

MATH 498 Writing a Statement of Purpose

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What universities ask for

- UW Mathematics

A Statement of Purpose consisting of about 200 to 300 words (as an uploaded PDF) detailing your reasons for wishing to enter graduate school in mathematics, your plans for the future, and any other information about your educational and professional objectives that may be relevant to your application.

- UC Berkeley Statistics

*We require applicants to submit both the **statement of purpose** AND **personal statement** (also known as the personal history statement). These statements must be submitted with the online application. For the statement of purpose, be concise; an ideal essay should say everything it needs to with brevity. Approximately 500 to 1000 well-selected words (1-2 single space pages in 12 point font) is better than more words with less clarity and poor organization. Personal statements are typically one page or shorter, though some are longer.*

Purpose

- to show you are capable of succeeding in a PhD program¹
- must convince admission committee that you have the qualities and background
- So, what are the qualities?
 - can learn
 - can think independently
 - organized and motivated enough to pursue long term goal
 - initiative and independence
 - can write

¹Replace PhD with MS, job, etc.

Think of your audience

- The admission committee = professors in the Math² program
[more generally – your future employer or colleagues]
- What do you know about them?
 - they know a lot about Math/Stat/CS/...
 - they have experience teaching and advising
 - they are reading a lot of applications (do not waste their time!)
 - there is a lot at stake for them too (they want to find the most promising applicants)
- How to think about it
 - imagine a professor you respect will be reading it
 - this professor will give your statement their full attention
 - but they will take no nonsense

²Substitute Math with Statistics/Physics/Computer Science/...

- Background – do you have the necessary education?
- Research – are you going to be good at it?
- Other professional experience – how mature are you? how much initiative do you have?
- Goals – what kind of research are you best at?
 - specific to the program you are applying

Reasons, plans for the future. . .

Two ways to look at this question

- From your point of view
 - If you have a reason, a motivation or a goal that you feel strongly about, and you want to share it – write about it briefly (one sentence or paragraph)
- From their point of view – What information are they looking for?
 - what particular area of mathematics are you interested in?
 - which professors are most likely to work with you if you are admitted?
 - who, outside the committee, should look at your application
 - (sometimes) what kind of researcher are you? will you be a good fit with the program?
 - the way you describe your plans and goals shows how you think

 - so . . . tell them what areas you are most interested in
 - if you have plans/ideas for future research describe them
 - if you want to switch to Mathematics from another field, you can briefly explain why you think Mathematics suits you better (but you don't necessarily have to explain)
 - it is very good form to say why you want to study in this particular program – it shows you have taken the time to learn about the program, that you have studied your options carefully
 - weak: “because this is the best Statistics program”; strong: “because UW also has a strong Computer Science/Astronomy/Biostatistics/collaboration with FHCRC and I want to . . .”; also strong: “because I want to work with Prof. X on Y”

- “professional” , mature
- factual rather than sentimental
 - easy to fake enthusiasm, hard to fake knowledge
- the words you use show how much you know
- the thoughts you express show your intellectual maturity

Final advice

- Think of your audience – yes, somebody will read this, and you are writing for them
- You are not anonymous – the person who reads this will want to know about YOU
- Be relevant
- Think of it as a positive experience – it's an opportunity to think about why you study what you study, what you are feeling proud of or excited about
- BE HONEST
 - show your best side, but do not exaggerate