

## Tips on Writing Statement of Purpose for Undergraduate Research Fellowship Applications

**Personal statements and statements of purpose are perhaps the most important parts of applications.** There is little you can do to change your GPA or your curriculum vitae (the academic version of a resume), but these statements can be written in many different ways, emphasizing different aspects of your interests, goals, personality, and style. They present the unique qualities that make you the candidate that a committee wants to select, and a good statement of purpose can also affect those professors who will write letters of recommendation for you. Consequently, you need to pay particular attention to their composition.

**Read the description of the essay carefully, and make sure that you answer the question in the way that it is worded.** Pay attention to the word length indicated in the instructions and do not exceed it. These essays are usually very short, and you need to be concise and strategic about which interests or goals you decide to highlight.

Statements of purpose are the committee's introduction to you as a scholar and potential colleague. These essays require you to clearly describe:

- Your intellectual interests
- Your research experience
- Your plans for the future

**A statement of purpose or interest is very different than the personal essay you wrote for undergraduate applications.** It is NOT a general biographical sketch, nor is it primarily a personal reflection upon your decisions to enter a field, nor does it focus on your extracurricular activities (unless those activities pertain to your scholarly interests).

**Keep in mind that you are writing to a particular audience, usually of faculty in your field** (unlike your undergraduate admissions essay, which was directed to a general admissions' committee). In other words, if you are applying for a chemistry research program, you will be addressing fellow chemists, for history, fellow historians, etc.

**Be prepared to produce many drafts.** These essays may be difficult to write because you must make strategic decisions on how to present yourself in such a short amount of space. Allow yourself a lot of time for drafts, and do not get frustrated because of the many times you will need to rewrite. Making multiple revisions is an inevitable part of the process.

**Show your drafts to faculty members, particularly those writing letters of recommendation, fellow students, and others.** Accept criticisms with as little defensiveness as possible. On occasion you will get conflicting opinions on the presentation of your ideas and you will have to decide which direction to take. If you have a leading faculty mentor, you may defer to his or her opinion over others.

**There are many ways to open your essay,** many choices on the order in which to present your involvement in the field, many different aspects of your academic career to highlight. However, many people get hung up on producing an exciting opening. In your initial drafting process,

experiment with presenting yourself and highlighting your interests in many different ways before settling on which approach is most compelling. You can experiment by avoiding any opening and writing the body of your essay; or you can experiment with trying to write one short paragraph that concisely says everything. One technique is to write a brief paragraph or a few sentences describing your different academic pursuits without any regard to a beginning, and then experiment with different ways of tying them together.

An opening that uses an anecdote about your interest in the field is very popular, so much so that it may come across as trite, unless it is very powerful, appropriate, and short. Opening with a personal narrative (e.g., how I became passionate about this subject) can be effective, but, again, this approach is very popular and even overdone (“When I was six I was hit on the head at the playground, and ever since then I’ve wanted to be a neuroscientist”). If you do use personal narrative, make it very brief and to the point. Don’t spend half your essay relating a story. Another popular approach is to present a chronology of your development. Another possibility is to open with at the most recent level of your development, such as the advanced research or honors thesis you are currently completing, and then describe how you got to that point in the field. Often, an analysis of some aspect of your research interest or of your own development can provide you with a way to discuss your overall development.

**Do not present a complete list of courses in the field you have taken or an undifferentiated, comprehensive description of your interest.** You will need to make strategic decisions on how you present your interest, deciding what is primary, secondary, etc., and making such decisions may be difficult, even painful.

**Avoid overly technical jargon and abbreviations.** Technical terms should be familiar to a broad committee of people working in the field. They should not be so specific that only people working in that exact sub-discipline can understand it. For instance, “I synthesized polystyrene-poly(ethylene)glycol graft copolymers for use in fuel cells” is general enough that a committee of chemists would understand it, but “I prepared PS-*co*-PEG for use in AAEM membranes” would be too specific and contain too many abbreviations.

**Avoid excessive, unreasonable enthusiasm.** Extreme effusion backfires. For example, statements such as “I love 19th century British literature so much that I feel that I live in the 19th century” or “I AM Nietzsche” or “I live and breathe sea urchins” suggest possible psychosis, not reasonable enthusiasm. For the most part, exclamation points should be avoided.

**Check your writing style for unconscious attempts at forced sincerity or authenticity.** For example, review “triples” or “doubles” to see if they are indeed necessary and reveal important information. For example, if you write, “I am dedicated, hard working, and committed,” you should note that dedicated and committed are almost identical and the repetition has the effect of undermining your sincerity.

**Be conscious of inflammatory or biased language, and avoid discussing religion or politics.** You may hold strong opinions or be motivated by particular causes. Do not mask your opinions, but be aware of presenting yourself in a tactful, judicious fashion. You can express various views in such a way as to present yourself as having an opinion yet remaining open-minded.

**No jokes.** Humor and sarcasm depend upon a shared field of reference – and you have no idea if you and your readers have such a mutual understanding. Most of the time, self-deprecating humor comes across as simply self-deprecating, and sarcasm can easily be misunderstood.

**Do not write what you think the committee wants to read. Be yourself.** Often, applicants believe they should write according to some image of proper "academic" seriousness or style. Your personal style and passion should shine through the essay. Although this is a formal essay and you should avoid slang or overly casual constructions, its tone should be engaging, even personable (though not personal).

**Proofread the essay, proofread the essay, proofread the essay.** Have your friends proofread it. While this is not a grammar test, excessive typos and other mechanical errors indicate poor work habits and do not make a good impression.

**Fonts, spacing, etc.** Follow all guidelines on font type, size, spacing, margins, etc. If no guidelines are given, use a 12 point font and pick a fairly common font such as Times New Roman, Arial, or Calibri.

**After all this advice and warning, keep in mind that this is actually an exciting process.** You are attempting to present a concise, coherent intellectual portrait of yourself. In the process of writing the statement of purpose, you may actually gain a clearer vision of your interests and goals, and it will also provide practice for graduate and professional school applications.