to hear. Do not shy away from sharing challenges you have faced; showing how you have grown can make your application memorable.

Seek Feedback: Imposter syndrome often makes me feel like I have to constantly prove my worth to others, which sometimes makes it difficult to ask for help. You might relate to this. However, applying to graduate school is a challenging process, and seeking guidance is crucial. Reach out to faculty in your field of interest, your advisors, and, if you're fortunate to be part of a program like McNair, take advantage of the support they offer. Each perspective I received strengthened my application and helped me ensure it was clear, compelling, and true to my voice.

Embrace the Process: Writing my SoP forced me to think about my future and how I fit into my chosen field. While it was challenging, it also reaffirmed my passion for research and learning. Treat the process as an opportunity to reflect on what excites you most about your field.

Applying to graduate school is both a challenge and a great opportunity. Take it one step at a time, lean on your support network, and stay focused on your goals.

Words of Wisdom from Cindy Lara

Applying to graduate school is already overwhelming and isolating, but being a first-generation college student and a second-generation immigrant made it even more so. This feeling was even more intensified by the lack of faculty and graduate students in my field who shared my background and identities. However, through the McNair Scholars Program, I found direction, guidance, and a supportive community that made applying to graduate programs less alienating. After finishing my application materials and submitting them, I have advice for those starting their journey.

- My first piece of advice would be to **start as early as possible**. When I first began the application process, I underestimated the amount of time it would take to write a statement of purpose that I felt portrayed my experiences and interests accurately and meaningfully. Writing my statements required multiple drafts, feedback from mentors, and personal reflections to effectively convey my interests and goals. Without starting early, I would not have had the time to revise and reflect on my statements in a meaningful way.
- Additionally, I would highly recommend **creating an account in the online application portals as soon as they become available**. I found it extremely helpful to review the required materials, statements, and information early on to ensure I had everything I needed

for my application. Since application instructions and statements can vary depending on the institution or program, having that extra time can be beneficial in the long run.

- Furthermore, I would advise **seeking feedback from numerous sources**, including faculty, mentors, or even friends. Receiving input from multiple perspectives helped me bring in multiple approaches and revisions. However, I sometimes encountered contradictory feedback from different mentors. This experience taught me to evaluate suggestions and select the ones that best aligned the application's requirements and instructions.
- One piece of advice that stuck with me from my mentor was to **avoid using passive voice** in my statement of purpose. Writing in an active voice when describing my personal and research experiences gave me agency and made my statement more confident.
- I was also advised to **show, rather than tell**. This advice helped me a lot when writing my statement because it encouraged me to describe my experiences and skills through examples rather than just stating them.
- **Be mindful when reading other people's statements**. It is easy to feel intimidated and compare yourself to others but remember everyone's journey and experiences are unique.
- My last piece of advice is to **find community**. While applying to graduate school, I found it extremely helpful to interact with others going through the same process, and those who have already been through it. Although I was privileged to have a strong community, I understand others may not have the same support. Therefore, I would recommend reaching out to faculty you feel comfortable with or exploring online communities. A support network can provide valuable advice and emotional encouragement throughout this overwhelming journey.

Words of Wisdom from Edson Lopez

The graduate school application process is known to be a stressful one, but it can be a great opportunity for growth and self-discovery. For me, it was a process that taught me resilience, teamwork, learning to accept feedback, and self-discovery.

Writing my statement of purpose (SoP) was particularly transformative. I collaborated with mentors who helped me clearly and concisely articulate my story and experiences. Their guidance enabled me to take pride in a type of writing which I had not often done. Initially, it was difficult to talk about myself, my emotions, and my hardships. The vulnerability required for self-reflection was uncomfortable but ultimately therapeutic. It deepened my understanding of my journey and helped me grow as a person.

This process also strengthened my relationships with mentors. Whether brainstorming ideas,

refining my writing, or even sharing poetry, they provided invaluable support. Through their willingness to be vulnerable with me, I felt truly seen and validated in my experiences.

Another significant lesson was learning to embrace constructive criticism. Receiving feedback can be hard, and at times it hurt my ego; I thought certain sentences were great, only to realize they lacked clarity for the reader. But over time, I understood that feedback wasn't an attack. It was an effort to help me refine my message and craft the strongest SoP possible.

The best advice I can offer is to stay true to yourself. I avoided looking at examples and instead wrote freely, capturing everything that felt important. With the help of mentors, I refined my writing to highlight the most impactful parts of my story. After numerous edits and revisions, my SoP became a true reflection of me—not just a template of what others had done.

Looking back, I appreciate the rollercoaster of emotions that came with this writing process. I found that applying for graduate school improved my writing, strengthened my ability to communicate concisely, deepened my self-awareness, and reinforced the value of mentorship. Despite the challenges, it was an incredibly rewarding experience.

