WRITING THE STATEMENT OF PURPOSE FOR GRADUATE PROGRAMS IN ENGLISH

English Undergraduate Advising offers Statement of Purpose Workshops every autumn quarter, generally in October. Check the englmajors listserv postings for dates and locations after the beginning of Autumn Quarter, or contact English Advising at engladv@u.washington.edu or (206) 543-2634. UW English majors and alumni are welcome to consult with English advisers on an individual basis about drafting the Statement of Purpose. Contact English Advising at engladv@u.washington.edu or (206) 543-2634.

WRITING STATEMENTS OF PURPOSE FOR ADMISSION TO GRADUATE PROGRAMS IN ENGLISH

ADMISSION AS MATCHMAKING

Applicants are usually very aware of one of the implied questions in the graduate admission process: "Am I good enough?" This is obviously an important question. Any admission committee will be looking for applicants who have demonstrated:

- adequate preparation in their field
- academic excellence
- maturity and purposefulness
- intellectual curiosity and a sustaining enthusiasm for the work

Applicants are generally insufficiently aware of the other important implied question, though: "Is this program a good fit for me, and am I a good fit for this program?" Admission committees want to make a good match between their programs and the applicants, recruiting students who are not simply smart or talented, but students with scholarly or professional interests that can be pursued successfully within their programs. Applicants should research prospective schools thoroughly so that they know how those programs “match up” with their own intellectual priorities.

The job in the statement is not to talk about your intellectual prowess, but rather about your interests and goals! If you do a good job of this, you will demonstrate your intellectual prowess.

ASSESSMENT

Before you can hope to make a good “match,” and certainly before you can write a powerful statement of purpose, you need to engage in a couple different types of assessment:

SELF ASSESSMENT:

Self assessment is a critical first task for any student considering graduate study. Is graduate study in English the right choice for you? Graduate school is not a natural extension of undergraduate study, but rather a rigorous training ground for scholars and professionals. To know whether graduate study is desirable or necessary, you should, ideally, have a firm sense of your academic and career goals. Find out what training and credentials you actually need to pursue your individual goals. Do you want to do original research in literature, English linguistics, or critical theory and teach at the undergraduate or graduate level? If so, then graduate study is definitely in your future. Looking for a career in publishing, editing, public relations, journalism, or technical communication? Well, graduate study in English might be one way to go, but it's probably not the most efficient. Instead, some really targeted internship experiences, or an M.A. in a professional program may be better choices. In some cases, however, extremely capable applicants may not have a firm sense of professional direction. This doesn't necessarily mean they shouldn't go to graduate
school. But it may mean that they could use a “gap” year to explore and make decisions. Finally, even in the absence of a clear professional pathway, a strong desire to learn and do research at advanced levels may be a sufficient basis for pursuing graduate study. Just be sure you're not making this decision based on fear of a bad job market, lack of knowledge about career options, or sheer laziness!

The self assessment process also asks you to reflect on your specific intellectual interests within your field. Are you more interested in scholarship and criticism, or in creating your own original poems, stories, and novels? Do you like reading and writing about texts and authors from a given historical period? Is there a critical approach or set of methods which interest you? Do you like to solve theoretical problems? Are you drawn to interdisciplinary approaches to literary study? Is there a particular set of issues or questions to which you find yourself returning as you encounter new texts? The more aware of your own interests you are, the likelier it is that you will pick programs that are right for you.

PROGRAM ASSESSMENT:

Finding the right program takes a great deal of research. Identifying “nationally ranked” programs is only one way – and a very limited way – of going about your search. More importantly, you need to find those programs that will allow you to do work within your field of specialization. You need to make sure that the schools you choose have the necessary faculty and facilities. For example, if you wish to specialize in medieval and textual studies, you need to make sure that the programs you select have a sufficient number of good medievalists, and at least a couple people who do research in the art of the book. Or, if you wish to do research into women's literary responses to the opening of the American frontier through letters and memoirs, then you should look for libraries with rich special collections in 19th-century American personal documents. If you want to do post-colonial studies, then you need to make sure your chosen schools have English faculty who work in that area, and preferably also have graduate programs in related fields, such as African Studies or Near East Studies, where you may find additional mentors.

If the programs you select do not offer opportunities to study in your chosen specializations, then it's not going to be a good “match.” You'll either end up dissatisfied with the program, or you may be denied admission because the faculty people on the admissions committee will see the mismatch between your stated goals and interests and what they have to offer.

