

Statement of Purpose

This is the part of your application where you set yourself distinct from other applicants and convince the graduate committee that your experience and interests are a good fit for their program. Keep in mind that the committee also uses your essay to make funding decisions. Even if you have not done much research yourself but are articulate in showing that your areas of interest match up with funded research projects in the graduate program, you are more likely to receive an assistantship offer.

The statement of purpose is also a good place to indicate your need for financial aid. Some international students directly write in their statement something to the effect that they will not be able to study in the program if they are not provided with a full scholarship (meaning a tuition waiver, coverage of basic academic expenses, and a stipend). If the admission committee understands your financial needs, it will be easier for them to make a decision.

Writing the Statement of Purpose

A graduate admissions committee looks for students who are well matched to the research areas emphasized in the program. The statement of purpose is your opportunity to demonstrate that you have done your homework and know what the graduate program you are applying to is about and understand how your goals and interests align with the courses, faculty, and research areas it offers. A strong statement will:

- show the admissions committee that you have an idea about what you want to study and why you believe it is important for you, for the field of study and for your country;
- demonstrate that you are familiar with the program (have done thorough research online) and that you have sound reasons for applying;
- reflect your intellectual curiosity, motivation, and persistence, or the earnestness of your academic pursuits;
- assure the committee that you will be successful in the program.

An effective statement of purpose is persuasive; it is intended to convince the admissions committee that you are the right choice for their program. Yet, it is important that you remain true to yourself when preparing your essay. Matching up well with a program does not just mean you are “measuring up” to admission standards and molding yourself to the program only for the sake of being accepted; it also means deciding that the program meets your own needs and interests. It is a two-way street. That is why it is so important that your statement reflects not only your best writing but also your true intellectual interests and personal goals for professional development. Also, remember that you have a huge advantage as an international student of being exposed to a different culture. Bringing a different perspective to and increasing diversity of the graduate program is something that should also be highlighted in your essay.

Considering your motivations for pursuing a graduate education (something that was already discussed at the beginning of this manual) will help you do just that:

- What are some of the pivotal experiences that have brought you to where you are in your life?
- Why are you thinking about graduate school?

- What do you hope to contribute as a student or as a graduate in your field?
- What contribution can you make as a graduate to the scientific community in your country or your community?

In order to demonstrate why you are a good match, you need to have an understanding about your prospective program. Granted you have done prior research, this is your chance to show the admissions committee that you have considered the following questions:

- Which faculty members are conducting research in areas related to your academic and research interests?
- What is it about their work that is meaningful, interesting, or appealing to you?
- Does the program offer specialized training or course sequences that fit with your goals?
- Are there specialized research centers or facilities that support the areas of investigation you wish to pursue?

Additional questions you might ask yourself that may help enrich your essay:

- What is special, distinctive, or impressive about you or your life experiences? What sets you apart from the crowd?
- What have you learned about your field that sparked your interest and convinced you that you are well suited to contribute to this field?
- Were you inspired by any classes, readings, seminars, research, or internship experiences related to your field? Have you had conversations with people already in the field that helped shape your interest?
- Do you possess special skills or work experience that enhances your likelihood of success?
- Are there any gaps in your academic record that you should explain?

Now, when writing your essay, you have to find a good balance for your statement not to sound too confident or too eager. Neither it should be underwhelming with self-deprecating humor or overwhelming with arrogance. Humor is good in moderation, achievements should be presented with dignity and humility. Matt Welsh, a Harvard professor who served on the graduate admission committee for a number of years and evaluated thousands of applications, cautions the applicants against the following dangers of the personal statement:

- it is not written to present the details of your life, or autobiography. (You can save this for your memoirs for later, when you become rich and famous);
- it is not written to explain why you want to be a PhD student in a good program. (We have already discussed the delay from adult life and studies for the sake of studies);
- it is not written to kiss up to the faculty at the school you are applying to. (They can see through it immediately and consider it unnecessary flattery indicative of a flawed character);
- it is not written to explain how you are going to solve the world's problems. (While the idealism of the young is commendable in itself, you should really focus on manageable and achievable goals and tasks that you can contribute to personally, i.e. personal statement of purpose).

Welsh also gives a helpful hint that you should approach your personal statement as a "mini project proposal" where you outline a single research problem that interests you, show that you know the research area and talk about how you would approach solving

the problem. Of course everyone understands that in the process of studies you may shift your interests and find other research problems more interesting and challenging. This means no one will hold you to the project outlined in the application, but it will show that you are capable of thinking as a true researcher that the program is looking for.

