

Statements of interest/ Research proposals

Transcript of Voicethread Presentation

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1. Welcome to this Voicethread presentation on Statements of Interest, also sometimes called a Research Statement, Statement of Intent, or a Statement of Research Interest. My name is Aleksander Franciczek and I am a Writing Specialist at The Write Place at King's. If you are listening to this, you are probably well along in the process of researching, and applying to, graduate schools. Congratulations on making that decision, and I wish you good luck with your applications.
2. What is a Statement of Interest? Also sometimes called a Research statement, a Statement of interest is a 1 to 2 page document required for many grad school applications to research-based programs and for major scholarships like the Ontario Government Scholarship (the OGS) or the SSHRC scholarships. Unlike with a personal statement, where the focus is usually presenting a personal story of engagement with the research question or field, the main purpose of the Statement of Interest is to clearly and concisely conceptualize a research-based project that you *may* end up pursuing during the program. You are not bound by this statement to see it through, but, rather, it's main purpose is to showcase your scholarly skills and breadth of knowledge; your ability to think, frame questions, read, research, and write like a scholar will be measured by readers of this document. Your audience will consist largely of scholars in your own field, but (particularly in scholarship applications) may include some administrators or scholars from adjacent fields, so make sure you write in a manner that will be accessible for non-expert audiences as well.
3. In this presentation, I will touch on the content and structure of a Statement of Interest, and the process for writing one. But before I do that, I want to make some general points. First, please be aware that this presentation contains general guidelines. If your target institution advises you to frame your proposal differently, by answering questions, for example, or by writing something more like a Personal Statement, follow their instructions. In fact, the best way to show that you can be a good researcher is to demonstrate that you have read the instructions closely and have followed them to the letter. If you are lucky enough to get advice from a particular professor who knows the field or the institution, again, make sure you follow their tips.

The process of applying to graduate school is quite time consuming, and includes many tasks that are not particularly entertaining. Make sure you start early, so that you have time to complete these tasks. One of the most important tasks is researching the institutions you are applying to. Customize your Statement of Interest to each school by reflecting on the unique resources available to you there; avoid writing a generic statement.

Another task to complete early is emailing your professors for references. When you are emailing them, explain who you are (especially if a couple of years have passed since they taught you), and why you are asking them to write a reference for you. Attach your updated resume and a writing sample, ideally from their course. Send them a gentle and polite reminder as the deadline approaches, and send them a draft of your Statement of Interest when you have one so they can comment on your capability if they would like to.

4. Here are some general guidelines for content and structure in a Statement of Interest
 - a) You could begin by introducing yourself; the first paragraph of your Statement of Interest could include a couple of sentences about your academic background and three or four sentences about your interest in the field, and formative experiences that led to this interest. Avoid repeating information that can easily be found by a quick glance at your resume or your transcript; give a sense of what the discipline or the topic really means to you.
 - b) You can then outline, in a paragraph or two, the specific focus and goals of your proposed or future research. What are your central research questions? Why are they important—why should people care about them? Introduce key ideas that will drive your project—a theoretical framework, for example, or a gap in the field that your project will fill in. Are there any implications or applications for your project that may be of wider social value? Have you already done research related to this, or have you had any research experience? If you have done work on a Year 4 capstone project or Honors thesis, for example, or a Year 3 term paper where you were also a research assistant to a professor, this is where you can mention the skills you have acquired (e.g., are you familiar with SPSS or structural equation modelling? Or mention the research-based achievements, such as conference presentations or a publication, that you are proud of.)
 - c) Devote some space to important concepts and ideas from established scholars that will feed into your project to contextualize it as significant to your field. Explain how your research fits in with and develops these ideas. You can blend this research into your outline of your own research (integrating it with ideas from the previous section), or have separate paragraphs on it. This part must be written after some reading and research, and can draw on your strengths in some of your Year 3 and 4 courses. You could also mention the type of methodology (e.g., grounded theory) or the theoretical frameworks (e.g., critical race theory) that you will use. Don't forget to cite all these sources correctly, both in-text and on a References list or Works Cited page!
 - d) End your proposal or Statement of Interest with a customized conclusion, where you mention specific aspects of the institution that appeal to your interest, and, conversely, show why you would be a good choice for the institution. If relevant, you could namedrop a specific faculty member with whom you are interested in working.