Section 8: Advice from Graduate Faculty

Advice from Graduate Faculty

Given that your statement of purpose and entire application will be reviewed by the faculty in the graduate program to which you are applying, it might be useful to consider what faculty look for in SoPs. Below are a collection of perspectives from graduate faculty across disciplines. Even if these faculty are not in your field of study, you might notice that they are mostly looking for an understanding of your relevant experiences, your motivation for graduate study, and your fit to the graduate program.

“One of the most important aspects of the statement of purpose is its sincerity. Before you even begin to write your statement, take some time to sit and think and reflect about your goals and priorities for graduate school. Be very honest with yourself about the reasons why you want to study your particular subject and why you want to study it where you do. Application readers can easily detect when someone is writing what they believe that the readers want to hear. Be sincere!”

– *Professor in Anthropology*

“A personal statement needs to convey clearly and in detail why and how the applicant wants to be part of a specific graduate program or lab. That means that they need to demonstrate an understanding of what kind of research is being conducted there (i.e., the types of questions being asked, the methods being used, and the subjects being studied). They should present their experiences, interests, and skills in a narrative format that explains why they are interested in contributing to that body of research and how that specific program/lab is the best fit for them. Ideally, then, they would also describe how being accepted would benefit their long-term career goals.”

– *Professor in Ecology, Evolution, and Organismal Biology*

"I look for graduate students who 1) demonstrate a genuine interest in environmental engineering and water chemistry, 2) are strong communicators, critical thinkers, hard workers, and committed to developing technology that solves environmental problems, and 3) have some degree of laboratory experience. Of course a student's background need not be perfect to be admitted to my research group; graduate school is the place to strengthen your skills, and we all have more to learn. Nonetheless, I will largely evaluate an SoP based on these three criteria to determine a prospective student's fit for our group.

1. **Genuine Interest:** Many applicants are "fishing" for assistantship offers outside of their expertise, and it's achingly transparent when this is the case. If nothing about your background or articulated interests makes clear that you care about environmental engineering and water chemistry more than as a vehicle to get me to pay for your graduate education, I will quickly lose interest. If your background reflects one of these interests, great: Explain to me why you need an advanced degree to manifest your dreams in that field. If you come from a different background, that's fine: Explain to me your motivations for switching fields of study/practice.
2. **Commitment and Drive:** Graduate school is very different from undergraduate education. I don't look too closely at grades or tests scores. In my experience, the most successful graduate students are the ones who are persistent and creative (often because of their personal motivations around the subject of their research). Demonstrate to me with clear examples in your SoP that you're willing to put in the hard work to make the world a better place through your research.
3. **Lab Experience:** As an experimentalist, the largest investment of my time training students is teaching practical lab skills. I don't need you to be able to run our instruments before you step foot on campus, but it saves us both time if you can demonstrate in your SoP that I don't have to worry about you melting your face in acid or setting your bench on fire. Bonus points if you know how to use a pipettor and a calibrate balance. Gold stars if you can show me analytical data that you generated yourself."

– *Professor in Environmental Engineering*

"For PhD (research focused) programs, the statement of purpose must include a direct link between the applicant's interests to the specific faculty member they want to work with; it's not just a matter of listing the faculty name, but discussing why that faculty is of interest. This shows that the applicant did their research on the faculty members and has thought about who would be a good fit, as opposed to just applying to the program in an unfocused manner. It's fine to include more than one faculty member but that needs to be done carefully. For example, if the applicant lists two faculty and they are very, very different, that

can raise a question of whether the applicant is focused enough on a particular research area.”

– *Professor in Human Development and Family Studies*

“I believe that the most impactful statements of purpose tell the whole story in the student’s own voice. In my opinion, a student talking about struggles and setbacks is much more informative than hearing about successes or accolades.”

– *Professor in Veterinary Medicine*

“I look for an essay which 1) is clearly written, 2) indicates some passion for science or shows signs of curiosity, 3) indicates some understanding of what the degree would provide them (but they don’t need to know exact plans after graduation), and 4) offers past evidence of successfully doing science (this is strongly recommended, but not required).”

– *Professor in Agronomy*

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Peer Review Statement

A Guide to Writing the Statement of Purpose for Graduate School Applications was peer reviewed by several subject matter experts. The review for this book was structured around a rubric adapted from the [Open Textbook Library's Review Rubric](#), rating the text on various aspects of its organization and content. Following the peer review process, changes suggested by the reviewers were incorporated by the author into the book's final draft for publication.

The author and editors would like to thank the reviewers for their time reading through and providing comments on the book's manuscript prior to its publication.

Reviewers

- Jordan Carson, Hampton University
- Carmen Jones, Binghamton University
- Susan Ott, University at Buffalo
- Erin Zimmerman, University of Nevada, Las Vegas