

# Statement of Purpose (SOP) Resource

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# Frequently Asked Questions (FAQs)

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After years of learning to write within academic conventions, writing a Statement of Purpose can seem daunting, largely because it's about you—something we're often trained to avoid in academic writing. Writing an SoP is best approached as an exercise in clarifying your motivations, goals and personal narrative in a manner that communicates why you are the best candidate for a programme and why the programme is the best fit for you.

This guide is designed to help you get started with writing an SoP, framing your personal narrative and navigating common roadblocks as you write your SoP. For further support, you may join one of our workshops. Or if you are at Ashoka University, you can bring your draft in for personalised feedback.

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# 1. GETTING STARTED

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## 1. Why is an SoP important?

The SoP demonstrates how your background, goals, and experiences align with the programme, answering the question: “How am I a good fit in this programme at this institute?” After the FAQs, we have included [a short worksheet](#) with targeted prompts and examples to help you write portions of your draft.

## 2. How do I start my SoP?

Effective ways to start include: opening with a compelling anecdote or quote, referencing an event that sparked an academic motivation, or describing your latest project.

**Eg:** One could begin with a memory of witnessing the 2014 Kashmir floods, sparking an interest in **environmental science informed by disaster management and preparation**. One might focus on how challenges at the community level in the wake of the floods might have shaped one’s understanding of **unique development needs, resilience, and responses** in vulnerable regions.

## 3. How can I incorporate quotes in my SoP?

While quotes can enhance your SoP, ensure they’re deeply relevant to your field and reflect your unique interests. Avoid using them as filler; instead, choose a quote that genuinely influenced your perspective or goals. Briefly connect it to your journey, letting it support, instead of overshadow, your narrative voice.

**Poor example:** William Shakespeare once said, ““This above all: to thine own self be true.” I, too, inspired by his words, aspire to embrace my passion for economic policy.

**Helpful example:** Mira Nair’s words: “I know what it's like to be in one place and dream of another”, fuel my fascination with transnational cinema as sites of in-betweenness that diasporic filmmakers attempt to negotiate and reimagine. It is this negotiation that I would like to focus on in my Film Studies course.

#### **4. How is an SoP different from a CV?**

A CV outlines what you've done, while an SoP answers the “good fit question”, presenting achievements and experiences in a personal, contextual manner beyond objective details. For example, instead of just stating that you volunteered at an NGO, the SoP would explain how it shaped your understanding of local social issues and sparked an academic or professional interest in public policy.

#### **5. What format should I follow for an SoP?**

While there is no set format, follow the prompt thoroughly and create a checklist to cover key requirements, like academic background, research/work experience, and goals. Pay attention to font, margins, and spacing, and attach application materials **as PDFs only**.

#### **6. How do I explain why I want to join this particular programme?**

Highlight specific programme details (faculty, courses, research opportunities) and align your interests and experiences with the programme's academic environment.

#### **7. How should I describe my career goals in an SoP?**

Mention the field and role you aim for in the short and long term, linking them to your education and professional background, and explain how the programme will help you succeed. Specify the field you want to work in and your ideal role (short-term/ long-term, or both).

Link these goals to your past education and work experience, showing how they've shaped your ambitions. Explain how this programme's resources and learning opportunities will equip you for your chosen path.

**Eg:** I aim to work in **sustainable development policy**, specifically addressing **water management challenges** in resource-scarce regions [such as hometown X]. In the short term, I envision working with **community-based initiatives** to tackle water scarcity in **Rajasthan**, building on my experience with local NGOs in this area. Long term, I will investigate how sustainable water solutions can be **scaled nationally**, [given challenges such as resource intensive industries often being concentrated in these regions, etc.] This programme's focus on **sustainable policy design, mentorship** from stalwarts in the field such as X/Y and possibilities of **partnership with the Centre** for Rural Development will equip me with the tools and methods I need to implement and scale such interventions.

### **8. Should I include extracurricular activities or hobbies?**

Include extracurriculars or hobbies if they demonstrate transferable skills (leadership, communication, etc.) relevant to your academic and career goals, but prioritise study/work experiences. For eg., including extracurriculars like classical music training or participation in local festivals can highlight cultural involvement.

### **9. How can I frame transitioning between disciplines for the new degree?**

Emphasise transferable skills and any upskilling you've done for the new field. Present experiences in your current discipline as providing a unique perspective for understanding and excelling in the new one.

