



RICE

# **Writing your Statement of Purpose**

Presenter:

Susan Cates, Ph.D.

Assistant Chair of Biosciences

- I. Components of the Statement of Purpose (SOP).
- II. Examples from good and not so good SOPs.
- III. Multiple Applications, same SOP?
- IV. Talking about the SOP in the Interview.

## Statement of Purpose (SOP).

This is why you spent years in English classes learning how to write a 5 paragraph essay.

Format information and suggestions can be found on multiple web sites.

1. Paragraph 1, introduce your thesis statement
2. Paragraphs 2 – 4, support the thesis statement
3. Paragraph 5, Summarize your supporting points and tie them to your thesis statement.

Limit yourself to 1 page if possible, 2 at most.

Paragraph 1, introduce your thesis statement

- 1<sup>st</sup> sentence should be engaging – this is the reader's first impression of you.
- Last sentence is your thesis statement; answers the question, “Why do I want to be a Ph.D., M.D., J.D., etc.?”

Ask yourself the question and list all your answers.

“Why do I want to be a Ph.D., M.D., J.D., etc. in Physics, Biology, Law, Medicine, Engineering, Art, Architecture, Music?”

## Examples – you tell me

“Why do I want to be...?”

I was diagnosed with [a serious disease] during my freshmen year at [my] University. My GPA suffered and fell to 1.5 by the end of the freshman year. In hindsight, I should have taken a leave of absence from school. I stubbornly refused to allow my illness to prevent my education.  
[explanation continues for 2 more paragraphs]



RICE

## Examples – you tell me

“Why do I want to be...?”

Some of my most enduring childhood memories center around holidays at the beach, where there was the inexorable notion that time stood still while we were near to nature’s heart. I had a perpetual sense that I was not alone, but a part of everything I could see and feel –paraphrasing William Shakespeare– the whole world was my kin.

## Examples – you tell me

“Why do I want to be...?”

I want to create things, but I want to make them on the scale of biological machinery. With this goal in mind, I’m particularly interested in the type of synthetic biology which involves using parts from natural biology to produce new results...This branch of synthetic biology, with technology like genetic circuits, can provide incredible opportunity to build useful things with biological parts. With nearly limitless applications in industry, healthcare, and perhaps even everyday life, I believe that this emerging field will change the world and I want to be a part of that change.

## Most common writing mistakes

- the mechanics of writing a statement
- lack of substance versus TMI

## Examples – you tell me

“Why do I want to be...?”

**My half-brother...is severely autistic.** He does not understand how to conjugate English verbs or perform addition or subtraction. Instead of holding down a job and raising a family like other thirty-eight-year-olds, he spends his days pacing back-and-forth, tapping sticks in our backyard. As a child, I was fascinated with the why behind [my brother's] condition. Why is his behavior different from mine? Why is he physically fit yet mentally impaired? As I grew up, I began to ask more fundamental questions. Why do related individuals exhibit a wide variety of traits? How is behavior determined by our genome? **Even in my adulthood, these questions hardly have complete answers, which is why I decided to pursue genetics as a career.**

## Paragraphs 2 – 4

- Pick important points that support the thesis statement and build 2 – 3 paragraphs around them.

### **Paragraph 2 = Pertinent Experience in Field**

- internships,
- your major,
- your favorite courses,
- your senior honor's project, etc.
- you can separate paragraphs by type of experience

**The admissions committee's number one interest is what qualifies you for their program.**

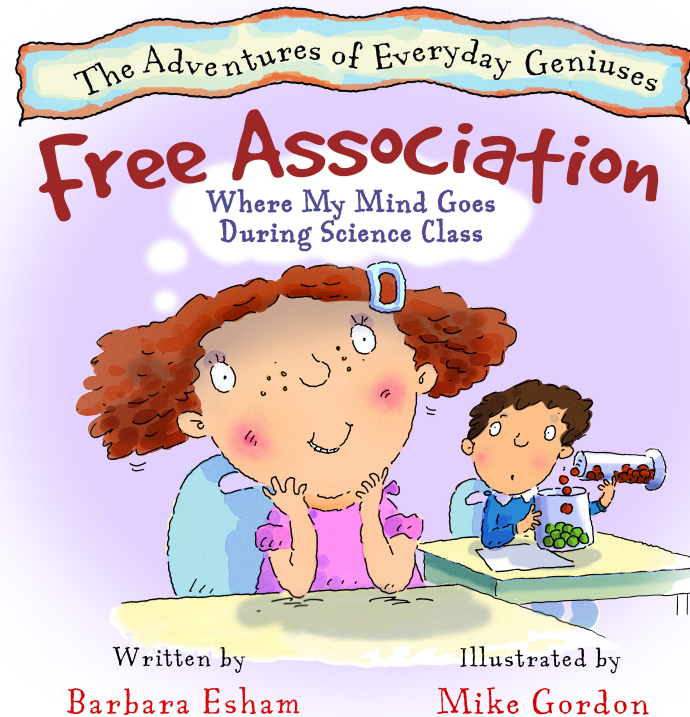
When discussing your experience, consider:

- What is pertinent to your field?
- How much should you mention outside of your field?
- Where do you place these two different types of experience in the personal statement?