Some other helpful hints for crafting your essay:

- Write a strong and captivating opening paragraph. First impressions matter. Admission committee members can tell good writing from the first paragraph and if they see that it lacks rigor and is not interesting, they may even set the whole application aside, either for later reading or for no reading at all. Since the first paragraph is so important, it may be a good idea to formulate it last, after you have already written up everything you want to say.
- Tell your story with examples, describe the events that shaped you as a person and aspired you academically and professionally.
- Be clear and specific, avoid generalities and generalizations. For example, instead of writing something like “my media internship gave me valuable experience,” describe your experience as “by interviewing people in the street for media reports, I learned how to ask meaningful, important and relevant questions,” or “working with the video producer, I learned how to select and queue the footage for the final cut, which gave me an insight into how the decisions are made about what material is considered to be important and newsworthy.”
- Get as much help with writing the essay as you can. If you have a writing center on campus, ask for their help in brainstorming your ideas, proofreading, style, and grammar. Never rely on Word spell check alone – consult writing and grammar aids. More importantly, ask your professors and advisors to give you feedback on the draft statements. They will be able to point out gaps in your statement and help to improve it.
- Give yourself plenty of time to write, review and edit your statement. Even with the final version of it, give it a day or two to settle in your mind and then go over it again – you may find something else to add before you submit your application.

On a final note about the importance of good writing: watch out for typos or grammatical mistakes *anywhere* in the application, not only in the statement of purpose. Even though the admission committee members are generally forgiving and understanding of the international students, any mistakes on the application look bad and unprofessional.

Letters of Recommendation

All graduate programs require at least three letters of recommendation. They are a very important part of your application. In fact, some admission committee members at top schools such as Harvard, Yale and Stanford believe that the best way to gauge the applicants’ potential for research and success in the graduate program is to assess *not* their statement of purpose (we all can write volumes of good things about ourselves), but letters of recommendation. Such professors even openly admit that they don’t read the statements of purpose carefully, just browse through them. Instead, they give more weight to the letters of recommendations as a more objective, third-person evaluation of your potential.

What they look for in the letters of references from your professors and work supervisors is the assessment of how hardworking and disciplined you are, your potential to conduct research independently, to be creative in finding non-standard solutions to problems and research questions, your creativity and ability to think out of the box, as well as your good character. This is why they almost immediately dismiss letters of reference without substance, such as “this is a good student who got an A in my class.”

To get a good letter of reference, you need not only to take a class from the professors you are asking a reference from and do well in those classes, but also build a good relationship with the professors. Only the professors who know you reasonably well will be able to give you a strong letter. For that, you need to take initiative. Approach the professors early on (well before the letter of recommendation needs to be submitted) and let them know that you are willing to help out with their research tasks and participate in their current research projects. Or ask them if you can do an independent research study under their guidance. Any research experience will be helpful. It is understandable that undergraduate students usually do not have the capacity, skills and resources to conduct independent original research and no one expects you to do that, but at least you can “dip your toes” in the research waters and get the taste of what it is about by working with one of your professors.

It should be noted that letters from your work supervisors, although acceptable, count for a lot less than letters from professors. You should only ask for letters from your bosses if you already graduated and are currently working and if the supervisor can testify to your research potential.

One thing to remember about academic letters of reference is that professors get a lot of requests for good recommendations, so you need to appreciate their time and effort. At the same time, it is a part of their job. Professors are expected to write and evaluate a lot of letters of references when they sit on various committees, therefore they appreciate their value. So you should not feel that you are begging for something you did not deserve. If a professor knows you well and truly believes you are capable of studying at the advanced level, he or she will be happy to write a letter of reference for you.

When approaching the professor for a letter of reference, you may want to ask him or her directly, “Can you write a strong letter for me?” If the professor hesitates or politely says something about lack of time and piles of urgent work tasks, this is not a good sign and you should approach someone else with the request. If the professor asks you to write a letter for yourself and promises to simply sign it, it is not a good sign either. It is not an acceptable practice. Instead, respectfully suggest that you will provide the professor with all the information he or she needs (your CV, some writing samples) and your draft statement of purpose so that he or she is better equipped to write the letter. You may even write up some important bullet points for the letter so that the professor expands on them and adds other things. But never write the letter yourself. It is plain unethical and not a good way to start your graduate academic career.

