

A “Skeleton” for Your Statement of Purpose Essay

Is this you? You’ve read the essay prompt carefully, and you have some ideas about what you might include in your essay. But you’re not sure how to structure it. You’re asking yourself, “what goes first?” or “where do I mention my fieldwork experience?” or “how many paragraphs should it have?” Or maybe you’re just completely overwhelmed with the very idea of writing a statement. You have no idea where to begin.

Don’t worry: This handout can help. There isn’t only one correct way to write a statement. And many programs have specific instructions for their essays (if so, follow those instructions exactly). But all writing is a matter of making choices, and each choice has pros and cons. For example, if you write a page and a half talking about your research experiences, you’ll have less room to describe your teaching abilities. If the program you’re applying to is heavily focused on research, then maybe this is a good choice. If the program has a different focus, then maybe not. **This handout suggests one set of choices**, but always use your best judgment plus any information you can learn—from advisors, other students, the internet, and the program itself—about what the program is looking for.

Always remember: Whenever you write anything, you should ask yourself: Who’s going to read this? Why will they read it? How can I give my readers the information that they want/need?¹ For grad school admissions, your readers are the admissions committee—tenured faculty in the department you’re applying to. They want to know if you’re a good fit² for their program. Your job is to show them that you are.

Below is a paragraph-by-paragraph “skeleton” (or scaffold) for constructing your statement of purpose.³

1. The Introduction Paragraph

There are two basic options for writing this paragraph: (1) direct and (2) anecdote (see examples below). Your readers are busy. They have to read dozens of these essays, and you don’t want to bore, confuse, or misdirect them. Instead, keep things short, simple, and to-the-point. So, I almost always recommend option 1. This option always works because you’ll add details in other paragraphs anyway.

However, for “people-centered” professions (e.g., healthcare, education, social work, counseling), you might want to include a human element, such as a demonstration of your bedside manner or your skills working with students/clients. If so, option 2 might be a good choice (but remember, you can insert the human element into your later “experiences” paragraphs, so option 1 is also perfectly fine).

Examples/sentence stems:

Option 1: Direct. “I am applying to the master’s program in higher education counseling at NAME OF UNIVERSITY because I am interested in counseling students in a higher education setting... As a counselor, I will use my cultural competence to help students from under-served backgrounds thrive academically... **Note:** For option 1, your intro paragraph will be just 1 to 3 sentences. That’s perfectly OK.

Option 2: Anecdote. (this example is adapted from an essay for a physical therapy [PT] program) “When I first started volunteering on the PT floor of X hospital, my assignment was to assist the lead therapist with basic exercises for trauma victims. My first patient, call her Maria,

¹ This point is based on the advice of [Larry McEnerney](#), Joseph Williams, & others associated with the UChicago Writing Program.

² For a good, brief discussion of “fit,” see Appleby & Appleby (2006), “[Kisses of Death in the Graduate School Application Process](#).”

³ Confusingly, a “statement of purpose” is also sometimes called a “personal statement,” while other times “personal statement” refers to what I call a “diversity statement.” For info on these different kinds of statements, see this page on [Admissions Essays](#).

came in with a leg that had been badly injured in a car accident. Her prognosis looked grim: I doubted if she'd ever walk again without a cane. But over the next several months, I helped the therapist direct Maria through various exercises, and as time went on, she made rapid improvement... When I finally saw her walk up the stairs unassisted, I felt so inspired by the role that I had played in her recovery. Realizing how much good I can do for people through PT makes me certain that PT is the right career for me."

2. The Education Paragraph

Describe your educational experiences and how they prepared you to succeed in grad school. This paragraph does not have to be long, and you certainly shouldn't bore your reader by rehashing your entire transcript (especially for majors like physics, in which all undergrads take roughly the same courses). But suppose you were an art history major who took a lot of courses on Latin American art, and now you're applying to a PhD program specializing in Latin American art. Not all art majors have that specialty, so it's worth explaining in this paragraph. Also, if you did anything special or unusual, such as taking graduate-level seminars while still an undergrad student, explain that.

Every time you explain something, briefly state what you learned from it (e.g., "This experience taught me the importance of...") and/or why it prepared you for success in grad school (e.g., "...which is an important skill that I will continue to develop in my graduate program"). Another reason to discuss coursework is if you're a "career changer": you're applying to a grad program in a different discipline from your undergrad major and you want to explain that you've taken enough prerequisite courses.

Important: Don't waste space telling the whole story of how you decided upon your major/field, e.g., "First, I was an English major, but I realized that I was more interested in people rather than texts, so I switched to anthropology. As an anthro student, I found myself drawn to psychological topics..." THAT'S IRRELEVANT. Your goal should be to state clearly how you have prepared for your chosen field, regardless of earlier twists and turns on your path: "To prepare myself for graduate study in psychology, I completed courses in..."

Remember to show, not tell (or at least: tell first, then show). Anyone can say, "I have always been passionate about biology" (and there is no way to prove this statement, on its own, true or false). But only you can say something like:

"I took all of the courses in biology that my university offered, served as the president of our local Society for Biology Students chapter, and am currently involved in a summer field research internship with Professor X of the Biology Department on the effects of climate change on indigenous flora and fauna of the Costa Rican rainforest."⁴

Examples/sentence stems:

- "To prepare myself for graduate study in W field, I majored in X with a focus on Y..."
 - **Note:** This is a good first sentence (topic sentence). It helps the reader understand what the paragraph will be about. Try to start all paragraphs with a crystal-clear topic sentence like this.
- "I have taken courses in X, Y, and Z..."
- "X Professor OR Y course motivated my interest in Z because..."
- "I am interested in exploring X question..." (this sentence describes research interests)
- "I learned about X technique or theory..."

