# Academic Writing Center

# Dr. Daniel Floyd

# Statement of Purpose Workshop

# Transcript

## Slide 1 – 00:00

Hello and welcome. My name is Dr. Daniel Floyd, and I am the Educational Advisor over the Academic Writing Center. In this presentation, we will discuss the statement of purpose portion of graduate school applications.

## Slide 2 – 00:17

You may have not yet encountered the statement of purpose, so we will begin by exploring what this document is. The statement of purpose is one piece of the application puzzle that helps the committee get to know you. It offers you the chance to share your academic interests and to show how these interests align with a given graduate program. It allows you one of the only opportunities of the application process to personalize.

## Slide 3 – 00:44

So, what should you include in your statement of purpose? As mentioned previously, you should talk about your academic interests and touch upon the experiences you have had in school or in life that have formed or built toward those interests. You should also show how those interests and experiences align with a specific program and, in doing so, demonstrate your awareness of the program and the faculty with whom you would work. You will want to show how your goals, experiences, and aims will contribute meaningfully to the program. An important thing to note, though, is that this should not just become another list of your accomplishments and experiences. Those will all be detailed in your CV. In your statement of purpose, it is better to provide more detail and personality for a small number of experiences you have had.

## Slide 4 – 01:42

Let’s consider the importance of program awareness by examining the PhD program I completed. UC English offers PhDs in literature, creative writing, and rhetoric and composition. The rhetoric and composition track offers the following features: it is a small, intimate program which will provide more contact hours will faculty members and classmates. It includes scholars who focus on social justice rhetoric, the rhetoric of emotions, archival work, and composition’s history. It provides opportunities to take on leadership roles such as serving as the assistant director of the composition program, hosting the graduate student conference, or teaching the graduate student practicum course. The university and surrounding area provide interesting subject matter for the field of rhetoric and composition such as Over-the-Rhine gentrification, Lucille Schultz Archive, the Irate8 group, the legacy of Charles McMicken and so on.

## Slide 5 – 02:49

Allow me to share my own experience writing statements of purpose for you. When I applied for a PhD program, I applied to literature and rhetoric and composition programs. I prefer smaller, intimate programs, but I also applied to some larger institutions, and I have experience working in those kinds of frameworks as well. I am interested in ESL composition, but it wasn’t the only area of interest for me. When I applied to the University of Cincinnati, it was important for me to note that UC does not have an ESL specialist. However, there is a rhet/comp scholar who focuses on social justice rhetoric, which was one of my secondary interests.

## Slide 6 – 03:33

So, when I wrote statements of purpose for the literature programs I applied to I focused on the literary aspects and issues that I would want to work with. For rhetoric and composition programs that did have an ESL focus I played up my ESL interests and experiences. For my UC application, I changed those ESL experiences and interests to reflect more of an interest in social justice issues. And I played up the notion that I would have a smaller, intimate program I could work in and the opportunities that I would have to assume leadership roles in that program.

## Slide 7 – 04:13

Now, take a moment, brainstorm what you would say about your academic interests. What would you want from a program based on these interests? How could you handle applications to schools that do not specialize in those interests?

## Slide 8 – 04:30

If there is time, take a moment to share what you have written.

## Slide 9 – 04:37

I do want to give a word of warning here. Be aware that showing program familiarity can backfire if you do not have accurate and up-to-date information. For example, a professor you express an interest in working with may have retired or moved to a new school. Entire programs may change their areas of focus depending on changing faculty or changing funding. Referencing any of these inaccurate pieces of information about the program can work against you. It looks like you did not adequately research the program. Or that you are not as interested in the scholar or the research focus as you claim to be. Or, at the very least, may give the impression that you are not as interested in the program as you thought you would be in the end. These are things you can do to avoid this problem. Reach out to the program. You can ask for information before you even apply. You may even be able to set up a campus visit. This does not work against you. It’s good to get to know the program first. And they’ll be happy to get to know you, as well. You can reach out to a graduate student who is already in that program. Most students would welcome the chance to speak with a potential new classmate. They can tell you things about the faculty and the program. Check the course catalogue to see who has taught courses you might take, and if any of the recent courses appeal to you. Check any kind of social media accounts linked to the program. If you find recent posts about faculty, courses or events, this can help you as you design your own interests and how they would, uh, fit with that program. Another word of warning: do not just go by faculty or staff lists, or even department websites. These may not be up-to-date. They may only be updated occasionally, and they may include outdated information.

