



The Hixon Writing Center at Caltech

## Approaching the Graduate School Statement of Purpose

In general, a statement of purpose for admission to graduate school should tell your reader:

- **Why you are compelled** to do further study and research
- How you have **become qualified** to pursue that study and research
- What you **hope to learn** and **what knowledge you want to produce**
- **Why *this* graduate school** is the ideal next step for you

In the early stages of developing the statement, writers generally negotiate the following concerns:

### 1) How “personal” should the personal statement be?

- A good statement *is* personal. It should showcase details about your intellectual background and goals that could not be in anyone else’s statement.
- Personal does not mean emotional. Rather than construct a narrative driven by emotion or relationships (e.g., “The sadness of my aunt’s death from cancer inspired me to become interested in bioengineering...”), emphasize the evolution of your intellectual interests (e.g., “An experience in a chemistry lab course my freshman year was the start of my interest in nuclear medicine. In this lab, we...”)

### 2) What kind of a history is appropriate to this genre?

- Don’t go back to your ecstatic first discovery about your field (i.e., when you were ten or even sixteen). Most readers will skip this. Focus on what you have done in college.
- Articulate your unique academic or related experiences (in most cases from your time as an undergrad), showing how they have motivated you to pursue advanced research in graduate school.

### 3) What’s the right balance in the statement between the work you’ve done so far and what you want to do?

- Prioritize discussing intellectual problems, questions, and findings that emerged out of your research and study experiences. This may include limitations that you found in one context that prompted you to seek out a different set of circumstances for future work. If you’re not sure what your take-away was from a certain experience or how it relates to your desired field of study, look back on any documents you generated from those experiences (e.g. SURF reports).
- Show your literacy in the field, including knowledge of current trends and leading research questions, as well as experience with of key methodologies or materials.
- Connect past/current work to future research plans, i.e., questions or problems that you want to investigate (or that you need further training to be equipped to answer).
- Avoid chronological lists of research experience that just lists what you’ve done (e.g., “And then I...” “And the next summer I...” “My following project was...”). Instead, **tell a story** of what

you've *learned*, highlighting the most important experiences. This may proceed chronologically; nevertheless, you need to emphasize the evolution of your thinking and your work over time.

#### 4) How much should you tailor your statement for each school?

- Tailoring your statement is important. Showing that you not only want to go to grad school but why want to go to *this* school sets you apart from others. This takes time, but graduate school may take five or more years of your life, so you want to get into the right one.
- It's not enough to simply name faculty members you'd like to work with or labs you'd like to work in. Be certain to indicate why those people or facilities interest you, and how you could fit in or contribute to the work they are already doing. Don't just look at the school website; familiarize yourself with their published work.
- Be cautious when naming a single entity, suggesting that you could only work in that configuration; if that person or lab gets no new students in the year you are to enter, it could mean that you are not admitted. Express flexibility and receptiveness to new opportunities without misrepresenting your true areas of interest.
- Note specific requirements in the instructions for your statement. Some may ask for specific elements or points of focus that others do not, (e.g., whether they ask for separate personal or diversity statements).

#### 5) What qualities should my writing have?

- Show rather than tell. Don't just say "I'd make a great researcher." Prove it by sharing specific stories about the kinds of questions that concern you and the skills you have to show that you would.
- Avoid melodramatic language or language that embellishes without content. Interesting detail, rather than unusual language, is what draws the reader in to a personal statement.
- Clarity is crucial. Faculty reading your statement are very busy people. If your statement is difficult to understand at the sentence or paragraph level, they'll give up on it and move to the next candidate.
- Correctness is also key. If you make grammar or proofreading errors in a high stakes document, you create a first impression of not being detail-oriented and/or of being a weak writer. Neither are qualities that admissions committees admire.

#### 6) Who can give me helpful feedback on my statement?

- It is important to talk to mentors in your field, because the expectations for statements can vary by discipline. Consider approaching the director of grad admissions in your field at Caltech for guidance about expectations and common mistakes.
- Show your working drafts to multiple readers, including those who know you well and those who do not, as well as those within and outside your research specialization. As you decide how to revise in response to feedback, be aware that no one knows exactly what each admissions committee will prioritize.
- We invite you to make an appointment with one of our Writing Specialists to get feedback on your draft. Appointments are made in the "Writing Center Scheduler" in Access. The Career Development Center can also provide useful feedback on your draft.