⁴ This example is adapted from Karen Kelsky, the "[A+ Graduate School Essay](#)."

3. The Experiences Paragraph(s)

Describe key professional experiences, research, clinical experiences, shadowing, publication, teaching, TA-ing, leadership, conference presentations, or volunteering **relevant to your field of study/graduate program**. Talk about the experiences in more detail than your résumé allows—focus on achievements, positive feedback, and anecdotes/stories that illustrate your professionalism and excellence.

Depending on the field and your level of accomplishment, you may have several experience paragraphs or none at all. For example, for social work you'll probably need to describe several clinical or field experiences (work or volunteer). On the other hand, for some fields (e.g., math or philosophy), there might be less of an expectation that you did research or other professional-level work as an undergrad (although if you have such experiences, mention them).

For each experience, make sure to include these 3 parts:

1. **Tell** what you did: “In my sophomore year, I worked in Dr. Abdullah’s zebrafish lab researching the topic of... My duties included... The next year, I was third author on a paper reporting our findings on...”
2. **Show** what you learned from it: “This experience taught me the importance of...” OR “I learned valuable skills/techniques, including...”
3. Explain how the **Lesson(s) Learned** from this experience prepared you for graduate school: “This knowledge is essential for an aspiring..., and I look forward to continue developing my skills in graduate school” OR “These skills will serve me well in my future role as a...”

Examples/sentence stems

- “To gain practical experience, I interned at X place under the supervision of Dr. Y. I performed Z duties...”
- “At my job at X, I learned to apply Y theories in a real-life setting...”
- “In the spring semester of my sophomore year, I worked at...” or “...I presented at X conference on the topic of...”

4. The “Why You Chose that Graduate Program” Paragraph

This paragraph is one of the most important. It’s where you show the committee that you’re a good fit for their program. First, research the program. Read the mission and vision statements on the program website. You might look at the courses that are offered and read about the faculty and their research interests. Look for special opportunities that the department offers related to your intended specialty, e.g., a certificate that you can add or a research partnership with a local company/institution.

Then, use that research to write the paragraph. Show the committee that after researching their program carefully, you’ve decided that it’s the best match for your interests and goals (i.e., make each program feel like your number one choice). Discuss specific professors and opportunities that the program offers that match your own research interests or professional specialization(s). If, for example, the program focuses on outreach to underprivileged urban students, and that’s exactly the population that you want to work with, talk about that. Mention the research specialties of specific professors that match your own interests. Even location can be helpful: if you’re specializing in mental health care for urban homeless populations, and the school is located in a big city with a large homeless population, that’s worth stating.

Examples/sentence stems

- “The program at X university suits me perfectly because...”
 - **Note:** After the “because,” be very specific. Remember: show, don’t tell.

- “The program’s focus on X matches my interest in Y, as demonstrated by my work on Z, as discussed earlier.”
- “This program aligns perfectly with my interests because...”
- “What attracts me the most to this program is...”

5. The Goals Paragraph (may be combined with the conclusion paragraph)

Describe your short-term and long-term goals, and how this graduate program will help you accomplish them. Think of short-term goals as goals you want to accomplish in the program and right after—for example, passing a key certification for your field, preparing yourself for the next graduate degree (e.g., using your MA to make yourself competitive for PhD programs), or getting a specific job. For longer-term goals, discuss where you see yourself in 5-10 years and how this program will help you get there.

Examples/sentence stems:

- “My ultimate goal is to work in X area as a Y.”
- “Upon completing this program, I wish to obtain a job in X industry...”

6. Final Paragraph: Conclusion & Statement of Confidence

Reiterate your purpose and your interest in the program. Be confident: tell the admissions committee that you are qualified for the program and that you have the necessary skills to succeed. Doing so achieves two important outcomes: (1) it helps overcome any diffidence or “false modesty” that might appear elsewhere in the statement, and (2) it goes beyond stating what the graduate program will do for you. Instead, it states (indirectly) what you will do for the program—namely, be a good student, graduate on time, and become a successful professional, thus making the program look good!

Examples/sentence stems:

- “I am passionate about X, and I look forward to my career as a Y” **OR** “...in Z field. I am confident that my preparation, experiences, and academic achievements have prepared me to succeed in graduate school, and I hope that W university is the place where I will complete my education.” **OR** “...and W university is the perfect place to prepare me for the next steps in my education.”
- “My education and experiences have prepared me to succeed in graduate study and in my future career. I look forward to the possibility of Y university preparing me for that future.”

Addendum: Diversity

Some universities ask for a separate diversity essay, while others want you to write only one essay that combines the statement of purpose and the diversity statement.⁵ For the “combined” essay, you can:

1. Add a separate diversity paragraph that explains (a) how your own background/identity (e.g., race, gender, ability, socioeconomic status) will contribute to the diversity of the campus, and (b) how that background, plus your experiences in life, work, or school, has given you the cultural competence to work effectively and sensitively with people from diverse backgrounds. This paragraph might go after the “Why you chose that program” paragraph, for example.
2. Instead of a separate paragraph, you could just weave ideas (a) & (b) into your other paragraphs. In the goals paragraph, for example, you can say something like: “In the future, I look forward to mentoring students from under-served backgrounds, who often face barriers in entering our discipline. As a first-generation student of color from a low-income family, I possess the cultural competence to effectively serve students from a diverse range of socioeconomic and cultural backgrounds.” This is a good message to include in any essay, “combined” or not.

⁵ For more on diversity statements and how to write them, see the resources posted on this page: [Admissions Essays](#).