

# Carnegie Mellon University



## Graduate Runway 2021

Fundamentals of Graduate Study

Workshop 3

Writing a winning SOP

[www.cmu.edu](http://www.cmu.edu)

# Today's objectives

- ▶ What is a statement of purpose (SOP)?
- ▶ What are SOP reviewers looking for?
- ▶ How should I get started?
- ▶ How should I structure my SOP?
- ▶ What should I avoid in my SOP?

# What is an SOP?

A **short essay** explaining the **purpose** of your application for your **desired program** at your **chosen university**.



# What is the purpose of an SOP?

**Demonstrate** you have the academic **strengths, motivation** and **career goals** to **be successful** and **add value** to the university as a student and an alum.

# What are SOP reviewers looking for?



- ▶ Academic potential to succeed
- ▶ Valuable & impactful career goals
- ▶ Alignment with their vision, mission & values
- ▶ Motivation & initiative
- ▶ Determination to overcome & learn from adversity
- ▶ Writing skills & attention to detail
- ▶ Ability to follow instructions
- ▶ Academic integrity

# Show them you're making an informed decision

- ▶ Specific courses you want to take
- ▶ Specific faculty you're interested in working with
- ▶ Specific aspects of the program that excite you
- ▶ Specific features of the university that attract you
- ▶ How the program will support your career goals

# Show them the value you will add

- ▶ Relevant technical skills you have gained from your academic or professional background
- ▶ Research you have conducted
- ▶ Your personal contribution to relevant projects
- ▶ Your professional or academic achievements
- ▶ Extracurricular activities that show key transferable skills, e.g.:
  - ▶ Leadership
  - ▶ Teamwork
  - ▶ Communication



How should I get  
started?



# Research the program



## Carnegie Mellon University Africa

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## About Carnegie Mellon University Africa in Rwanda

CMU-Africa's vision is to educate and empower the next generation of African leaders and innovators by delivering a world-class educational experience. Our mission is to produce creative and technically strong engineers, who have been trained in the African context, and prepared to make transformative impact in their communities and the world.

CMU-Africa was established in 2011 and is the only U.S. research university offering its master's degrees with a full-time faculty, staff and operations in Africa. Born out of a partnership between CMU and the Government of Rwanda, CMU-Africa is addressing the critical shortage of high quality engineering talent required to accelerate development in Africa—home to the fastest growing workforce in the world.

CMU's presence in Rwanda provides a platform to engage in Africa's most significant opportunities and challenges through world-class education and contextually-relevant research.

# Brainstorm some general ideas

- ▶ Why do you want to study at graduate level?
- ▶ Why are you applying to that particular program?
  - ▶ What courses or features of the program excite you the most?
- ▶ How will your professional and personal experiences add value to the program?
- ▶ What makes you special?
- ▶ How do you plan to use this degree?
  - ▶ How will this degree contribute to your career and life goals?

Write a concise one or two page statement of purpose (no less than 500 and no more than 1,000 words) in the following format. Your essay should begin **"My objective in pursuing my program of choice is ..."**:

**1. Briefly explain your objectives in pursuing a Master of Science degree:**

- What specific areas do you want to study at graduate school?
- Why are you interested in pursuing that particular area of study?
- What do you plan to do with your degree once you graduate? Include your career goals and plans for your future.

**2. Describe why you think you are a good candidate for this program at CMU-Africa:**

- Provide information about your academic background and describe any significant academic projects.
- Provide information about any industrial or commercial work experience, including any research experience and publications.
- Describe any relevant internships, research projects, personal projects or extracurricular activities.
- What will be the biggest challenge for you in graduate school? What strengths do you bring with you?

Before submitting, proofread your essay to make sure that you use appropriate grammar, and that your writing is clear.

PS: Please ensure that the content in your essay is your own or has been correctly referenced. Any form of plagiarism found in your essay will be considered as a breach of the honor code you signed at the beginning of this application. **If you are found to be in breach of the honor code, your application will be rejected and you will be barred from applying to CMU-Africa in the future.**

# Analyze the instructions

# Develop an outline

## **Introduction**

Explain your motivation for applying to grad school and how this relates to who you are and what you want to do in your career.

## **Second paragraph**

- ▶ The reason(s) for your interest in this particular program.
- ▶ Your relevant professional goals.

## **Third paragraph**

- ▶ Your relevant experience and accomplishments.
- ▶ The value you will add to the program & university.

## **Conclusion**

A brief summary of your SOP that emphasizes your qualifications and good fit with the university.

# What to avoid

- ▶ Failing to follow the instructions or address all parts of the prompt
- ▶ Typos and errors in punctuation, spelling or grammar
- ▶ An informal style
- ▶ Poor writing (unclear structure, lack of paragraphs, long sentences)
- ▶ Your life story or irrelevant information
- ▶ No concrete examples of your experience & achievements
- ▶ Telling them what they already know (e.g. a top-ranking university)
- ▶ Dishonesty or inauthenticity (writing what you think they want to read)
- ▶ Plagiarism