

**Writing an Effective
Statement of Purpose**



...and getting into grad school

Celia M. Elliott
University of Illinois
cmelliot@illinois.edu



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Today we'll look at how to craft a compelling statement of purpose for graduate school applications.

Don't underestimate the importance of an effective statement of purpose—it is often the tie-breaker in decisions on whether to offer or deny admission to graduate study.

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Caveat: One size *does not* fit all

**Write a general “core” document and then
customize it for each application**



**What is required varies from department
to department—READ the instructions**

READ the instructions and follow them witlessly. Pay particular attention to font sizes, margins, and page, word, and character limits.

Address every point mentioned, in the order that they're presented in the instructions. Make it easy for a reader to see that you have included everything that was asked for. (Use the same structure and the same words that are given in the instructions.)

Adhere to page and word limits, if stated. If a page limit is not stated, restrict your SOP to no more than two single-spaced pages in a readable (11-pt. min.) font.

Beware of the pitfalls of word processing. It's heartbreakingly easy to copy what you've written for Cornell into a new document for Ohio State and forget that stray "I really want to come to Cornell University" in the fourth paragraph. But the Buckeyes will be miffed and have doubts about your attention to detail.

The first step—who is your audience?



Answer: senior faculty* from that department

What will make them read beyond your first paragraph?

What will make you stand out from the crowd?

**who have read thousands of applications*

The first step in writing **anything** is to think about who is going to read it. Put yourself in the admission committee's members' shoes. What would your reader find interesting about your goals and experience? What would she like to know more about?

Experienced academic physicists are going to be reading your statement of purpose. DO NOT write **anything** that you do not thoroughly understand!

Then ask yourself questions...



**...write down the answers and
make a sentence outline**

First-order questions:

What have I learned in the last four years? about physics? about myself?

What do I enjoy doing? What do I do well?

What do I know about “research” and why is that a good career choice for me?

What are my career expectations? my dreams?

Second-order questions:

How can I show that I finish what I start?

How can I show that I’m creative?

How can I show that I can overcome adversity?

How can I show that I have an aptitude for physics (or materials science, or electrical engineering, or medicine)? for research?

How can I show that I have what it takes to be successful in this field?

Next, write a strong lead and make it the first sentence of your statement



I fell in love with physics on the Moscow Metro.

“There is nothing more soothing than an earthquake.” Not the first sentence that comes to mind when thinking about fault zones, but it’s true for me; at heart I’ll always be a geophysicist.

When I was 16, a wise man once told me: “I consider you to be a failure—you aren’t a real physicist yet. Real physicists are either addicted to coffee or beer....so you should probably start drinking some coffee.” In my quest to become a real, coffee-drinking physicist, I have learned a lot about how research is conducted, how to think about a problem from the bottom up, how to explain a physical phenomenon to a third-grader, and somewhat importantly, how to make an espresso.

Write like a journalist—capture the reader’s attention with an engaging, intriguing first sentence, the “lead” (or “lede,” in newspaper parlance).

Your lead should differentiate you from the other 400 people who are applying for admission to this graduate program. They *all* want to become physicists to unravel the mysteries of nature.

Return to the subject of your lead in the final paragraph of your statement to “wrap up” the idea and end with a bang.

Objective: Convince an admissions committee that you're a good investment

You have the requisite skills, experience, and desire to succeed

You understand that doing independent research is different from taking classes, and you're excited about research

You have the maturity to work on your own and the discipline to persist when the going gets tough

Over the course of your graduate studies, the department that accepts you will likely spend >\$250k on *your* PhD. Make the admissions committee confident that you are a good investment and will be successful in your research and your teaching.

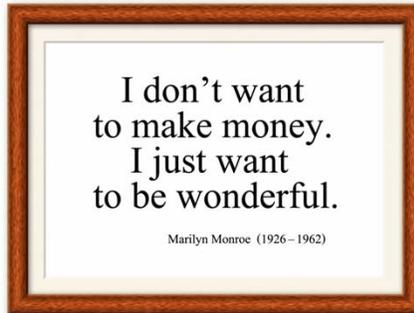
Address the following points:

1. You understand that graduate school is about successfully doing independent research—not about getting good grades in classes.
2. You have the discipline and maturity to manage your time and meet your responsibilities as an employee.
3. You have the skills and interests to be a good teacher as well as a researcher.

BE HONEST. Don't exaggerate or give inappropriate emphasis. Be sincere.

Write it yourself—in your own words. I will give you suggestions and help with proofreading, but I will NOT do the kind of heavy-duty editing that you've come to know (and fear). Your statement of purpose must reflect your voice and your writing abilities, not mine.

Clearly state your short- and long-term career goals—be specific



How will graduate study at this particular department prepare you to achieve those goals?

Examples of short-term goals (what you want to do in the next two years):

- Explore one or two subfields of physics.
- Learn new theoretical approaches or experimental techniques.
- Polish your communications and teaching skills.
- Contribute to a research group.

