

WRITING A WINNING STATEMENT OF PURPOSE
DEPARTMENT OF PSYCHOLOGY, SAN JOSE STATE UNIVERSITY

I. Determine your purpose in writing the statement

Usually the purpose is to persuade the admissions committee that you are an applicant they should choose. You may want to show that you have the ability and motivation to succeed in your field, or you may want to show the committee that, on the basis of your experience, you are the kind of candidate who will do well in the field. Whatever the purpose, it must be explicit to give coherence to the whole statement.

1. Pay attention to the purpose throughout the statement so that extraneous material is left out.
2. Pay attention to the audience (committee) throughout the statement. Remember, your audience is made up of faculty members who are experts in their field. They want to know *that* you can think as much as *what* you think.

II. Determine the content of your statement

Be sure to answer any direct questions fully. Analyze the questions or guidance statements for the essay completely and answer all parts.

For example: "What are the strengths and weaknesses in setting and achieving goals and working through people?" In this question there are actually six parts to be answered 1) strengths in setting goals, 2) strengths in achieving goals, 3) strengths in working through people, 4) weaknesses in setting goals, 5) weaknesses in achieving goals and 6) weaknesses in working through people. Pay attention to small words. Notice: This example question says *through* people not with people, if it says *with* people, answer that way.

Usually graduate and professional schools are interested in the following:

1. *Your purpose in graduate study.* This means you must have thought this through before you try to answer the question.
2. *The area of study in which you wish to specialize.* This requires that you know the field well enough to make such decision.
3. *Your future use of your graduate study.* This will include your career goals and plans for your future.
4. *Your special preparation and fitness for study in the field.* This is the opportunity to relate your academic background with your extracurricular experience to show how they unite to make you a special candidate.
5. *Any problems or inconsistencies in your records or scores* such as a bad semester. Be sure to explain in a positive manner and justify the explanation. Since this is a rebuttal argument, it should be followed by a positive statement of your abilities.
6. *Any special conditions that are not revealed elsewhere* in the application such as a large (35 hour a week) work load outside of school. This too should be followed with a positive statement about yourself and your future.
7. You may be asked, "Why do you wish to attend this school?" This requires that you have done your research about the school and know what its special appeal is to you.
8. Above all this, the statement is to contain information about you as a person. They know nothing about you that you don't tell them. *You* are the subject of the statement.

III. Determine your approach and the style of the statement

There is no such thing as "the perfect way to write a statement." There is only the one that is best for you and fits your circumstances.

1. There are some things the statement should not be:

- a. Avoid the "what I did with my life" approach. This was fine for grade school essays on "what I did last summer." It is not good for a personal statement.
- b. Equally elementary is the approach "I've always wanted to be a _____." This is only appropriate if it also reflects your current career goals.

- c. Also avoid a statement that indicates your interest in psychology is because of your own personal psychotherapy or a family member's psychological disturbance. While this may have motivated many of us to go on to graduate study in psychology, this is not what your audience is necessarily looking for in your statement.
- d. These are some things the statement should do:

- (1) It should be objective yet self-revelatory. Write directly and in a straightforward manner that tells about your experience and what it means to you. Do not use "academese" or jargon.
- (2) It should form conclusions that explain the value and meaning of your experiences such as: (1) what you learned about yourself; (2) about your field; (3) about your future goals; and (4) about your career concerns.
- (3) It should be specific. Document your conclusions with specific instances or draw your conclusions as the result of individual experience. See the list of general Words to Avoid Using without Explanation listed below.
- (4) It should be an example of careful persuasive writing.

CONSIDERTIONS ABOUT FORM:

- (1) Keep to the Page Limit Number!!! Reviewers have to read hundreds of these applications, don't overburden them with extra pages.
- (2) Do not leave in typographical errors. You don't want to be taken less seriously due to a typo, rite? (kidding)

WORDS TO AVOID USING WITHOUT EXPLANATION

| | | |
|--------------------------|-------------------|------------------|
| Significant | Invaluable | appealing to me |
| interesting | exciting, excited | appealing aspect |
| challenging | enjoyable, enjoy | I like it |
| satisfying, satisfaction | I can contribute | it's important |
| rewarding | valuable | fascinating |
| gratifying | helpful | appreciate |
| meaningful | useful | helping people |
| meant a lot to me | feel good | I like to help |
| stimulating | remarkable | people |
| incredible | | |

GETTING STARTED EXERCISES:

A. Recalling and analyzing experience - write short paragraphs on the following:

1. Pick a memorable accomplishment in your life. What did you do? How did you accomplish it?
2. What sort of important activities have you engaged in? With whom? what role did you play?
3. What work experiences have you had? What was your job? responsibility? How did you carry it out?
 - Now look over your paragraphs. What skills and qualities do you see that you possess? For example, consider working with others. Were you a leader? important "team" player?
 - Looking at what you have found, you can now look for skills and qualities that will help you in graduate school. What factors stand out?
 - NOTE: You will undoubtedly have more material than you can use. This is good, but you need to make strategic choices.

B. Your career goals - write two short paragraphs:

1. What career have you chosen? What factors formed this decision?
2. What evidence shows that this is a correct choice? That is, how can you show that this choice is realistic? (Personal experience in the field is a good place to begin.)