The Statement of Purpose/Intent/Reasons for Graduate Study

You have various reasons for wanting to apply to graduate school. The programs to which you are applying want to know what those reasons are. So they ask you to write a statement, variously known as a Statement of Purpose, Statement of Intent, Statement of Reasons for Graduate Study, etc.

The statement also serves other purposes. It is an example of your ability to express yourself clearly in writing. It helps the program faculty to determine whether or not your goals and interests fit with theirs. And it can be expanded to include additional information which can affect your admissibility.

The statement is usually the only opportunity you as an applicant have to present yourself as a person distinct from your gradepoint average or test scores.

What Information Should I Include?

The instructions which come with the application form should be your first guide as to what to include in your statement. The instructions should give you a good idea as to what information the program needs from you: your area of interest in the field (both what it is and why you are interested in studying it), your background preparation (education, training, work experience), and other relevant information. Often applicants are asked to list notable academic or work accomplishments that relate to the field of study.

You may also be asked to indicate possible thesis or dissertation topics or to indicate the names of faculty members with whom you would like to work. If you don't have a general idea of possible topics, you should at least mention about the area of concentration with in the field that you wish to pursue.

If there is additional information that you feel ought to be taken into consideration in the evaluation of your application, you can include it, either as part of the statement itself, or by attaching a supplementary statement. (Click here for some additional thoughts about discussing a "low" GPA in a reasons statement.)

How Long Should My Statement Be?

Check the application instructions to see whether a minimum and/or maximum length is specified. If no guidelines are given, you need to balance two concerns:

- Providing your proposed program with the information sought, and
- Keeping your statement concise enough to be readable.

How long a statement is does not seem to matter nearly as much, in my experience, as how well it is written. Every day I see statements of varying lengths come in with applications. Most of them are one to two pages in length. I have also seen statemen ts that were only a few sentences long and multipage statements. In my experience there isn't a strong correlation between statement length and acceptance rate. Common sense would suggest that if you are applying to a highly competitive program, and if your statement is going to be long, you need to write it especially well so as to hold your rea ders' attention.

Is There a Preferred Format or Style?

All the rules of good writing apply to the writing of your statement. Unless you write final-draft quality prose on the first attempt, be prepared to revise your statement. It may be helpful to have other people read and critique a draft of your s tatement.

Format

Check the application instructions. In most cases, the specific format is left to the applicant. I use the term "statement" in these pages only because that's what we call it where I work. Unless you are instructed to the contrary, you can use a letter format if that helps you to write better. (It may help you to think of the statement as being similar in purpose to a cover letter that you would send with your resume to a prospective employer.) The best hint I can give is this: use the format that allows you to organize your thoughts to communicate to your best advantage.

The vast majority of statements which I see are at least typed, if not written with a word-processor. The wide availability of such technology means that it is easy to produce a statement that is free of typographical errors and easy to read. Even if you have very legible handwriting, it is probably better not to submit a hand-written statement.

Style

The application instructions may or may not specify how the statement is to be written. As with any writing, it is important to consider your audience, but it is also important to write in your own voice. Affectation in word choice or syntax usually shows up very clearly.

Your chosen field of study will have a lot to do with what constitutes appropriate style. An applicant to a literature program will be expected to write in a different style than will an applicant to an engineering program. Another factor is whether or not you are required to submit work samples as part of your application. If you are *not* required to submit separate samples of academic w ork you have done, then it is more important that your statement be well written, as it will be your sole opportunity to demonstrate your writing proficiency.

Getting More Help on Statements

I have kept my suggestions brief and general. If you need more help with your statement, Linda Abraham has written a booklet on writing statements and has posted some suggestions to the Usenet newsgroups soc.college.grad and soc.college.gradinfo. She has also put together a website with specific pointers that you can use.

The Writing Center at Rensselaer Polytechnic Institute also has a website on Graduate School Application Essays with tips and samples.