Beyond that, make sure that other factors which may affect your quality of life over the next 5 to 7 years are acceptable. Hate cold weather? Don't go to Buffalo! Need a large, lively Jewish community to sustain you? Think twice about relocating to Iowa. Just because you're a graduate student doesn't mean you stop being human!

THE STATEMENT AS A MATCHMAKING TOOL

The other parts of the application tell only part of the story. Students have a tendency to focus on the so-called “objective” factors, such as grades and test scores. Unlike some fields, firm “cutoffs” for GPA and GRE scores are not the norm in English. Although each school may weight these factors differently, it is generally true that the so-called “subjective” admissions factors, which include letters of recommendation and the critical and/or creative writing sample, are absolutely critical. One of the key “subjective” factors is the statement of purpose. The statement provides information about the applicant that cannot be conveyed by the transcript or by test scores. Because the statement focuses on the applicant's interests and goals, it is vital for helping admission committees make a good “match” between their program and applicants. It also, along with letters of recommendation, acts to document educational experiences such as undergraduate research which may not necessarily be transcribed.

Finally, the statement puts a “human face” on the application, lets the committee know a little bit about the applicant as an individual. This is particularly important in fields where “suitability” is an issue, such as K-12 education. It can make an applicant stand out favorably (or unfavorably!) from an impressive pool. It can tell the faculty on the admissions committee whether you're somebody they want in their graduate seminars, in their research labs, or under their supervision for exams or dissertation. Don't underestimate the “human” element in the admissions process!

THE STATEMENT AS AID TO RECOMMENDERS

Provide a copy of your statement, or at least a good working draft, to your recommenders. This will help ensure that what you say about yourself does not conflict with what they say about you and your goals. It will also function as a helpful reminder of details they may forget.
STATEMENT OF PURPOSE CONTENT

- The statement of purpose is – first and foremost - a place to express your intellectual interests and professional objectives.
- The statement should look both backward and forward. If it doesn't say something significant about where you have been intellectually and/or professionally and where you see yourself going, then it hasn't done its job.
- Ideally, the statement should be institution-specific. This greatly enhances its value as a matchmaking tool and shows that you know how to do research.
- The statement may address gaps or weaknesses in your history when necessary but should not dwell on them.
- It should not be a loose collection of information or informal laundry list of accomplishments, but rather a coherent essay which focuses on one or two important ideas and develops those ideas with a fair degree of specificity.
- It should include plenty of concrete information! Vague generalizations and other types of content-free writing should be avoided!

DISCIPLINE-SPECIFIC INFORMATION AND VARIATIONS

- For information about conventions, usages, vocabulary, or concepts which may be peculiar to your discipline, make sure you consult with advisers or faculty in your field. Don't use language that just sounds “impressive.”
- The importance of the role played by the statement of purpose varies from one field to another. For example, it plays a much more central role in admission to a Master in Social Work program than to law school. However, you should never assume it is unimportant! In English and other humanities disciplines, it is a key part of your application.

STYLE

- The biggest danger is the completely bland or “voiceless” statement.
- Successful statements can be either more conversational, or more formal and “academic” in tone.
- Do not experiment! Be conservative, even if it seems less scintillating.
- Meticulous proofreading is required. The statement should be completely error-free.

AVOID

- Gratuitous self-revelation. This is not a confessional occasion. Every piece of information needs to pass the “so what?” test for relevance.
- Showboating (going on and on about awards, honors, prizes, etc.).
- Using jargon of one's discipline in a heavy-handed manner intended to impress.
- Name-dropping, flattery, or other attempts to ingratiate or bamboozle.
- Clichés, vacuous truisms, vague generalizations, second-hand information.
- Misrepresentations of yourself or your interests.

FORMAT

- Varies wildly from one school to another. Follow instructions!
- Single-spacing is the accepted convention, except when an application specifies otherwise.
- When no specific instructions regarding length or format are given, produce an essay that is one and a half to two single-spaced pages. Any less gives you scant room to be detailed; any more gives you plenty of room for judicious editing.

TIMELINE

- Begin drafting early, at least two months prior to your deadline.
- Two months will give you time to put together a decent draft in time to provide it to recommenders.
- Two months will also allow sufficient time to revise, revise, revise! Get responses from real readers, then revise, revise, revise!

Mel Wensel
Director of Academic Services