It is important for you to find model Statements of Interest that are from your own discipline. To do this, do an internet search for "Statement of Interest" and the name of your discipline. Look for university departmental or writing centre websites, rather than popular sites like Howto or Quora. When I tried this with "Psychology," here is one of the results I got:

<http://myweb.facstaff.wvu.edu/haskelt/psychedup/resources/SampleStatement-MSExpPsych.pdf>

5. A Statement of Interest should be concise, clear, focused and readable. There are some common mistakes to avoid. One of the most common mistakes is making the research area too broad. For example, an English-based proposal to research gender in Shakespeare is simply not viable; anyone who has done some research in the field will know that it would take a lifetime to cover this topic. A more focused and viable research project could propose to research representations of cross-dressing in *Twelfth Night*, *As You Like It*, and *Two Gentlemen of Verona*, informed by the work of Werstine, Purkis, and Kidney – experts in Shakespearean study. As another example, a Psychology proposal to research why some people discriminate against other people is far too vague; a more focused proposal would be to examine the part that racial stereotypes play in reinforcing right-wing authoritarianism, taking the work of Altemeyer (2004) as a starting point.

6. Next, I will touch upon the process for writing a research proposal or Statement of Interest and the tasks that need to be completed at each stage.

At the prewriting stage, to help you brainstorm, you could ask yourself some of these questions:

- What experiences (courses, volunteer, extracurricular) during your undergrad inspired/prepared you to continue your studies in this particular area?
- What research questions are driving your project?
- What gaps in the area have scholars not sufficiently explored? Your project is an opportunity to fill those gaps and approach the research area in a unique way.
- What texts that you read were most impactful to your thinking about this project? What were their most significant contributions/limitations? How does your own research respond to them? If you have time, consider looking up related texts to broaden your knowledge of the area.
- What resources (faculty, program focus, research labs) does the specific school(s) you are applying to have to offer for your particular area? Why do you think you'd be a good fit for that institution/program?

7. When you are drafting your Statement of Interest,

- use the structure required by the Statement of Interest form or question in your application package, or, if there are no specific instructions, use the structure outlined in this presentation.
- When you are drafting, keep your audience in mind: they are academics who already know their own institution (and don't need to hear you praising it), who have access to your transcript and

resume, who know the field, but may not know sub-fields within it, who are looking for evidence of research skills and capacity in your writing.

- Use clear and concise language; show your awareness of the technical vocabulary in your field without excessive and alienating reliance on terminological jargon.
- Do not use internet templates; they are likely to yield cookie-cutter results that will betray their origin.
- This is a good stage to seek guidance from a Write Place consultant, senior tutor, or Specialist and also to seek guidance from a faculty member in the same field.

8. At the revision stage, which will produce your final draft, check your work for having...

- given a clear or focused conceptualization of your project
- a strong structure and flow between paragraphs and sections
- used clear, concise, attention-grabbing language
- employed technical vocabulary, but without jargon overload
- stayed within the word count, and followed other instructions
- elaborated the project to the right extent, without too much specificity and/or oversimplification
- made specific references to research and cited sources correctly
- been edited for style and mechanics.

9. Other common mistakes that could make your statement of interest sound weak include:

- Sounding unfocused and as if you have not really thought about your plans with any degree of detail
- Sounding as if you are not sure of what you are doing, and as if you will need a lot of supervision
- Appearing to have not researched the fit between the university and your project
- Praising the target university without specific details
- Coming across as overambitious, taking on far more than a Master's level project can cover
- Sounding unscholarly, and relying too much on your own intuitions
- Conversely, being too technical, as if you want to obscure your point rather than communicate it
- Being careless, not editing for spelling, punctuation, grammar, paragraphing, and other errors

10. Thank you for listening to this presentation on Statements of Interest! The Write Place and I wish you all the best with your applications!