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# What They Don't Tell You About the Statement of Purpose

**SARAH ANJUM BARI**

The university application, be it for a graduate or undergraduate programme, often relies heavily on numbers. And numbers, such as low GPA or language test scores and unsavoury grades on an A Levels certificate, can be a misleading representative of a student's potential. Letters of recommendations, too, are *another* person's evaluation of our potential.

The SOP alone allows us the freedom to communicate, in our own voice and style, our triumphs and limitations, our ambitions. Here we can add nuance and colour to our otherwise mechanical application and explain who we are beyond the numbers.

It is also among the only parts of the application that we can continue to revise, unlike those godforsaken numbers. And so, while it is normal to feel the stirrings of an existential crisis by the prospect of recreating oneself on a blank page, it has helped me, in the past, to remember that no one is better placed to speak about me than, well, me.

Tutorials on writing SOPs will suggest outlining the points we must address in the statement — our skills and qualifications, our motivations for applying to a specific programme, who we are outside of studies and how that complements our eligibility for a program.

The SOP, by the way, is a conversation with the admissions committee. In the same way that I wouldn't regale someone with a list of my qualifications in a conversation, here, it can help to avoid repetitive sentences along the lines of "I have done [this or that]" or "I am capable

of [doing this or that]".

Among the most fruitful communications with professors or academic directors I've witnessed or experienced are the ones in which we chatted about what the program offers, what about it excites either of us, the surrounding context of the field, its location, its people. That exchange of ideas, of the potential you bring to the table and the potential you hope to gain, translated onto a page is the SOP.

Furthermore, nothing parallels the power of editing. While the outline can offer the building blocks of the personal statement, the text itself becomes much more powerful if we first write a longer draft, pouring onto the page all that we want to convey to the committee.

After that, it's a matter of shaving away the weaker sentences and the unwitting repetitions. It is here that returning to the draft with a fresh mind, and the suggestions of other beta readers (friends, colleagues, teachers, family) prove most valuable.

Three years after finishing grad school, I often look back on the essays I wrote and wonder how I ever gained admission. But as an academic director explained to me afterwards, it was the fact that my research interests aligned with their specific offerings that proved to be the deciding factor in my application.

I've also come to realise that this sense of alienation that I feel from a draft written years earlier might also be a sign of growth, proof that something in me changed since attending the program and all the experience it brought me.

I hope it brings the same and more for you.

## For the Ones Who Stay Behind

**IQRA L QAMARI**

Packed luggage. Fretting over farewell presents. Loud and ensemble hang-outs. Hurried goodbyes and slowed-down nostalgia.

Friends leaving for higher education abroad is a bittersweet experience most of us live through. Amidst all the chaotic excitement, there are those who secretly heave a sigh of wistfulness, thinking how they too could have been wearing those airport shoes.

Many of us dream of a lucrative overseas degree, with our ideas and aspirations being moulded culturally by movies and media that promise the grand college experience — a bustling campus, dormitory shenanigans, new city, friends and the freedom to be oneself.

So naturally, we prepare excitedly for this transition with meticulous care, but then for some of us, all these plans fall flat on its face when life gives us a reality check. A cold nudge, that amidst all the planning, we might have forgotten to make allowances for. Factors such as familial responsibilities, financial setbacks, ailment of a close one, or just any sudden curveball life throws at us, particularly aim at these nascent dreams.

Years ago, such a life-altering episode had grabbed me by the shoulders. I had unsuspectingly ventured into a new country in pursuit of my own aspirations, but had been compelled to fly back home, to an ailing loved one. Seething with hurt and self-pity, I came back stripped off of the zeal that I earlier used to harbour towards life. Days turned to months and all I could think of was how I was stuck in a dead end, while all my friends had moved along.

In hindsight, truthfully, I probably needed that period of listlessness to allow myself to realign. Having a series of small epiphanies, I found myself trying to get back on track and making the best of the life that I did not pick but was gifted with.

I did not wake up one day all geared up to grab life by the horns, rather, it was a gradual process filled with relapses and recoveries, gaining strength to face it all and allowing myself to feel vulnerable again. I enrolled myself into a university here, aced my exams, made precious friends, and found my love for writing. I realised that with unyielding perseverance, life will entice again with a sense of purpose and the promise of brand new adventures.

Today, I can genuinely say that coming back home — a divine intervention — worked out better for me.

As our utopian fantasies run wild, let us not forget that there's a life waiting to be cherished and lived here too. There are opportunities to be explored, friends to be made and dreams to be chased, and one never knows when an opportunity of studying abroad might step in again. And if it doesn't, it's okay.

All of this optimism will usually jump out the window at the slightest inconvenience, but it should be on us to find the silver lining again, regardless of your GPS coordinates.

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