

Writing the Graduate School Statement of Purpose

The statement of purpose is one of the most important parts of a graduate school application. This statement differs in many ways from any essay you have previously written, including your undergraduate application essays. Here are some general tips for writing a statement of purpose for a research-focused psychology or neuroscience master's or Ph.D. program (note that some of these suggestions may be more relevant for certain programs than others; ask your thesis advisor or other faculty for more specific guidance):

- In most cases, your statement will be read and evaluated by a committee of faculty members, not admissions officers. Write for a scholarly audience in the field to which you are applying (or subfield, especially for Ph.D. programs).
- Portray yourself as a *scholar*, not just a student. Through your statement, aim to demonstrate serious engagement with interesting ideas. One way to do this is by discussing a current problem or question in the field and the ways in which you hope to address it through your graduate research. You're not expected to have all the answers at this point; more important is showing that you can ask good questions and have some ideas for how to tackle them.
- From the perspective of the graduate program, it's a huge risk to admit a student with little or no meaningful research experience. This is where you have an advantage over students from many other schools; most of you will have completed a *thesis*, not just done menial labor in someone's lab. In describing the research you've done, clearly explain why you did it, what you learned, and how the experience led to or furthered your current research interests and plans for graduate study.
- Describe your interests in a way that shows you have some specific ideas you'd like to pursue, but don't pigeonhole yourself too much. Feel free to describe a specific study you'd like to conduct, but don't make it sound like this is the only kind of work you ever want to do. Many faculty are looking for students who can take their lab in a slightly new direction rather than merely assisting with existing projects, but it's also important to recognize that your interests will change and mature over your graduate years.
- Show, don't tell. Avoid offering a laundry list of intellectual and personal qualities (e.g., "I am motivated and have strong critical thinking skills, and I have many interesting ideas about how attitudes affect behavior."). These qualities should come through in your discussion of current issues in the field and your research trajectory.
- Identify specific faculty members as potential mentors and clearly explain how your interests dovetail with their current research projects. Many faculty prefer a student with a strong research fit over someone with slightly higher grades or test scores. Make sure that the faculty members you mention are actually *in* the department to which you are applying; "affiliated" faculty often have no say in the admissions process.
- Keep in mind that it's a statement of *purpose*, not a personal statement. While a brief personal story or "hook" can be effective if the connection to your scholarly ideas and interests is clear, it's generally best to avoid childhood anecdotes and stories about overcoming personal obstacles.