

# Statement of Purpose (SOP)

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## Objective content

- There's no agreement on how important SOP is, even among faculty members
  - There are faculty members who don't read it
  - There are others who read it
  - There are faculty members who iterate 4-6 drafts with their predocs
- There is no 1 way to write an SOP
  - Personal SOPs get into top programs
  - Professional SOPs get into top programs
- There are different length limits: 250w, 300w, 500w, 1page, 2page, 1000w.

# Statement of Purpose (SOP)

## Advice (subjective)

- It matters, if you can write a good one
  - “Does it matter” has a trivially true “yes” answer: a “no” requires all to ignore, but the space of admissions committee members is rich.
  - Real question: should you take it seriously?
  - Rule of thumb: Time-constrained readers more likely to read shorter than longer materials.
  - It’s one of the few actionable items that you can personally work on without a time machine, even if it does not matter as much as your GPA, an indicator of whether you have an Ivy+ A.B., the strength of your letters, or an indicator of whether your GRE is  $> 168$ .
- Advice
  - Starting point: past predoc examples + GS (or some other) lab advice
  - Write a two-page (1000w) version, and then prepare shorter versions
  - For the long version, at least write 1-2 paragraphs about your writing sample
    - Do not assume that readers will read it (see rule of thumb above).
  - Be strategic about SoP vs diversity statement (if any)

# Writing Sample

# Writing Sample

You SHOULD have a good writing sample

- You learn.
- It's read (directly / through your SoP / rec letters).
- It's your productive output (not just signaling).
- You learn to write papers through writing papers.
- What else do you talk about during interviews + visit days?
- You are applying to a research program. Show your research.
  - If you do not have research, ask yourself why you're applying / if you're ready / when you'll do research.

# Writing Sample

Advice (subjective)

- Good idea poorly executed > Bad idea executed well
  - Good execution is easy to learn (e.g. Sun and Abraham)
  - Nobody will read your Online Appendix Figure 5's last sentence in figure notes
- There are many resources on how to write a paper. If you do not know any, find them.
- (Abstract > Intro >) Figure > > Table (~ the rest)
  - Skim-ability
  - Nonparametric graphing techniques often tell a fuller story than numbers from (parametric) regressions
- “Writing” sample is not just about writing
  - Lea Nagel: writing, use of data, creativity, etc

# Writing tips on SoP + Writing Sample

## Writing tips on SoP + Writing Sample

- Draft early; read and revise regularly
- Take feedback, especially from outside your field.
  - Because readers are diverse.
- Say upfront why your readers should care.
  - “Your audience does not care about your topic; You have 1–2 slides to change their minds”
- Don’t demand reader attention
  - Don’t: “I utilize a regression  $Y_i = \alpha + \beta D_i + X_i \delta + e_i$  where  $Y$  is PhD placement,  $D$  is an indicator of having a Clark medalist PI,  $X$  includes gender, age, age squared, ethnicity. I estimate  $\beta$ , my parameter of interest”
  - Do: “I compare the PhD placement of applicants with Clark-medalist PIs to their demographically-similar cohort without Clark-medalist PIs.”
  - Don’t: “I employ a close-election RDD to study the equity market premium of governor’s office”
  - Do: “I compare the future stock returns of gubernatorial candidates who narrowly won versus lost an election.”