

GUIDELINES FOR A GRADUATE SCHOOL STATEMENT OF PURPOSE

Graduate school differs from undergraduate education: it certifies you as a professional in a discipline. Faculty in grad programs assess whether you are suitable to be their professional colleague. Their first step is reviewing your grad school application. Statement of Purpose must convince its readers that you are graduate school material and worth the faculty's investment of years of close professional tutelage. Six points can guide writing a compelling statement.

1. Be brief

- Admission committees may read 200 applications over one to two weeks. Clarity and brevity are virtues: aim for one page, single-spaced. This is a writing sample. Edit mercilessly.
- Draft a general statement, addressing points 2-4. Then customize versions for each program's faculty research interests, special programs or facilities, etc. (see 5. below).

2. Show focus

- Graduate programs expect applicants to focus on regions, time spans, analytical and theoretical approaches. Stipulate that you want to study Southwestern archaeology, evolution and functional anatomy of the great apes, etc. Once in a program, it's usually okay to move around a bit – but look focused when applying.
- Specify which methodological approaches attract you: lithic analysis, zooarchaeology, ceramics, human skeletal biology, biomechanics, isotopes, etc. What methods have you already used in labs, field programs, employment, etc.? Don't worry if you have not had a chance to use a method that interests you but that is not available at UCSC.
- If you've studied ecological theory, behavioral ecology, life history theory, Marxist theory, gender studies in archaeology, say so. This is how they learn of your intellectual background.
- At the same time, take care not to appear dogmatic. The grad program will probably want to "reprogram" you with their theoretical perspectives, anyway.

3. Show breadth

- Seek a balance between show focus and implying that you are overly narrow. For instance, you would not want to say you wish to study core reduction technology in the Magdalenian 5c of Southwest France, or devote your graduate studies to the hylobatid wrist. This may indeed be what you wind up doing in your dissertation, but specialized research must be set within broader regional history, social dynamics, evolution, and theory. A strong applicant shows they are focusing but nonetheless has the intellectual breadth to see the Big Picture.
- Note: in some programs, faculty don't invest much time in graduate student mentoring, and such programs may actually want you to articulate a dissertation topic in your application. In many other cases, this would be the kiss of death. Your guidance on this may come from departmental websites but also consult our faculty. They often know what's up.

4. Show background

- Include some one-liners showing how you developed your regional or areal interest: e.g. you found your focus while surveying Hohokam settlements last summer, in writing your Senior Seminar paper on Southwestern Prehistory, during your field quarter in Costa Rica, etc.
- Use one-liners to show how you got your field or practical, hands-on experience. UCSC students have a huge advantage over many other undergraduates, because they have unusual access to a broad spectrum of lab courses. However, your methodological background may have come from field schools, contract archaeology, volunteering, lab independent studies,

etc. Whether candidates actually got their hands dirty, or bloody, before advanced degree training is a crucial consideration for evaluators. One artful approach is to explain that you developed your proficiencies while doing fieldwork in Bénin with Monroe, during Gifford-Gonzalez's comparative osteology course, in Juarez's forensics class, etc.

5. Show knowledge of each program

- Researching graduate programs saves you money, because you apply only to those where faculty will help you develop the career you want. Faculty here can help you refine your search quickly: show them a list of potential programs, and ask for feedback.
- Your statement should convey that you know faculty specialties in that program and how you could learn from them. You needn't list everyone, but do note a few with whom you see yourself working, and why. The *AAA Guide to Departments* or departmental websites show faculty specializations. Mention special programs or facilities associated with the department.
- Just three to five sentences can show readers that you have done your homework, checked their website, or read the *Guide* and know why and how this program matches your interests.

6. Highlight your distinctiveness

- Finally, consider if there's a way to make yourself memorable, in one or two sentences.
- If you were drawn to your focus by a childhood hobby of collecting animal bones, an intense field experience in Belize, a class that changed your life, add a brief opening anecdote that establish your uniqueness. That overworked admissions committee may recall you more quickly if you have a short, distinctive story related to you interest.
- But if it feels forced or corny, don't do it. Your application will stand without it.

A DEMOGRAPHIC FOOTNOTE

- Senior faculty get old, retire, and/or die.
 - It is not prudent to pin your graduate school hopes only on professors whose *AAA Guide* PhD dates put them close to retirement age (1970s, 1980s). A doctorate takes five to eight years to complete. Your "fantasy committee" could retire and/or die before you finish your dissertation. Some stop taking students in a 4-6 year "window" before retirement.
- Not all junior faculty get tenure. They are reviewed for tenure 4-6 years after being hired.
 - It is unwise to pin one's hopes on working only with untenured (assistant professor) faculty, especially at Ivy League institutions, which customarily don't grant tenure to assistant professors. Academic natural selection could leave you without a mentor.
- If you are interested working with someone, regardless of age, email them and ask if they are accepting students this year. If they don't reply at all, it's probably a sign that they may not be someone with whom you'd want to work. If they do, then you know whether to apply.
- Your local faculty can help you get a handle on these and other matters at specific institutions. Once you have some schools tentatively listed as possible programs, consult them in their office hours and use their knowledge of the field.