



## THE STATEMENT OF PURPOSE AND HOW TO WRITE ONE

### **What is the Statement of Purpose?**

As the name signifies, the Statement of Purpose (SOP) is your personal statement about who you are, what has influenced your career path so far, your professional interests and where you plan to go from here. It need not be a bold statement of facts as several successful SOPs address these questions through anecdotes, stories or by describing their hero. But whether your SOP is subtle or to the point, it must be well written to have a positive impact on your application. This is because the SOP is the only part of your application packet over which you have full control. Your academic and extra-curricular records are in the past. Most people only take one or two shots at the GMAT, GRE or TOEFL, and these scores could be adversely affected by conditions on the test day. It is important to choose recommendation letter writers carefully, but while you hope they give you the best possible recommendation, this is not within your control.

The SOP is your chance to talk directly to the admissions committee, to make yourself stand out from among a multitude of similarly qualified candidates and to convince the committee that you have the spark, the thirst for knowledge that could add value to your class.

Most of us work hard for the standard tests like the SAT, GRE, GMAT and TOEFL. We attend classes or peruse study aids. We give practice tests and do everything within our power to aim for the highest possible score. Because we know that these test scores, while not a perfect tool, are crucial to our chances of gaining admission and even a scholarship or assistantship.

The SOP or essay, on the other hand, is put off till the last possible moment. It scares us and we look at those oh-so-perfect essay examples in the admissions guidebooks and wonder how we can ever write so well. Or wonder what shining instance we can pick out of our normal, average lives to show that we are unique and remarkable. Or how to pick our way through the minefield of endless Do's and Don'ts. Or, after overcoming all these obstacles, we falter at the seemingly endless revisions, wondering if this latest draft is good enough (If I read that essay once more, I'll scream!). Finally we write something, because time is crucial and we have to meet the application deadline. We do our best, juggling the writing process with the last-minute paraphernalia of applying, checking forms for errors and completeness, collating the application packets, making sure transcripts, recommendations, work samples and resumes go in their right envelopes, worrying about transit times. We feel thankful when the essay is over, do a quick scan for obvious mistakes, and send it on its way. If you do it this way, you are practically throwing away your chances of admission. A good SOP will certainly improve your chances of getting admission to the school of your choice, and even compensate for weaker portions of your application such as less-than-perfect grades. A bad SOP, on the other hand, has the potential to drag down an otherwise strong application.

If you plan correctly, you can give yourself enough time to submit a well-written, thoughtful, polished essay that will boost your chances for admission. Equally important, this is a great opportunity to look inside yourself and be rewarded for a better understanding of who you are.

Writing a reasonably good Statement of Purpose is not an impossible task. It requires care, attention and patience. And enough time for you to be able to write several drafts, show them to people and polish the essay till you get a version you are happy with.

Done right, this will even turn out to be an enjoyable process. And you will be richer and happier.

### **What do colleges look for in a SOP?**

The primary question admissions committee members ask themselves when they read a Statement of Purpose is: What does this essay tell me about the person who wrote it?

Put yourself in an admission officer's shoes. From among thousands of applications, you have to choose the fraction of students that will comprise next year's incoming class a mix of interesting, confident and enthusiastic people who will make the class a stimulating place. Academic achievements and good test scores are important. But in an era where the majority of applicants have good academic records, it becomes increasingly difficult to distinguish between individuals and decide who gets the offer of admission.

When you apply, each of the items in the application packet -recommendations, extra-curricular achievements, work samples - adds an extra dimension to your personality. But it is the SOP that brings you to life. Which is why each essay is read carefully by at least two and often four or five people before a decision is taken on the application.

Does this mean that the SOP is the main deciding factor? No. Your academic record, grades and the courses you took- are the first section admission committee members turn to. Standardized test scores are useful to know where you stand in the applicant pool. For graduate schools, relevant work or academic experience is important. Being from a reputed school or college confers a distinct advantage. What your teachers or boss think of you goes a long way towards the school's opinion. A good work sample can show your creativity, skill and professionalism.

However, only the SOP or application essays can bring out your uniqueness. And therefore make or break your application. An applicant who does not take the essay seriously is throwing away the best opportunity available.

