

Things you need to know to write an effective **Statement of purpose**



All graduate schools request some version of the statement of purpose. This is **THE MOST IMPORTANT** component of your graduate application. You should plan to spend lots of time drafting this document, getting feedback from trusted advisors, and revising, revising, revising. Start early!

The Statement of Purpose should address:

1) How did you get interested in the specialty of psychology that you are applying for?

- a. You might discuss some of your favorite coursework or theories in psychology/counseling and/or relevant research or internship experiences.
- b. Be careful about oversharing about personal or familial mental health issues as reasons why you're interested in psychology. Some review committees see these as red flags!

2) How are you prepared you for graduate study?

DISCUSS RESEARCH EXPERIENCE (e.g., Psy 375 Advanced Methods course; independent research)

- a. Discuss your project in detail. How did you select your research question? What did you hypothesize? How did you conduct your study and collect participants? Most importantly, discuss your findings and what you learned as a result of doing this work. Is there anything you would change or new research ideas that emerged as a result of your project?
- b. Be sure to discuss any specific skills you have gained (e.g., PsycINFO, Qualtrics, SPSS, Excel).

DISCUSS INTERNSHIP/VOLUNTEER EXPERIENCE (e.g., Psy 497 course; relevant work/volunteering)

- a. Discuss your internship / work / volunteer experience in detail. Who were you working for and for how long? What was your specific role and responsibilities? Use stories or anecdotes to describe poignant memories or learning opportunities from your experience.
- b. Be sure to discuss any specific skills you have gained (e.g., group therapy; note-taking; case management).

3) How will this graduate program help you meet your goals? What topics are of most interest to you?

- a. Why are you interested in attending this program? What is unique about the program that you like?
- b. Is there a specialization that you are most interested in? What interests you about that specialization?
- c. What will you do after you earn your graduate degree? Discuss career goals/plans specifically.
- d. **ESSENTIAL FOR PhD PROGRAMS:** What faculty members are you particularly interested in working with and why? How does their research match your interests?

IMPORTANT WRITING TIPS

1. **Don't write your autobiography!** A statement of purpose is not an autobiography. While it can be okay to address some aspects of your personal life and how you've overcome obstacles, you should instead focus on the *key moments in your academic life*, using them to show how you are a unique, qualified applicant to their graduate program. Avoid discussing personal or familial mental health issues in too much detail.
2. **Show much more than you tell.** "Show" your skills and abilities, don't just "list" them. This is not a resume, so you need not list every job you've ever had or every skill/technical ability you have. Instead, describe your work/research/internship/volunteer experiences using specific examples that provide "evidence" of your skills and abilities.

Examples:

✘ **"Telling:"** In my internship, I ran group therapy and took case notes.

✓ **"Showing":** Describe a time when you ran a group therapy session. How did you prepare? What happened? What did you learn? Why do you want to continue to do this? By describing the scenario in more detail, you go beyond just listing the ability to "run group therapy".

✘ **"Telling:"** In my Advanced Methods course, I designed and ran my own study, collected participants, and analyzed my data. I know how to use Qualtrics and SPSS.

✓ **"Showing":** Describe your research study from start to finish. Why did you select the research question you did? What hypotheses did you make? Discuss how you collected your data (Qualtrics survey; participant sampling). What were your specific findings? What did you learn? Would you change anything?

3. **Do not just list personal attributes.** You want your readers to *infer* your characteristics from the detailed description of your experiences.

✘ **"Telling:"** I am an ambitious, goal-oriented person. I love helping people.

✓ **"Showing":** Ambitious? Discuss your stellar grades and achievements. Discuss pursuing opportunities that other students haven't taken advantage of. A leader? Describe clubs or organizations where you have taken on a leadership role or promotions at work. Love helping others? Discuss work or internship experiences that illustrate that love, compassion, and empathy.

4. **Demonstrate that you have a clear sense of the program you are applying to.** Discuss the unique features of the program that appeal to you. [For PhD programs] **Identify the professors** you are interested in working with and explain why (they should have matching or closely related research interests). This means you will have had to have researched these professors prior to applying! Demonstrate that you have a clear idea of what **area of research** you would like to explore as a grad student. If you cannot do this, you are not ready for a PhD program.

5. **Address the prompt.** Be sure you have answered all questions asked.

6. **Revise, revise, revise!** Have as many trusted people review it as possible, including your letter writers!