

WHAT DO COLLEGES LOOK FOR IN A STATEMENT OF PURPOSE?

The primary question admissions committee members ask themselves when they read a Statement of Purpose is: What does this essay tell me about the person who wrote it?

Put yourself in an admission officer's shoes. From among thousands of applications, you have to choose the fraction of students that will comprise next year's incoming class. A mix of interesting, confident and enthusiastic people who will make the class a stimulating place. Academic achievements and good test scores are important. But in an era where the majority of applicants have good academic records, it becomes increasingly difficult to distinguish between individuals and decide who gets the offer of admission.

When you apply, each of the items in the application packet -recommendations, extra-curricular achievements, work samples - adds an extra dimension to your personality. But it is the SoP that brings you to life. Which is why each essay is read carefully by at least two and often four or five people before a decision is taken on the application.

Does this mean that the SoP is the main deciding factor? No. Your academic record, grades and the courses you took- are the first section admission committee members turn to. Standardized test scores are useful to know where you stand in the applicant pool. For graduate schools, relevant work or academic experience is important. Being from a reputed school or college confers a distinct advantage. What your teachers or boss think of you goes a long way towards the school's opinion. A good work sample can show your creativity, skill and professionalism.

However, only the SoP or application essays can bring out your uniqueness. And therefore make or break your application. An applicant who does not take the essay seriously is throwing away the best opportunity available.

So are the admission officers looking for specific personality sorts? Well, yes and no. Creativity, curiosity, pride in your work, an enthusiasm for learning, a capacity for teamwork, the ability to think independently and so on are all good attributes, and most of us share these in varying proportions. But what schools look for is a mix of individuals that together, form a well-balanced class. This would include several personality types.

It is good to go through the school's brochure or web site, speak to people about it, visit if that is possible; get a feel of the student mix that they look for and decide if this is the school for you. However, trying to tailor your SoP to reflect what you think the school is looking for is dangerous business. The people who read your application have been doing so for years and are skilled at spotting fakes. They are likely to know soon if a particular author is saying something for effect or if an essay does not ring true. And that means almost certain rejection.

What is this, you might ask. Of course we want to have an effect on the admissions officers. The important thing is to do so without appearing dishonest. If, for instance, you talk about your deep desire to make society a better place, your application should reflect it. Have you done anything about this desire? Can you talk about your actions and experiences? A small example of something you did, not necessarily spectacular, can do more towards boosting your chances than the noblest platitude can.

Don't try to be something you are not. Don't try to tell the admissions committee what you think they want to hear. Be honest, look inside yourself and do your best.

Which brings us to the next point - self-knowledge. The people who read your essay want to be convinced that you have thought long and hard about who you are, what are the things you appreciate, what inspires you. What you want out of life, and where you are going from here. It is not necessary to have all the answers . after all, several admirable people have no idea where they are going even at age 40 or 50. It is necessary to show that you have thought about this. And that these life experiences have taught you something.

Finally, you have to show a desire to learn. From your books and teachers, from your classmates, from music or art, from life itself.

Too vague for you? Turn to the section on starting your SoP and find out how these attributes translate into concrete steps.

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