Examples of long-term goals (where you want to be in 10 years):

- Pursue a career in research in industry or a national laboratory.
- Become a professor.
- Become an entrepreneur in a high-tech enterprise.
- Become a quantitative analyst in the financial industry.
- Contribute to the nation's energy independence.
- Design new biocompatible materials for prosthetics.

Use positive language* and active verbs



Do or do not. There is no "try."

— Master Yoda, *The Return of the Jedi*

***No “wishing” or “trying” or “hoping”—
and especially no “hopefully”!**

Show that you are in charge of your destiny and that you understand that **you** are responsible for your successful graduate career.

“Hopefully” means “full of hope” or “in a hopeful manner”; it does not mean “I hope” or “it is to be hoped.” At least that’s my opinion, and I’m sticking to it.

Bryan Garner (with whom I agree about 90 percent of the time, although he is wrong occasionally) claims that this battle was lost in the 1980s, and I am condemned to old-fuss-budget status for insisting on the distinction. He devotes almost one full page of *Garner’s Modern American Usage* to the controversy. Despite wimping out and accepting the late-20th-century abuse of “hopefully,” Garner ends with the following admonition:

“Fourth, though the controversy swirling around this word has subsided, it is now a SKUNKED TERM. Avoid it in all senses if you’re concerned with your credibility: if you use it in the traditional way, many readers will think it odd; if you use it in the newish way, a few readers will tacitly tut-tut you.”

Bryan A. Garner, *Garner’s Modern American Usage*
(Oxford, Oxford University Press, 2003), pp. 412–413.

Count me among the tut-tutters.

Emphasize your personal and research goals and demonstrate your communications skills

Most committees base their decisions on some combination of your

- 1. Intellectual horsepower (GPA, GRE) *and***
- 2. Research aptitude and promise (SOP, refs)**

Why are you a particularly strong prospect for this department?

Have you had to overcome any unusual obstacles in your life that have contributed to your maturity or intellectual growth?

Communications skills—as in everything else you write, ***consider your audience.*** They may not be experts in your narrow field; don't use jargon; define your terms.

Don't use slang. Convey that you are a serious professional. You don't have to be stuffy, but you have to be professional.

Give specific reasons for

- **Why you're interested in a particular research area**
- **Why you have chosen this particular university to do your training**

Describe past experiences that have shaped your thinking and prepared you for graduate study

Be selective. An SOP is a prospectus, not your memoirs.

The experiences that you highlight should be relevant to **both**

- your personal career goals.

- the opportunities that this particular department offers.

Too little is as bad as too much; you want the committee members to feel that they know enough about you to predict your success confidently .

The motivating "why I want to be a physicist" should be no longer than a paragraph. The admissions committee probably doesn't really care about your trip to the Museum of Science and Industry in first grade or your Cub Scout merit badge in "electricity."

Include experiences that have directly shaped your thinking or that have tested your resolve, but be selective. One compelling example is much more persuasive than a disjointed laundry list of things you've done.

Don't talk too much about classes. Graduate school is about doing independent research, not taking classes. If you **do** talk about classes, emphasize skills that you've acquired, not grades that you got or courses you sat through.

What about deficiencies?

A low grade in a key physics course
Disastrous GRE scores
That one semester you partied too hard
A suboptimal GPA

**“It is better to offer no
excuse than a bad one.”**
—George Washington



Library of Congress (Gilbert Stuart)

Are there any deficiencies in your academic record or test scores that you should explain?

Talk to your adviser and your letter writers about whether an explanation will help or hurt your chances. If the deficiency is so egregious that it casts doubt on your ability to be successful in graduate study, *somebody* has to discuss it. A letter writer may be able to offer a more convincing explanation than you can; he or she at least has the cloak of objectivity.

If you feel compelled to explain the problem, focus on what the experience has taught you, what you've done to overcome the problem, and how you are better equipped to face adversity in the future because of it.

Own your mistakes, and take responsibility for your actions.

“A man can fail many times, but he isn't a failure until he begins to blame somebody else.” John Burroughs, 1837–1921, U.S. naturalist and essayist, influential in the conservation movement in the United States

Map your strengths and interests to that particular department's

Show that you have

- **thoughtfully and analytically investigated the department's strengths and opportunities**
- **found that they fit your interests and goals**
- **planned how you will succeed**

TO REPEAT: Your SOP must be separately tuned to each department you're applying to—sending an identical statement of purpose to different programs is a recipe for disaster

Mention specific faculty members or research projects in which you're interested.

If the department has unique facilities, show that you know about them and explain how learning to use them will prepare you to achieve your overall goals.

Describe your areas of interest

I am interested in optical communications and networks. During my senior year, I worked with Professor Jim Eckstein, who is developing an all-optical frequency shifter that employs a microwave source phase-locked to the optical pulse repetition rate. I believe that the Applied and Engineering Physics Program at Cornell would offer an ideal environment for me to expand these interests. The work that Professor Clifford Pollack is doing on the interaction of ultrashort pulses with fiber optic devices is particularly intriguing. I am also interested in ...

Relate them to your experience and to that specific department

But don't box yourself in...