So are the admission officers looking for specific personality sorts? Well, yes and no. Creativity, curiosity, pride in your work, an enthusiasm for learning, a capacity for teamwork, the ability to think independently and so on are all good attributes, and most of us share these in varying proportions. But what schools look for is a mix of individuals that together, form a well-balanced class. This would include several personality types.

It is good to go through the school's brochure or web site, speak to people about it, visit if that is possible; get a feel of the student mix that they look for and decide if this is the school for you.

However, trying to tailor your SOP to reflect what you think the school is looking for is dangerous business. The people who read your application have been doing so for years and are skilled at spotting fakes. They are likely to know soon if a particular author is saying something for effect or if an essay does not ring true. And that means almost certain rejection.

Of course we want to have an effect on the admissions officers. The important thing is to do so without appearing dishonest. If, for instance, you talk about your deep desire to make society a better place, your application should reflect it. Have you done anything about this desire? Can you talk about your actions and experiences? A small example of something you did, not necessarily spectacular, can do more towards boosting your chances than the noblest platitude can.

Don't try to be something you are not. Don't try to tell the admissions committee what you think they want to hear. Be honest, look inside yourself and do your best.

Which brings us to the next point - self-knowledge. The people who read your essay want to be convinced that you have thought long and hard about who you are, what are the things you appreciate, what inspires you, what you want out of life, and where you are going from here. It is not necessary to have all the answers. After all, several admirable people have no idea where they are going even at age 40 or 50. It is necessary to show that you have thought about this. And that these life experiences have taught you something.

Finally, you have to show a desire to learn. From your books and teachers, from your classmates, from music or art, from life itself.

### **How to answer a specific question asked by an institute**

Show your interest in the subject. Rather than saying that you find electronics interesting, it is more convincing to demonstrate your interest by talking about any projects you may have done and what you learnt from them. If you have taken the initiative to do things on your own, now is the time to talk about them

Show that you have thought carefully about further studies, know what you are getting into, and have the confidence to go through with it. Have the admissions committee like you! Avoid sounding opinionated, conceited, pedantic or patronizing. Read your essay carefully, and have others read it to find and correct this.

Demonstrate a well-rounded personality. Include a short paragraph near the end on what you like to do outside your professional life. Keep the essay focused. Each sentence you use should strengthen the admissions committee's resolve to admit you. So while you may have done several interesting things in life, avoid falling into the trap of mentioning each of them. Your essay should have depth, not breadth. The resume is where you should list achievements. Remember that you have very little space to convey who you are, so make every sentence count.

Pitfalls in your essay must be avoided: If it is a repetition of the resume or other information available from the application form, it could have been written by just about anybody. Since your individuality does not come through, it is not an honest account in response to the essay question (why you want to study what you do, what you have learned from an event/person in your life and so on). Embarrassing, highly personal and emotional content should also be avoided unless it makes a unique, creative point. The admissions committee would not appreciate reading about the pain you went through after breaking up with your boyfriend. An account of how you overcame difficult family circumstances, illness, or a handicap, would be a valid point to include in your essay. However, avoid emotional language.

### **Background Issues**

Ask yourself why you want to study further. Take a piece of paper and start writing down all the reasons. Spend about half an hour on this, so that you can go beyond clichéd ideas like wanting to improve your prospects or contribute to society. Write a few sentences on any reason that particularly strikes a chord with you.

Make lists of instances you can use in your SOP. For example, if you've been asked to talk about an important event in your life, list down events that have made a significant impression on you. Don't worry if these events are not 'conventionally' important or seem insignificant; what matters is that they have had some influence over you. Similarly, make a list of people you admire or who have influenced you - this could be a friend, a family member, a teacher, etc. and need not necessarily be a famous person.

Go through your résumé and reflect on what you have learned from your various experiences. How have they molded your interests and led you to this point? Pick one or two cases that you can talk about in-depth. For graduate school, it is best to take at least one professional situation and show what you did and learned.

Make a list of schools you plan to apply to. As you continue through the background check, you will add a few universities and delete several. A final shortlist of ten to fifteen schools is common. Ask yourself why you wish to study at each of the schools you have listed. For graduate study, it is important to ensure that your interests are compatible with the research interests of the department you are applying to. As you progress through the background check and understand more about your interests through subsequent revisions of the SOP, add to and improve the list.

