

## How to write a competitive Statement of Research Interests / Statement of Purpose / Statement of Intent for admission to Graduate School

Based on a twitter post by  
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(who graciously allowed us to use this information on our webpage for the benefit of our prospective students)

Most students assume (understandably!) that a graduate school Statement of Interest should be like that written for an undergraduate application. They write autobiographically – “I started here, then I did A then B then C really well, and now I’m applying to work with you”. This is a mistake.

Unlike an undergraduate statement, a graduate school Statement of Interest needs to tell the reader (the professor(s) who you want to work with) what you want to work on. The main thing readers want is to understand how your interests would gel with theirs, and to imagine in what areas and how they might best be able to advise and mentor you.

Competitive Statements of Interest can be written in three acts. Act I: Research interests. Act II: Supporting evidence (background/experience). Act III: Fit to the faculty/department.

Act I: What are your research interests? What are the intellectual issues you want to better understand? This should be specific enough to make it clear that you know the major open questions in your research area, but not so specific that you’re proposing one particular study, as this would limit you to work in one lab or with one person only.

Act II: What is your experience and background enabling you to carry out graduate work on these issues? Your thesis/RA experience shouldn’t be an autobiography, it should be evidence -- look, I really have the skills, ability, perseverance, etc. to do this work!

Act III: How do your interests match specific faculty members at the department or program you’re applying to? This is the part that changes the most between applications to different schools or programs. Your core interests (Act I) shouldn’t change much – they’re what you generally want to work on, regardless of where!

This leads to an important point: Act I should really be the actual reason you’re applying. But don’t be too hard on yourself. It takes a long time and lots of trial-and-error to figure out your intellectual interests. If you haven’t figured them out yet, be honest about where you stand right now with your research curiosity. But if you find yourself making stuff up or only trying to appeal to a professor just to get accepted, take a step back and ask yourself why you’re applying in the first place. A Master’s degree and to an even greater extent, a PhD, take too long and pay too little to do something you’re not genuinely excited about.