

# Writing a Statement of Purpose or Statement of Research Interest

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## Rhetorical Purpose

A statement of purpose or statement of research interest is often required for graduate school applications, where it takes its place alongside of other materials. Such a statement, or one similar to it, can also be part of NSF grant and fellowship applications. The purpose of this statement is to give the admissions committee or granting agency a sense of your research interests and/or research agenda. Think of it as an intellectual or research autobiography—one that gives a sense of your mind-in-action and frames your recent academic and research experiences as setting the stage for your next steps as a professional. Such statements also serve a secondary purpose: they function as a writing sample.

## Tone, Content, and Audience

This statement is not to be confused with a personal statement, which can often reach back into childhood and contains more intimate details about your interests, personality, and any challenges you may have faced. Rather, a statement of purpose or research interest is intentionally more professional—that is to say, more academic and research oriented. Any personal references should serve to create a profile of yourself as a professional.

Although it is tempting to think of your statement as a description or narrative, it is best to think of it as a veiled *argument*: you are making the case that the logical next step in your career path is graduate school or the particular grant/fellowship for which you are applying. As you talk about specific research interests and experiences, be sure to place them in the context of a larger argument about your suitability for graduate work or the value and likely success of your grant project. Be aware that scientists outside of your immediate field or subfield will likely read your statement, so your statement needs to be persuasive to both the narrow specialist and scientists in fields somewhat removed from your own.

It is important, within reason, to customize your statement of purpose or statement of research interest to the particular institution or to the specifications of the grant agency RFP (request for proposals). For our purposes, it is sufficient for you to identify one or two subfields in which you are interested. Avoid sweeping generalizations, clichéd statements, or pie-in-the-sky idealism; you can do so by grounding your assertions through concrete evidence and examples that show you are ready for your next immediate steps as a young professional.

## **Format and Length**

Statements of purpose or research interest are relatively short, so they need to be tightly constructed and on-task. The typical length is 500-1000 words, or roughly 2-4 double-spaced pages.

- The opening paragraph can be short and serves to focus on your goals as they relate to graduate school or a fellowship or grant. You may offer a short, attention-getting story or anecdote, but don't be too creative or quirky. Often a straightforward professional tone works best.
- The broad middle section (multiple paragraphs) should make a compelling case that your goals are well-founded and that your career trajectory, as evidenced through particular experiences and personal characteristics, is a good fit with the particular graduate institution or with the specific grant or fellowship. Pay close attention to stated or implied selection criteria or rating systems for judging your statement.
- The closing paragraph can be short, and serves to reaffirm your commitment to and preparation for your professional goals.

## **Further Resources**

<https://career.berkeley.edu/Article/041112b-so.stm>

[http://sciencecareers.sciencemag.org/career\\_magazine/previous\\_issues/articles/2006\\_01\\_06/noD.OI.15679808495969386309](http://sciencecareers.sciencemag.org/career_magazine/previous_issues/articles/2006_01_06/noD.OI.15679808495969386309)

<http://www.theleadershipalliance.org/matriarch/documents/TIPSGuide.pdf>  
(see section on Statement of Purpose)