### **Language Guidelines**

Please keep in mind the following when writing your essays and SOP:

#### ***Flow***

While each paragraph should make a complete statement on its own, the essay should logically progress from paragraph to paragraph. Read your essay for flow, or have someone else read it, and ask yourself if there seems to be abrupt shift between ideas in two consecutive paragraphs.

### **Structure**

This follows naturally from flow. Do all the paragraphs mesh together to form a cogent whole? Does the essay, through a logical progression of ideas, demonstrate your interest, enthusiasm, and fit in the department you have applied to?

### **Language**

Avoid slang and abbreviations. For acronyms, use the full form the first time and show the acronym in parentheses. Use grammatically correct English and ALWAYS read your essay carefully for spelling mistakes before you send it off -your computer's spell check may not flush out all the errors. Try to make your essay crisp, cutting out unnecessary adverbs, articles and pronouns (for instance, a careful reading may yield several "the's" that are superfluous).

### **Tone**

Use a consistent tone throughout the essay -it will only confuse the admissions officers if you alternately sound like Ernest Hemingway and Shakespeare. This is definitely not going to impress them. While you should avoid flowery language and clichés, there is no harm in looking for the most apt phrase or sentence. However, be careful while using humor -it can backfire and harm your chances for admission.

### **A critiqued essay**

#### **MBA**

**Write a candid description of yourself, stressing those personal qualities, assets, and liabilities that you feel will influence your graduate work. Describe what you consider to be your most important professional and / or academic achievement to date.**

If one were to ask my friends to describe me they would say that I am a very pleasant, diverse, active and intelligent woman. I think one of my most distinguishing characteristics is the diversity of experiences I possess. I am a science student with a flair for the arts. I am a woman with technical aptitude and an interest in management. I also have a passion for traveling and understanding different cultures of the world. All these elements have given me a very broad outlook, with varying degrees of knowledge in a range of topics. I strongly believe that although some are not related directly, all these qualities will influence my graduate work.

My Engineering degree has given a strong foundation to my analytical skills since civil designing not only involves the application of basic math skills but also long, complex and intricate calculations. Over the past four years, I have been working part-time with my family firm, SnMTech Systems. I am also the co-founder and active member with FOE - Friends of the Environment. I have assisted in the installation of Enterprise-wide Resource Planning (ERP) System at Biotech, a major Engineering Company. More than what I have studied in school and college, it has been these experiences that have shaped the person that I am today.

I believe that this unique blend of experiences has made me a woman with an original point of view. This blend has given me a broader perspective and a good understanding of life and a goal to aim for. Among other things, I believe the strongest asset I have to offer the University of Utah is my diversity of experience. My most substantial accomplishment has been the success of the software upgradation project that I managed at SnMTech Systems Pvt. Ltd., New Delhi, where I have been working as a part time Associate Intern - Management Information Systems since 1994.

During the first two years of my work at SnMTech, I had an opportunity to observe and work with the existing system being used. Some of the software packages being used were outdated versions. I have always been in touch with the latest software packages thanks to the powerful PC I have at home and am acquainted to working with a Graphical User Interface (GUI) environment. At the office, there was great deal of chaos while preparing reports that involved use of more than one software since compatibility between packages usually posed a problem. The difficulty we faced putting different files together led to the final report occasionally appearing rather haphazard.

I believe in providing and maintaining non-negotiable high standards and service. I recognized that shifting to a newer GUI based software would not only dramatically improve our documentation quality, but also increase

productivity at the workplace. Presenting the pros and cons to the management of the upgradation was a very challenging task. I was asked to prepare a proposal regarding the upgradation of the firm's software. Initially, I imagined this project would be rather simple but it turned out to be among the most challenging and rewarding experiences of my life.

Through a firm-wide survey of operators and several one-on-one discussions of their own preferences and solutions, I found that while everybody wanted an upgradation, they had doubts since they would have to learn a whole set of new skills. In order to prepare a budget, I procured quotations from various vendors and analyzed possible combinations. I realized the necessity of a training course for the operators because most of them were not familiar with the GUI interface. I examined the various training classes that offered private in-house training for the employees. After a detailed analysis, I presented my report to the management in the next meeting. They were pleased with my efforts and pleasantly surprised at the cost of the project since it seemed to be comparatively less than what they had anticipated.

