Statements of Purpose

A Sweetland Workshop

The International Institute
01.13.16
Opportunities and Hazards

- How do these documents get read?
- What is the role of argument in a SoP?
- How and when do things go wrong?
- Questions!
Statement of Purpose: Function

- To address issues the remainder of the application doesn’t cover
- To allow the writer an opportunity to make her case
- To allow the readers an opportunity to determine if the applicant is a good match
- To demonstrate the writer’s argumentative and compositional fluency

Let’s address these one at a time!
Role in Application

The statement of purpose is a complement to the general application, not a condensed prose replacement of it. It will be read in the context of the additional application materials.

TAKEAWAY:

Do not use the SoP to duplicate information that you have provided elsewhere! You can refer to and elaborate on that information, but don’t just re-write your cv.

MAKE SURE THE DOCUMENT OFFERS SOMETHING NEW!
Role in Application

The statement of purpose is also a chance for the readers to make sure you understand the ethos and structure of the organization to which you are applying.

TAKEAWAY:

Read carefully, research, and absorb the mission of the granting agency. Allow that to inform your writing, so the readers will know you and they are in alignment!

ABSORB, DON’T MERELY MIMIC!
Making Your Case

Your first and most important goal is *clarity*. No one will fund a project they do not understand.

In order to establish clarity, you need to discuss

- Your practical intent
- Your intellectual justification
- How these two correspond with the organization’s requirements
- The planned outcome
“Sounds great! But how?”

Keep the following techniques and approaches in mind:

❖ Use direct and efficient syntax and diction – no jargon.
❖ Place your work in a scholarly context.
❖ Establish the consequences and relevance of your successful work.
❖ Be thorough, specific and detailed in your tactical plans.
❖ Be realistic and candid about risks and goals.
Role of Readers and Evaluators

Try to place yourself in the position of the persons reading and evaluating your application. What conditions are they facing?

- They have many applicants, but fewer resources.
- They need to both understand and trust the applicant.
- They are making an investment in both the applicant and her scholarship.
- They are seeking to advance their own agenda.
Role of Argument

Do you really need one? I mean, the argument is implicit in the occasion itself, right?

YES, YOU DO, and NO, IT ISN’T.

At the very least, you will need a basic thesis, one that establishes a relationship between cause and effect.

For example:

“This grant suits my project because these resources enable... <what, exactly?>”
Role of Argument

Statements of purpose are excellent occasions to practice the art of *identifying and saying what you mean*.

This can run counter to a lot of academic practice!

But the statement of purpose will force you to be concise, explicit and direct.

What is the syntactical default for concision, explicitness and directness?

**SUBJECT > VERB > DIRECT OBJECT**
Types of Argument

ADDITIVE

An additive argument is the basic unit of scholarship: you are complementing established corpora via archival or investigative work.

Advantage? Very easy to establish!

Disadvantage? Not always very compelling.
Types of Argument

ELABORATIVE

An elaborative argument furthers, complicates or extends not just corpora of research but theories and concepts.

Advantage? Easier to establish subsequent consequence!

Disadvantage? Requires substantial risk.
Types of Argument

TRANSFORMATIVE

A transformative argument shifts an entire paradigm and opens up new and previously unimagined possibilities.

Advantage? You’ve just won the game of scholarship!

Disadvantage: It’s not very easy to do.
Points of Caution

- Space is limited! Avoid extraneous material.
- Resist the passive voice, and be sure to edit!
- Choose graphic minimalism.
- Present yourself as a professional first.
- Avoid obvious or universal truisms.
- Don’t forget to match your skills to your plans.
- Don’t fib. Fibbing is naughty.
Questions?