Submitting Your Application

Most applications nowadays are submitted online. As it was pointed out earlier, some universities still require submission of originals, signed documents and test scores by

mail. However, the application itself in most cases can be submitted online either directly to the graduate program or to the graduate school, which is a separate administrative unit managing all graduate programs across the university to make sure they all meet the same standards.

When submitting the application online, make sure to follow the instructions carefully and attach all required documents in their designated places. For mail-in submissions, it is a good idea to have a checklist on top of the application with all the items you are enclosing checked off.

The biggest hurdle for many international students in submitting the application is the payment of the application fee. Most universities provide an option of paying by credit card, which is the easiest way for American applicants, but not so accessible for international students. Some take checks, money orders that are sent in by mail or even accept the international electronic money transfers. If none of those options are available for you, you may want to ask an American friend or even a (visiting) professor at AUCA with a credit card to help you out by making the transaction online and to be reimbursed in cash. You can also check if the school you are applying to is a part of the Committee on Institutional Cooperation and if it is, submit a request to waive the application fee (go to cic.net/FreeApp for details).

Once your application is submitted online, you should get an immediate automatic confirmation that it has been received. Mailed applications take some time to be delivered, but once they are received you should get an email confirmation as well. The confirmation usually tells you when to expect the decision on your application, but for most graduate programs it is end of March – April.

Having received the confirmation, you can just sit back and relax. You do not need to follow up on your application once you got the receipt confirmation – all graduate programs have their own pace and procedures for considering applications and committee members find it annoying when the applicants email or write to follow up before the decision is made. You have done everything on your part for the application package and now the process is beyond your control. But let's talk about what the process entails.

How The Applications Are Considered

Every application is evaluated by the admissions committee with the goal of finding the ideal graduate student who will be the perfect fit for the program. But who is this elusive being – an ideal grad student?

Ideal Graduate Student

The ideal graduate student is gifted, creative, eager to learn, independent and highly motivated. While studying and working in the program, he/she will be treated as a responsible, mature adult, which means that he/she is expected to work independently and take direction, supervision, and constructive criticism without becoming upset or overly sensitive. Faculty look for students who are hard workers, want to collaborate closely with faculty on their research projects, are responsible and easy to work with, and who are a good fit to the program. The best graduate students complete the

program on time, with distinction - and excel in the professional world upon graduation to make graduate faculty proud. They also do not cut the ties with the university after graduation. They stay involved through the alumni network and contribute to the school's charitable programs.

The Process of Considering Applications

Each graduate program has 3-9 Graduate Committee members, who are the program administrators and the faculty teaching in the program. The committee size depends on how large the program is and how many applications they receive. In any case, each Committee member is given a large stack of folders with all applications received. They have to go through all applications individually and evaluate them thoroughly to find the applicants that truly stand out.

The committee members have a rubric where they evaluate the application on a scale from 1 (very poor) to 5 (excellent) on several items, such as potential for research, academic achievement, evaluations by referees, potential to contribute to the school, etc.

Check out this page from our example of the Duke University's PhD in Political Science. It spells out clearly what is expected of the letters of recommendation (work supervisors' letters are encouraged), the GPA expectation (3.5+), minimum acceptable GRE scores and the key evaluation factors under Qualifications:

RECOMMENDATION LETTERS – Please note:

- If you are a current undergraduate, your letters of recommendation should come from faculty members, especially political science faculty.
- If you are not a current undergraduate, not only do we want letters of recommendation from faculty who know you, we also want a letter from your current employer, if applicable.

GPA/GRE – Successful applicants generally have a GPA of 3.5 or above, but are expected to have a minimum of 3.2. The combined Verbal and Quantitative GRE score should be at least 308 and the Writing, a 3.5 or higher. Exceptions to these thresholds are sometimes made.

The code number for Duke University Graduate School is **5156**. Because you are applying for admission to the Graduate School at Duke University, you do not need a department code.

QUALIFICATIONS – No one factor determines whether an applicant is admitted or not. It is our practice to review all of the information included in admissions files before reaching a final decision.