RICE

## Supporting paragraphs



If you are having trouble deciding what to include/exclude, I suggest you list whatever comes to mind in free association mode, then refine your list.



# RICE Supporting paragraphs

Won photography contest

Political Activist

Job at Starbuck's

Illness/accident/life altering event

Internship – industrial, professional, research

Entered Science Fair every year in high school

Senior Thesis Project

My dad is a physician

Eagle Scout Award

Community Service

Conclusion statement - confidently summarizes what you wish to do in your graduate program and afterward.

## Closing paragraph

- Your conclusion summarizes your supporting points and ties them to your thesis statement.

In my career, I want to contribute to our society's ability to adapt and support diversity, both biological and cultural, around the world. Being a researcher and educator would be a fulfilling job. As a researcher, I want to continue to do work that improves our basic understanding of ecosystems and that can be applied to actionable conservation tools. I know that there is a highly competitive job market, but I think that one of the biggest impacts that one can have on the world is through education.

Limit yourself to 1 page if possible, 2 at most.

1. Comb your essay for repetitive words and phrases; delete one if possible, rephrase one if both instances are critical.
2. Give a copy to 2 – 3 friends, ask them to help consolidate.
3. Ask proofreaders to identify the most interesting sentence in each paragraph. If this doesn't turn out to be either the first or last sentence, consider reorganization of that paragraph.

Limit yourself to 1 page if possible, 2 at most.

I am applying to the University of Illinois at Chicago's Computer Science program because of **my intense and long-term interest in the research** being performed at the Electronic Visualization Laboratory. I have been fascinated by electronic music since the age of thirteen, and, as my education progressed, this fascination developed into a keen interest in the synthesis, processing and representation of all kinds of signals. In addition, I have spent *considerable* amounts of time speculating (fantasizing, if I were to be pejorative) about the applications and functional specifics of immersive virtual-reality systems. **I discovered the Electronic Visualization Lab's YouTube channel around two years ago while combing the internet for information after attending a show of really great early electronic video art.** I was delighted to find (in addition to a source of really cool videos) an institution that combined research in a number of my academic interests with a history of involvement in the arts. Since then, I have been **keenly interested in pursuing a graduate degree** at UIC performing research in the EVL.

Limit yourself to 1 page if possible, 2 at most.

I discovered the Electronic Visualization Lab's YouTube channel around two years ago while combing the internet for information after attending a show of really great early electronic video art. I have been fascinated by electronic music since the age of thirteen, and, as my education progressed, this fascination developed into a keen interest in the synthesis, processing and representation of all kinds of signals. In addition, I have spent *considerable* amounts of time speculating (fantasizing, if I were to be pejorative) about the applications and functional specifics of immersive virtual-reality systems. I was delighted to find (in addition to a source of really cool videos) an institution that combined research in a number of my academic interests with a history of involvement in the arts. Since then, I have been **keenly** interested in pursuing a graduate degree at UIC performing research in the EVL.

## Multiple applications

Do you use the same statement of purpose for all applications?

## Examples – you tell me

“Why do I want to be...?”

My only goal in life has been to get a [different degree than the one applied for] from [different university than the one applied to].

## Examples – you tell me

Specific: I'm particularly interested in the type of synthetic biology which involves using parts from natural biology to produce new results.

Generic: My extremely positive experience working in [research advisor's] lab has influenced me toward a career in academia and elevated my passion for research. I too want to inspire undergrads to pursue research careers and kindle their passion for science. When I teach a course, I want to integrate cutting-edge research into the material, and feed students' appetites for wonder. Acceptance to [the graduate] program will help me realize my career and life goals.



# RICE



Should you mention specific faculty or projects or departments in your statement of purpose?

## PROS

Can communicate specific and sincere interest.

Conveys a clear picture of your areas of interest.

## CONS

If you are too specific, it can impose limitations.

Statement will need to be updated for each application.

## Talking about the SOP in the Interview - consistency

Most common questions in a graduate or professional school interview:

What are your interests?

What will you do with your degree?

What is your experience?



## Talking about the SOP in the Interview

- Be consistent with your application statements when communicating goals verbally.
- Show your enthusiasm and curiosity for your subject.
- Be confident and optimistic about your career goals.