**Make it clear that you are
flexible and adaptable**

**Explicitly state that you
will welcome exploring
options beyond the ones
you specifically mention**



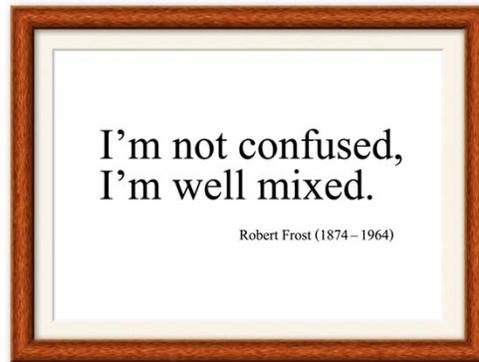
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Do be specific about your general interests and objectives, but don't paint yourself into a corner.

If all you write about is the work being done in Professor Jones' group and how much you want to join that group, and Professor Jones isn't taking any students for two years, the committee may decide to admit somebody else.

Have your adviser review your SOP for physics accuracy

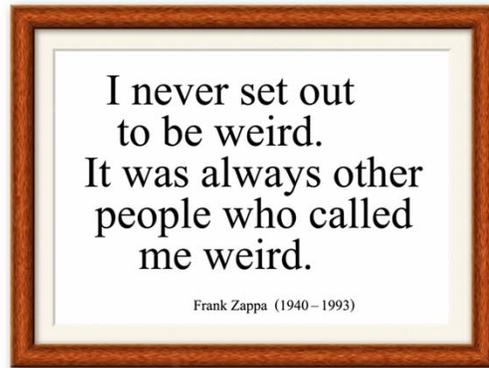
Don't write *anything* about physics or your research that you do not thoroughly understand



Describe your research concisely and emphasize ***what you contributed***.

Don't get bogged down in details—the committee doesn't care how long it took to anneal the sample or how long it took to pump down the chamber. They want to know how you formulate a hypothesis, attack a problem, determine the validity of an approach, know when you're "done," decide what to do next.

**Set yourself apart from the crowd,
but do it prudently and tastefully**



Start your statement of purpose with a strong “lead” that will immediately grab the reader’s interest and attention:

“Physicist—rock star? Rock star—physicist? What do I want to be?”

**Express yourself
lucidly,
elegantly,
concisely[‡]**

**[‡]The likelihood of the spontaneous appearance
of these effects in a first-and-only draft
asymptotically approaches 0.**

Start from an outline of the important points you want to make.

Make sure your outline conforms to the structure given in the instructions for that particular department.

Fill in the outline with real sentences.

Revise.

Give your statement to your adviser or Physics mentor to read and ask for constructive criticism.

Incorporate suggestions and revise. Again.

Spelcheck the final draft...



... or take it to the demon editor for proofreading

With thanks to Lance Cooper for good advice.

Train yourself to run the spellcheck every time you make a change to your document. If something has to be *perfect* (and an SOP **does**), use these old proofreader's tricks:

1. Always proofread from a hard copy. Mistakes will leap off the paper that you'll never see on the screen.
2. Start at the lower right-hand corner of the document and read right to left, bottom to top.

Suggestions for further reading:

C.R. Barrera, "The Graduate School Application,"

http://sciencecareers.sciencemag.org/career_magazine/previous_issues/articles/2006_04_14/noDOI.5474268556298302823

B. Rybarczyk, "Sell Yourself: Guidance for Developing Your Personal Statement for Graduate School Applications,"

http://sciencecareers.sciencemag.org/career_magazine/previous_issues/articles/2006_01_06/noDOI.15679808495969386309

B. Rybarczyk, "Perspective: Sell Yourself—Refining the Personal Statement,"

http://sciencecareers.sciencemag.org/career_magazine/previous_issues/articles/2010_01_08/caredit.a1000005

**A school I'm applying to is asking for
an optional "diversity" statement**

What do they want?

Do I really have to write one?



Caveat Lector:
**These are my personal
conjectures and
opinions and may have
zero coupling to reality**

**As in every other writing task,
ask these two questions first:**

- 1. Who's the audience?
(admissions committee [adcomm])**
- 2. What do they want to know?
What do I want to tell them?**

Why would an adcomm ask for one?

Find out information that they cannot ask for legally

- **identify members of minority groups**
- **identify “underrepresented” applicants (e.g., gender, disability)**

Gauge your sensitivity to inclusiveness; predict how you will interact with others

Get another (truer?) measure of your writing skills

Most are marked “optional”

Why would you want to write one?



- **Allows you to focus your SOP on physics and research and move personal details into a separate document**
- **Gives you another chance to sell yourself**
- **Gives you another chance to showcase what you've learned in P496/499 to set you apart from the other 562 applicants**
- **May qualify you for special financial support or increase your admit chances**

Seems to be a bifurcation of DSs

**How admitting you will increase the
department's diversity**

- **ethnic background/minority status**
- **gender (if underrepresented)**
- **physical disability**
- **first-generation grad student**

**How you value diversity; will you respect
others and contribute to inclusiveness?**