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## 2. FRAMING YOUR PERSONAL NARRATIVE

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### **1. How do I know if a personal anecdote is appropriate to write about?**

Consider: “What does this anecdote say about me, and how am I using it?”. Include an anecdote if it directly relates to your interests, demonstrates a fundamental personal point, or complements your academic narrative. Consider the following: “I’ve **always been fascinated** by helping others. Growing up in a large/joint family, I **often took care** of my younger cousins, which made me realise my **passion for nurturing and guiding others**. Hence, I want to pursue a **master’s in education**.”

While it is personal, this anecdote doesn’t relate to academic or professional goals. It focuses on a temporally vague experience (“always been fascinated”) that doesn’t provide insight into the candidate’s qualifications for the field. The connection to a relevant disciplinary background is not well-developed, and a rather flat interpretation of “education” as simply “taking care” of or “nurturing” younger people is presented—it would therefore not add to the purpose of the application.

### **2. Should I include personal challenges or obstacles I’ve overcome?**

Include personal challenges if they demonstrate resilience and significantly impact your approach to your discipline. However, they may be better suited for a personal statement.

### **3. What if I don't have clear career goals yet?**

Frame your goals in an exploratory or interdisciplinary context, emphasising enthusiasm for new opportunities and how the programme's flexibility aligns with this interest. For instance, emphasising the benefit of an open curriculum or a programme's interdisciplinary approach that will allow you to explore a wide range of interests before zeroing in on a niche in your research. Moreover, your personal narrative can be framed to accommodate an interest in emerging fields or in seeking broad skill development.

### **4. How do I address a gap year or academic setbacks in my SoP?**

Address gaps constructively, focusing on lessons learned. Frame setbacks as strengths by highlighting how you overcame challenges and gained skills.

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## 3. NAVIGATING ROADBLOCKS

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### **1. How can I make my SOP stand out?**

Avoid generic statements, clichés, and unsupported assumptions about the field (consider Answer 1 in the section above). Being overly lengthy, lacking focus, using generic templates, oversharing, or relying on personal flattery detract from the goal of communicating the "good fit" and make the document tedious to read. Anchoring your narrative in personally meaningful and specific aspirations/experiences instead makes for a strong statement.

## **2. Should I use technical jargon or keep the language simple?**

The admissions committee may include both faculty members and administrators, so use technical terms where appropriate but ensure the overall pitch remains accessible and clear.

## **3. Can I use the same SoP for multiple programs?**

This varies from one case to another. In some cases, you can tailor sections of your SoP to make it relevant to the various programmes you may be applying to. In other cases, it may be essential to rewrite larger sections of the statement to answer all parts of the prompt and explore the programme's nuances properly. If you are writing multiple letters and essays for one application, ensure you are drafting in response to the requirements and purposes of each application material and/or given prompts.

## **4. How do I ensure that I am adhering to the prescribed word count?**

Don't worry too much about the word count in your first draft, but focus on minimising redundancies in subsequent drafts. Avoid repeating information exactly as in your CV or transcript, and instead focus on imbuing your narrative with your own voice. Answer all the questions in the prompt adequately but don't provide unnecessary/ overly biographical details.



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# DRAFTING YOUR SOP: EXERCISE

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This exercise will help you brainstorm information to include in your application materials. This exercise template has been adapted from the [Prewriting for personal statements and other application materials](#) handout by the Baruch College Writing Center with substantial additions. Copy to a new document and take notes in response to each of the following prompts:

- List your experience
- Identify your skills, interests, and goals
- Connect your experience to your skills
- Research the program
- Find and analyse models
- Draft the statement

## **List your experience**

Begin by identifying your most significant past experiences—in work, in school, and in your personal life. What are the most important, uncommon, or interesting elements of your past? What makes you stand out from the average applicant? List anything a committee might want to know about you.

### **Academic Experiences**

Eg: The course “*The New Geography of the Information Age*”

### **Professional or Extracurricular Experiences**

Eg: Marketing Internship; founder of start-up; treasurer of IEEE (Ashoka chapter).

### **Personal Experiences**

Eg: Living in several countries; family members or mentors who have inspired you.

## Identify your skills, interests, and goals

As you brainstorm, focus on what is most relevant to this application.

- Personal skills and traits

**Eg:** data analysis; leadership skills; patient with young learners; persistence; curiosity; self-taught graphic design

- Current interests and goals that motivate you to apply

**Eg:** Management consulting; undergraduate theatre; to gain non-profit experience; to do biomedical research

- Long term goals this opportunity will help you achieve

**Eg:** To obtain a managerial or analytical role; to pursue a PhD; to enter a particular subfield or speciality.

## Connect your experiences to your skills

Look for connections between elements in this list you've made.