Once I was given the go-ahead, the next hurdle was to implement the proposal and coordinate the upgrading. To avoid any disturbance to the company's work, training sessions were planned after working hours. The upgrading took a week and the training of the operators took another two weeks. The really tough period started once the training personnel left. The management felt that it was my responsibility to see that the operators didn't face any problems once they actually started using the new software packages. I put in 60 to 70-hour weeks for the next three weeks before everyone was comfortable with the new system. While the benefits of using these packages were not immediately tangible, a few months later our clients acknowledged that the quality of the reports we sent them had improved considerably. In fact, a year later our firm decided to upgrade all of its software packages. I consider this to be a tacit compliment for my efforts.

This project required me to believe in myself and in what I thought was good for the company. I had to take a pro-active approach, take the initiative and play a leadership role in motivating people and executing the project to completion. A good manager is one who can figure out where the problem lies, deal with it effectively by involving all the members of the company and improve the overall culture of the company. The problem I saw at SnMTech had to be resolved to sustain the company's image. The fact that I was able to pull off this task alone has boosted my confidence in my abilities.

### **Comments and Critique of the above essay**

#### **Paragraph 1**

A good introductory paragraph.-This summarizes the next couple of paragraphs and also has a certain intriguing appeal - it arouses the reader's curiosity and impels him to read further. The first sentence, however, could easily have been dropped - the second sentence would make a more compelling introduction to the essay.

#### **Paragraph 2**

Here the writer develops on the thread of diversity. Note that there is an emphasis on aspects that are important to an MBA course (strong analytical skills, math skills, work experience). The writer shows effectively that she has not been 'wasting her time' - besides earning a degree, she has earned valuable work experience and done something for the environment. Volunteer work is a strong advantage while applying to an MBA course - universities love people with a social conscience! (To a lesser degree, this is true if you're applying to other graduate courses as well, as long as you show that your primary interest, now and in the future, is in the field you are applying to). At the same time, it is important that this experience appears genuine - so before making tall claims, make sure that you can substantiate them, preferably by actually doing some volunteer / social work. The last sentence ties the paragraph together. The argument 'my experiences have shaped me' is invaluable IF you have strong or unusual life experiences and in some cases can also partially compensate for an average or below-average academic record.

#### **Paragraph 3**

We come to a shift in focus with this paragraph. The writer wraps up the 'diversity' thread well. Saying that she has a diversity of experience to offer, 'among other things', is a good idea - it implies that there is much more to her, qualities and assets that could not be described here because of space limitations. It might have been a better idea to begin the next topic - 'most important achievement' in a new paragraph. The abrupt change of subject has a slightly disconcerting effect here.

**Paragraph 4**

While this paragraph is ostensibly an introduction to the problem handled by the writer, it also makes two points, subtly – she had been working in the family firm on a continuous basis and kept her eyes open to spot an area of improvement. And second she is familiar with popular software packages and very comfortable with a PC.

**Paragraph 5**

The first sentence risks sounding slightly pompous, but the writer's earnestness comes through after reading the paragraph as a whole.

**Paragraph 6**

This paragraph comes across as systematic, organized and thorough. Good qualities for any graduate applicant.

**Paragraph 7**

This paragraph shows considerable maturity and learning from the event. A problem is not solved when you have a solution for it - implementing the solution is usually the biggest hurdle. Also, she realizes that company-wide changes rarely yield instant results, and must be followed up over a period of time to evaluate their effects. The last two sentences show that this project also had an effect on the company management's thinking.

**Paragraph 8**

Reflective paragraph on what she has gained from the project. She certainly seems to have been the driving force behind the project and it's an impressive achievement. It might have been a good idea, though, to put in a line or two about how she learned to co-ordinate between various entities to get her job done. Overall, it is a good paragraph to end the essay with.

**Summary**

This is a mature, well-written essay. Some of the ideas here are gold mines for other essays – describing how she found and helped run FOE could be a whole essay by itself, and can be used to show how she used leadership and teamwork skills to achieve her task effectively. Her experience in assisting in the implementation of an ERP system can also be used as an example of team skills and project management skills. MBA applicants have to write a number of essays for each school. It helps to have a bank of experiences to draw on. Writing a series of essays also means that you cannot afford to have a limited scope for each essay, you must go a little deeper. Diversity of experiences is an excellent point to make, but one more paragraph on other aspects of the writer's personality would have strengthened the essay. Finally, each application essay should answer the question asked clearly and in detail.

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