## Slide 10 – 06:36

The organization of a statement of purpose will resemble most traditional essays. This means it will include an introduction, a body, and a conclusion. In the next slides, we will go into each of these aspects in a little more detail as they relate to a statement of purpose.

## Slide 11 – 06:56

The first part of your statement of purpose will be the introduction. In the introduction, you will want to address the specific committee (the program, department, university, etc.) and introduce yourself. You may begin by stating your interest in a kind of general overview. If possible, you may include something memorable. However, I would caution that you should not force what is often called the “hook.” What I mean is, do not feel obligated to include something to grab the committee’s attention if it is disingenuous, fake, or unconnected. It would be better to include a less flashy introduction than to include something fake or unrelated. Additionally, avoid falling into patterns of cliches in order to make your introduction catchy. Again, it is better to be a little less exciting than to tell the same story that committees have heard hundreds of times.

## Slide 12 – 07:54

In the body paragraphs, you may want to organize thematically. To do this, you could group experiences and interests around common themes; these commonalities could turn into paragraphs that are based on experience, goals, and your program fit—OR—you could organize each paragraph around a specific interest and include detailed examples from your experiences or your future plans. Again, though, be aware of length requirements. You will not likely have room for more than three paragraphs, and, while you should flesh them out adequately, you will not be able to list everything in these paragraphs and stay under your required length.

## Slide 13 – 08:38

In these paragraphs, I want to reiterate that you should be authentic and be true to yourself. You will have to keep things formal, but that doesn’t mean that you can’t show your personality. You will want to use this opportunity to differentiate yourself from other potential applicants. If you only use sterile, academic language and writing, and if you use cliched experiences, the committee will still not have an idea about who you are. Show your unique personality, strengths, and ideas in these body paragraphs.

## Slide 14 – 09:12

In the conclusion, you will want to tie everything from the introduction and body together. You will probably want to reiterate your interest in the program. You may thank the committee for its time and express excitement about hearing from them but avoid offers for things like additional references or materials upon request. This goes without saying. If the committee needs anything else from you, they will ask for it.

## Slide 15 – 09:40

You may want to address some red flags that the committee may find in your materials. For instance, a lower than desired GPA, gaps in your educational background timeline, or if your degree is tangential to the program you are applying to. Try to spin these negatives as positives if possible. For example, if you had a bad semester, explain the circumstances and show how it demonstrates your ability to overcome adversity. However, there is no need to overshare, especially when it comes to personal details. And be careful of coming across cliched in discussing the overcoming adversity narrative. Instead of telling the committee that these experiences show you can overcome adversity, give a detailed example that implies you have overcome adversity—show, don’t tell. Remember that all applicants will most likely be successful and have success stories; find a way to set your story apart. Finally, some red flags cannot be addressed. We will talk about those in the next slide.

## Slide 16 – 10:52

Some red flags would be better to avoid altogether. For instance, if you have trouble getting along with certain kinds of people, or if you have financial or legal problems, these are not red flags that can be adequately addressed in a statement of purpose. Bringing them up will most likely just result in an automatic rejection. Bad letters of recommendation cannot and should not be explained away in the statement of purpose. You will want to be certain that you can find references who will speak for your qualities in a good light. If you cannot or do not wish to leave your local area for some reason, saying so in the statement of purpose will seem like you have applied to this program out of convenience or necessity. If you have been rejected by other programs, telling committees this in the statement of purpose may give them pause for considering your application as well. Of course, there are many other things you should not address in your statement of purpose but thinking through what certain disclosures say to the committee will help you screen the information you share.

## Slide 17 – 11:59

Now, let’s cover some of the grammar and mechanics aspects of your statement of purpose. Statements of purpose will most likely need to be written in Standard American English. Even if you apply to a highly creative program, the committee will probably expect the document to be in Standard American English. This also means you will want to keep the format traditional. In addition to writing in Standard American English, you will want to use the active voice. This document focuses on what you have done and what you want to do. Be sure you are the agent and that you emphasize those actions. Connected to the idea of action and agency, be sure you give detailed examples of what you have done, not just lists. Lists are easily forgotten; they lack detail; they blend together. Concrete examples will make your experiences more memorable. As you provide these detailed examples, though, be sure you write concisely and avoid flowery, unnecessarily showy language. Partly, you will want to be concise because committees are not impressed by ostentatious language, but you also need to keep in mind that you will only want to write about 500 to 1,000 words. Of course, all of these things should not be necessary. Ideally, committees would give all candidates an equal chance, but the fact that they’ll have a lot of applicants, and a lot of those applicants will be highly qualified means you can’t give them an easy reason to reject you.