1. Our Admissions Committee screens each application for several factors:

- Does the applicant's academic background indicate the applicant's ability to successfully complete the PhD degree? (type/number/grade of courses taken as undergraduate, and where applicable, as master's student)
- Does the applicant's statement of purpose indicate the applicant's ability and desire to successfully complete the PhD degree? (background/field of interest/goals and/or ideas/theories /literature)
- Do the applicant's letters of recommendation indicate that the applicant has an outstanding aptitude, knowledge and record of performance?
- Is the applicant's writing sample of the highest quality?
- Is there a faculty match?
- If the primary language of the applicant is not English, does the applicant score 90 or higher on the English test?

2. Our Admissions Committee also looks at the needs of the Department (e.g. how many students in a given subfield is desirable) and ranks the applicants accordingly. We typically receive more than 350 applications to our PhD program but can only matriculate 8-12 students a year which means we must regretfully refuse admission to a large number of otherwise qualified applicants.

For more information about Duke's graduate studies policies, procedures, and requirements

It should be noted here that the GPA and tests scores, especially for international students, are considered only as *indicators* of academic potential, not disqualifying cut-offs. In other words, if you are short of a couple of points on test scores and your GPA is 3.48 and not 3.5, you will not be automatically disqualified and your application will be still evaluated on its merit for the research potential.

After the individual evaluation is complete, all admission committee members sit together and go through each folder to compare their individual assessments. If there are great disparities on the same application, where, for example, one evaluator gives the overall score of 2 and the other one – 5 to the same applicant, they are asked to explain their rationale and come to a consensus. It should be noted that most applications will end up with the scores of 3-4, only the very few best and worst applications fall on both extremes of highly exceptional and badly written applications.

After this discussion, the committee gives each application an overall score and the folders are sorted out into three piles: (1) "accept" - top applicants we really want to see as our grad students; (2) "maybe," if top students reject our offer; and (3) "reject." Those who are rejected are then immediately sent out standard rejection letters with wishes of good luck in future endeavors.

At the same time, the top applicants are contacted with the letters of acceptance and explanation of how much funding the school is ready to provide for them. The amount is usually non-negotiable: you have to trust that the school has your best interests in mind and that the Graduate Committee's offer is the best one they can give you.

If the scholarship they offer you is not enough to cover all your expenses while you are in the program (graduate schools do NOT cover the costs of visas and airplane tickets for you to get there), you simply have to write them about it and politely explain your situation and circumstances. They will most probably say that they do not have any other options for funding and then you will have to decline their offer if you have a better one. If you don't have a better offer and really want to go to this school, be prepared to be a struggling grad student who saves on everything (you will not be alone in that). However, the advantage of applying to the graduate school by yourself, without any government funding, is that you will receive an F-1 student visa, which allows students to work part-time. Most students then take this opportunity to earn a little extra income on or off campus.

The top applicants are usually asked to respond within a certain period of time (a week or so) whether they accept or decline the offer. If they decline, the offer goes to the next best candidate from the "maybe" pile, and so on.

One way or another, you should receive the letter about the decision on your application some time at the end of March or in April. If you don't hear anything from the school by the beginning of May, you should write to inquire about your application because it is very unusual for the graduate programs, especially given the time needed to secure the visa, not to get back to you without a response for that long.

How to Handle Rejection Letters

Rejections can be devastating. When you receive a rejection letter, you have a feeling that your whole world collapsed and all your dreams are crushed. But be assured, even the most brilliant academic minds received a rejection letter at some point in their career. The rejection letter is not a reflection of your worthiness. Neither it is a reflection of your character.

When you get a rejection letter, it can be for one of the two reasons (we will not consider the one where the applicant is obviously not a good grad school material; we will assume that all the applicants are talented and deserving of being admitted):
(1) you have not done enough to impress the committee with your potential;
(2) there were so many excellent candidates that the graduate program could not accommodate them all.

The reality of life is that no matter how good you are, there is always a chance that some applicants articulated their goals and ideas better. On the grand scale of things, it does not really matter why you did not get accepted. You cannot appeal this decision

anyway. But this is exactly why you should increase your chances by applying to several schools at the same time. Hopefully, you will be accepted into another program. Or two or three, so that you have some options.

If you applied only to one school, the graduate program of your dream, and got rejected, and if you are really set on getting into that particular program, you should not be forever discouraged either. In fact, it would be not such a bad idea to write to whoever signed your rejection letter and politely ask her or him what you should do better next year to get accepted into the program. Such an inquiry would show the graduate committee member that you are genuinely interested in the program and what it offers for your development.