Frame your background as a source of expertise. Explain **how** one or more elements of your background helped you to develop a key skill, interest, or understanding.

- Eg: Having minored in English literature, I'm especially interested in the relationship between creative writing and marketing, particularly in the age of "automated content production".
- Eg: My initial interest in communication studies, and specifically the field of intercultural communication, emerged from the experience of growing up in West Bengal as a child of Anglo-Indian and Tamil parents.

Now consider one or two of your professional/ academic/ extracurricular experiences. Write a few sentences about what you learned or achieved through them.

Eg: As a volunteer coordinator with Seva Bharati, I gained practical experience in community engagement, especially in urban development initiatives. I learnt how culturally sensitive communication and strategic planning are critical in successful interventions—skills that I hope to expand upon through a master’s programme in urban policy.

**Link your past to your future:** You’ll want to demonstrate that you have thought about your future professional or academic plans upon completion of the program (even if you change your mind later, which you are often expected to do!). Write a few sentences linking admission in this program to success in your future career goals. **Traditionally, students mention courses, professors, and Centres.**

**Eg:** I am particularly drawn to this programme’s focus on sustainable policy design and the opportunity to collaborate with the [Centre for Rural Development] through the field practicum. I aim to deepen my understanding of how the Centre’s methods can be used to address water scarcity in Rajasthan, especially approaches tailored to the specific needs of local communities.

### **Research the programme**

Before writing your Statement, you’ll want to research the programme’s design, emphasis, and curriculum. Then write a few sentences to demonstrate knowledge of and interest in specific aspects of the programme. This may be very helpful when you are writing your conclusion.

**Eg:** Professor X’s research on sustainable water management in agrarian communities in India closely aligns with my own interests. Her recent study on community-led irrigation solutions in drought-prone regions provide a valuable model for addressing similar water scarcity issues in Rajasthan.

## **Find and analyse model SoPs**

Look for models of strong statements in the same discipline or genre.

- Start by asking advisors if they have models to share.
- If you find an example online, run it by a trusted advisor to see whether they agree that it's a strong model text.
- Find out what readers in your specific programme expect. Applications in research focused programmes have different expectations than those in more applied fields (doctoral programmes in clinical vs social psychology, for example).

Once you've found some compelling examples, analyse them for writing moves you can borrow.

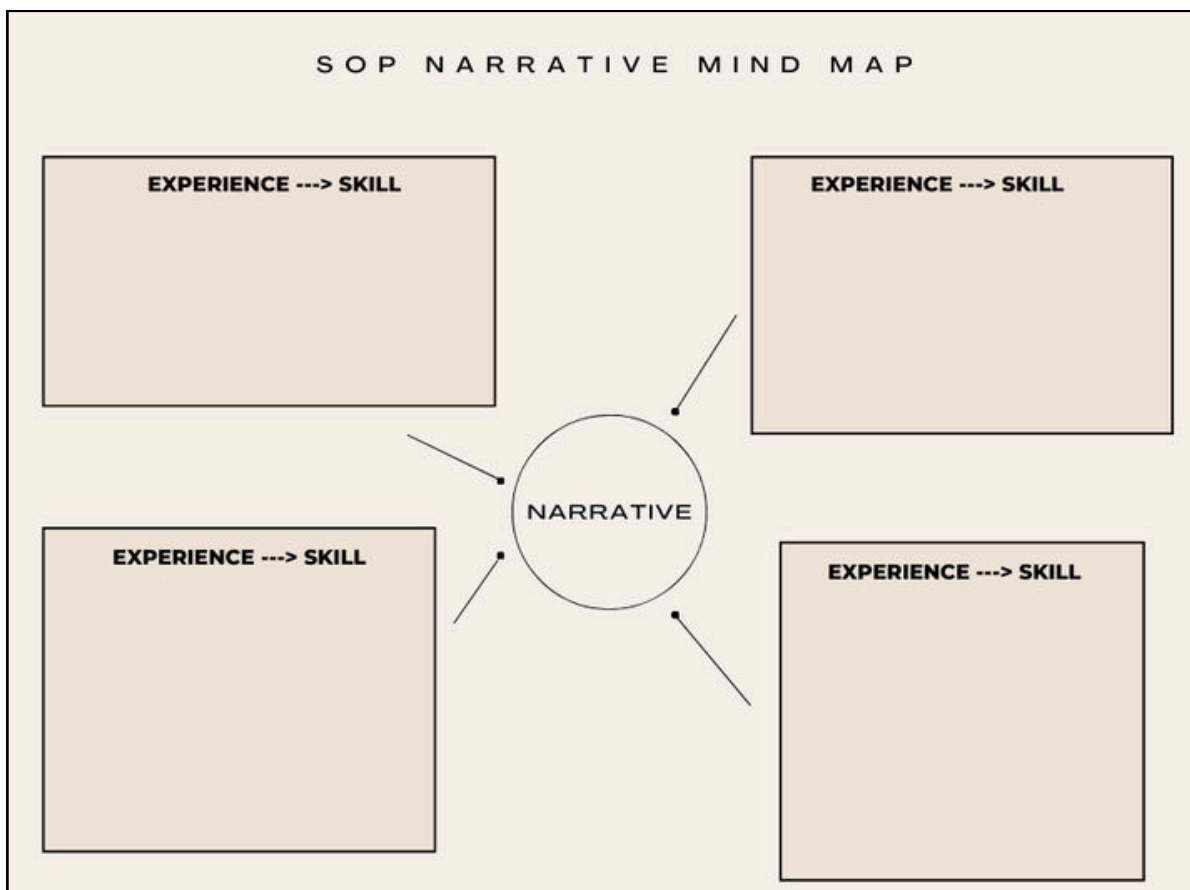
- What information does the writer include in the introduction and conclusion?
- How do they structure their body paragraphs?
- How "personal" is the statement?