## Slide 18 – 13:39

To use Standard American English, you will want to avoid informal language. Do not use “text speak” and use traditional, standardized spellings for words, and you should be fine. For example, instead of writing, “It was totally awesome that I was nominated by my classmates for such an award!!”, you could write, “One of my proudest achievements is that I won this prestigious award for which my classmates nominated me.” The second example conveys the same idea in a clearer and more formal manner. It makes you the agent of the sentence. It calls the committee’s attention to your achievement. It also does not rely on a committee of readers who are open to informal language or who know current slang or modes of speaking.

## Slide 19 – 14:28

In using Standard American English, you should also use the active voice. The active voice puts the agent of the sentence in the active role—the doer gets credit for doing something. The active voice clarifies subjects and objects in sentences, and it conveys responsibility. Not only is the active voice stronger grammatically, but it also exemplifies what committees look for in candidates: agency, action, responsibility, commitment and so on. Consider this example: “My commitment is demonstrated by my actions” versus “I demonstrate commitment through my actions.” Or, even better, you could simply explain examples of times when you have demonstrated your commitment. In the active voice, you make yourself the clear actor of your commitments.

## Slide 20 – 15:23

Let’s discuss briefly what we mean by the active voice. What are the active and passive voices? In the active voice, the sentence structure is subject, verb, object. Subjects are the people, places or things doing the action (or the verb). In the active voice, the subject comes first in the sentence—the emphasis is placed on the noun doing the action. Take, for example, the simple sentence, “Bob hit Joe.” Bob is the person performing the action of hitting. Joe is the person receiving that action. In the passive voice, the sentence structure often changes to object, verb, subject. Objects are the people, places or things receiving the action. In the passive voice, the object comes first in the sentence—the emphasis is on the recipient of the action, not the actor. Take, for example, the reverse of the previous sentence, “Joe was hit by Bob.” Even though Joe is not doing anything in this sentence, he is situated as the actor. Often you can find the passive voice if you look for the phrase “by someone,” like “by Bob” in the previous sentence. Passive voice has its uses. It is good for hiding responsibility or in situations where the recipient of an action IS the most important part of the sentence, but in a statement of purpose, you want to be the actor, and you want to put yourself front and center.

## Slide 21 – 17:01

The active voice will also help you to bolster your examples, not just include lifeless lists of your actions and accomplishments. Examples are important because readers may forget lists—lists, by definition, include a lot of items that do not have a lot of detail. We make grocery lists so we do not forget items. Committees may do the same with your achievements if they do not have the list in front of them at all times. Items on lists tend to blend together. Also, items on a list may not make it clear what you mean by some action. Here is another example: “I have demonstrated my leadership through working as a tutor, serving as a spokesperson for X organization, mentoring freshmen in my program, and coordinating X conference.” Each of these items may be a great example of your leadership, but the reader does not know what those experiences entailed. You might instead write, “I developed specific leadership skills relevant for this position when I coordinated the X conference. While coordinating this conference, I had to reach out to presenters, keynote speakers, administrators, and vendors. I found that with each group I needed to take a different approach to communication. These flexible communication skills will aid me as I develop X for my graduate program.” Of course, you would want to include even more specifics than I have included here. Although this example only includes one item from the previous list, it gives the reader a much better understanding of what the applicant’s leadership and communication skills look like, as well as how the applicant believes those skills will help in the program.

## Slide 22 – 18:59

Now, take a moment, think about a relevant experience you may want to include in your statement of purpose. Write this experience as a detailed example, not a list item, and try to use the active voice.

## Slide 23 – 19:14

If there is time, take a moment to share what you have written.

## Slide 24 – 19:21

As a final note, I’d like to invite you to work with the Academic Writing Center on your statements of purpose. We work with all kinds of documents in the AWC. And many of our tutors are either grad students or plan to be, so they have experience writing statements of purpose.

## Slide 25 – 19:41

Thank you for your participation. If you have any further questions, feel free to reach out to me at my email address. That is daniel.floyd@uc.edu.