

SOP Writing - Part 2

A couple of weeks back, we talked about the "pen and pad" routine to introspect about things to write in your Statement of Purpose (SoP). This week, we will tell you how to transfer your thoughts into a first draft. We do not intend to provide you with a sample structure in this article, but merely explain the look and feel of the first draft.

The Structure

After going through a thorough pen and pad routine, it is important that you prioritize all the points you have shortlisted for your statement. Once you have ranked your points in a priority-based fashion, you should form a skeleton for your essay. The skeleton should be a description of the main point you wish to convey in each paragraph. Once you have the skeleton ready, your essay is simply (well it isn't really that simple!) a matter of padding the main points with supporting evidence.

The Beginning

The most important part of your SoP is the beginning. When you set out to write your essay, please remember that any good department, on an average, gets thousands of graduate school applications. Some of these are screened out at the first hurdle on the basis of criteria like GPA, GRE/TOEFL scores, etc. However, hundreds of applications still make it past the initial screening and appear in front of the professors or the admissions committee for consideration.

With so many essays to be read and evaluated, you only have a minute to make an impression. That is where the beginning of your essay becomes important. You must get the reader hooked onto your essay from the first sentence, rather like the text of a novel you cannot put down. Most people begin their essay with a quote or a banal observation, which is the best-known fact in the field. Please avoid such beginnings like the plague! The best beginnings are those that are smart, insightful and original.

For example, consider the following sample first paragraph:

I first came across the challenge of XXX system design while developing the YYY system. To save on AA, I opted for a design that eliminated more than 60% of the computations involved in an intermediate step. What got me hooked onto XXX was my intuitive use of a more advanced concept that was only discussed later in class. As I delved deeper into the field, I realized my interest in working further in XXX, and so I am applying to graduate school with my intended focus on XXX.

This paragraph immediately hooks the knowledgeable reader because it talks about a personal experience, which is unique to this applicant. It shows that the applicant has worked hands-on with whatever system is begin discussed; and further illustrates his/her ability to make smart design choices about the system design. It also logically describes the start of his/her interest in the field and relates it to his/her choice of applying to grad school.

Essential Content

While the content of the SoP must be original, there are some questions, which one is expected to answer in every essay. Having said that, the combination of answers to these questions is usually unique for every candidate, making it all the more essential for applicants to be honest in their statements. Here are a list of questions one is expected to answer (in no particular order):

1. What are your objectives behind applying for graduate school, and what are your plans during graduate study and also afterwards?
2. What does your background comprise of? The candidate should mention his/her academic as well as relevant professional experience while answering this question. Remember that PS-1 and PS-2 also count as professional experience.
3. What is your motivation to apply to graduate school? Why are you interested in the field you are applying to? This is especially important for aspirations to Ph.D. programs.
4. What is your experience in the field you are applying to? For Ph.D. candidates, it is almost mandatory to mention one's past research experience. For Masters candidates too, mentioning research is important.
5. Why are you applying to XYZ university? More importantly, why should they hire you as a graduate student? At this point, it is also useful to highlight your self-perceived qualities in a couple of sentences (without sounding pompous or arrogant!)

The Flow and the Language

Do remember that the SoP is a story of your research life. Like all good stories, a good SoP should also have a smooth and interesting flow. Every word in your SoP should contribute something to the story you are trying to tell. The flow should be such that the amount of relevant information conveyed per line of text is as high as possible.

One of the most important things to consider is to maintain a thread of logical thought throughout the essay. A common mistake people make is to write an incredible i^{th} paragraph, an incredible $(i+1)^{\text{th}}$ paragraph but with NO CONTINUITY between the two. Continuity is a big part of the flow of your essay and it is important to pay special attention to it.

Remember that the language you use needs to be both concise and precise, and that the essay sticks to the prescribed word limit. For instance, talking about a tertiary APOGEE project in detail is fine if you don't have a word limit but is a terrible idea if your essay must be less than 300 words.

Additionally, you must state your intentions in the clearest possible terms, for fear of giving the impression that you are confused. Be specific and concrete whenever you can. For instance, you should say "I am interested in Statistical Process Control or Process Optimization"

instead of saying something generic like "I am interested in Chemical or Mechanical Engineering".

Finally, do not make the mistake of making use of your new-found GRE vocabulary all over the place in your essay. Fancy words stick out like a sore thumb, especially if you don't use them appropriately. The best essays are ones that use simple, concise and appropriately expressive language; not the ones that use fancy words.

After the First Draft

Although the first draft is often the biggest hurdle in writing an SoP, your work doesn't get any easier after it is ready. The best way to write the first draft is to start writing after the pen and paper phase. After you have this draft ready, you can take a look at sample SoPs to pick up some general pointers about structuring and expression.

Along with self-evaluation, it is also important to get external feedback from multiple sources. Ask your friends, wingies and seniors to review your essay and be brutal in deconstructing it. Remember that the best feedback often is the one which makes you feel you wrote the worst essay in the world. Once you have the feedback, it is just a matter of iterating over your essay till you converge to a version you are happy with.