## **Draft the statement**

Now that you've brainstormed in all of the categories above, you're ready to start putting together a first draft.

- As you outline, give each paragraph a clear focus.
- Committees often review hundreds of applications from similar candidates. As you write, try to help them understand your specific interests and experiences. Ask yourself: Does any part of your document read as generic enough that any other student could have written this/ would this point apply to most schools or most programmes?
- If you're writing multiple letters or essays for one application, draft with their different purposes in mind.

Our FAQ document introduces various ways to structure your SOP, especially the introduction. Approaches include making it "goal-oriented," "anecdote-focused," or "research-oriented," among others. If you're unsure which format suits your story, use the mind map below to highlight key personal or academic experiences and the skills they helped you develop—this will help with steps 1 and 3 of this worksheet. As you map out these experiences, a narrative about your motivation should begin to form. For example, if you start with a significant personal experience, you might decide to use that as a hook for your SOP. Even if it doesn't form a seamless story initially, the goal is simply to start writing; a clear narrative will emerge as you revise.



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# TESTIMONIALS

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Every year, CWC supports a large number of graduate applicants in crafting their application documents. Many who engage with us have gone on to secure admission to top programmes and institutions worldwide, including at Ivy League universities, UChicago, LSE, Sciences Po, and Oxbridge, across a range of disciplines and degree levels.

“I am writing to express my deepest gratitude for the exceptional help and support I received during my application process for graduate applications...I would like to extend my sincerest thanks to Sampurna, who went above and beyond to ensure my success(...) As a first generation college student, studying abroad is a far-fetched dream for a lot of us who are unsure about how to navigate the process but the constant encouragement and helping build processes to navigate really make a huge difference...”

**Economics (UG 2024) student**

“I also secured the prestigious Weidenfeld-Hoffmann Trust Scholarship and Leadership programme with the CWC's guidance. Their one-to-one support and commitment pushed me to structure my thoughts and write action-oriented responses...Their attention to detail, in terms of how I phrased myself, what words I used and the flow of my responses, was also extremely helpful given how competitive the scholarship is. Working with CWC definitely gave me an edge over other candidates...”

**Political Science (UG 2023) student**

“...I am writing to express my gratitude for your assistance in reviewing my essays and statement of purpose. I also wanted to share some exciting updates with you. I received admission offers from all the schools I applied to, and I have decided to accept the offer from the University of Pennsylvania...Additionally, I was awarded the Penn-UNESCO scholarship and a GA position. I would like to inquire if it would be possible to meet with you on campus this week. I would love to discuss ways to further improve my writing skills and would appreciate any resources you might recommend.”

**YIF 2024 student**

“Her commitment to her students is impeccable. She helped me understand how I can write better, suggested ways in which each sentence could be optimized into something better. Most importantly, what I appreciate the most is how her approach to ensure I learn how to observe and rectify these issues while writing rather than just giving me solutions right away. This way I now know how to address this in my writing much after I leave Ashoka as well.”

**YIF 2023 student**





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