Create Your Very Own SOP Story!
Communicate Your Attributes, Values and Contributions in a Clear, Concise and Inviting Manner

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Abstract

"Tell me about yourself." When we are asked that question, whether in casual conversation or in a more formal setting such as a job interview, how well do we capture our true selves in our answer? How often do we really think about who we are, what we believe in and how we want to communicate our values, vision and goals to another person in just a few sentences? This article discusses how to create a Statement of Purpose.

Keywords

professional development; career planning; purpose; personal development; brand

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"Tell me about yourself." When we are asked that question, whether in casual conversation or in a more formal setting such as a job interview, how well do we capture our true selves in our answer? How often do we really think about who we are, what we believe in, and how we want to communicate our values, vision and goals to another person in just a few sentences?
Purpose is defined as “the reason for which anything is done, created or exists,” and “fixed intention in doing something; determination” (“Purpose”). A Statement of Purpose is a useful tool that may help you get where you want to go by helping you define your intention. Creating your own Statement of Purpose will help you take a look at yourself and your work. It will help you see how your professional situation fits in with the rest of your life and think about why you chose to do what you are doing now. It can also help you gain confidence, articulate your passion and strengths, and enable you to have a ready answer to the question what do you do?

To create a personal or professional Statement of Purpose, one must start with some self-evaluation. Where do I want to go? How is what I’m doing now getting me there? These seem like simple questions, but they often dig up some unexpected answers. It will take some reflection and a few tries to produce a statement that is authentic, represents your personal “brand”, and invites further conversation.

**SOP vs. Mission**

You might be familiar with the concept of a mission statement. A mission statement is a written declaration of specific focus that may shift over time as the market and environment changes. It answers the questions what do we do? and for whom do we do it? A Statement of Purpose, however, documents the fundamental reason for your existence from a business perspective. It is the motivational force that drives what you do. Purpose goes deeper and will outlast the product you are selling or a business goal that you are trying to achieve. In essence, it is your corporate or personal reason for being: why you do what you do (Kelly, par. 6).

**Why do we need a Statement of Purpose?**

- A Statement of Purpose is a communications tool you will use in conversations throughout your career – in networking, meetings and interviews.
- You will use written versions of it in your cover letters and on your resume where it becomes the basis for a summary statement.
- It is a personal statement about who you are, what has influenced your career path so far, and should include your professional interests and where you plan to go from here.
- It should give a good indication of the type of person you are.
- It responds to the inquiry “Tell me about yourself.”
- It gives you an opportunity to succinctly and positively position yourself in the minds of listeners.
How might we use it?

The most common reasons to craft a Statement of Purpose are job interviews, college/university applications, project presentations, grant applications or even cocktail party conversations. You will have the opportunity to provide written versions of your statement for applications, but you will need a shorter, more succinct version for interviews, presentations and conversation. As Branch Managers for Brampton Library, we are involved in the recruitment process, and we have often thought that the process of crafting an SOP would be a useful exercise for those seeking employment. Most interviews contain an opportunity for candidates to “sell themselves” to an interview panel, and a prepared statement is an excellent starting point for a conversation that will explain who you are and what you stand for and give an idea of your personal brand. A session for the OLA Super Conference was the result of this way of thinking of the SOP as a professional development tool.

Building your personal brand

“Why fit in when you are born to stand out?” (Dr. Seuss)

How do others perceive you? What attributes do people associate with you? How can you maximize the ones that will help you stand out from everyone around you?

First impressions are powerful! Personal branding allows you to clarify what makes you unique – your skills, strengths and values – and to communicate to prospective employers and customers how these qualities make you stand out from others. Your personal brand can be thought of as your reputation – which builds over time and becomes synonymous with how people describe you. Through personal branding you clearly communicate the unique promise of value that you have to offer (Arruda and Dixon 29). Apart from taking advantage of the many online personal branding surveys available, which can help you better understand your professional reputation, you can gather valuable information simply by being aware of how people interact with and respond to you. When you are introduced or acknowledged, e.g., receiving compliments or thank you cards, listen to what people are communicating about your attributes. What adjectives do they consistently use to describe you? “Have you met Julie? She’s a most supportive and helpful staff member in this branch.” Or “I’d like to introduce you to Henry – he is our resident IT trouble-shooter extraordinaire.” If there is no consistency in what people are saying about you, then you may not be conveying a strong brand. The goal in personal branding is to maximize your positive attributes – your strengths – while diminishing negative ones.

Choose the best words

When you work on your statement, envision your best self. To help you get started quickly, write down three or four key words which you feel best describe
your essential qualities. Ask yourself again “What energizes me? How do my attributes connect with my key values? Am I clearly expressing my attributes, strengths and skills in all that I do every day – not only in words but in actions? What do people recognize my expertise in? What makes me stand out from my competition?” Choose the best words to describe your unique self. There is a difference between being described as “creative” vs. “innovative”, or as “ambitious” vs. “driven”, or as “generous” vs. “supportive”. Which words resonate with you most?

**Putting it all into words:** Determine your approach and the style of the statement

Your Statement of Purpose identifies what makes your brand important and unique so that the people who are making decisions about you clearly understand who you are, what you have to offer, and what makes you compelling. This is the foundation from which you can communicate your authentic self. There is no such thing as “the perfect way” to write a Statement of Purpose. There is only the one that is best for you with the circumstances that you are in at the present moment.

“Be yourself because everyone else is already taken.” (Oscar Wilde)

**Be authentic.** This quote from Oscar Wilde sums up one of the most important ingredients of personal branding: authenticity.

**Be specific, persuasive, clear and succinct.** Give evidence and give details. A sentence such as “I’m an outgoing, confident person with excellent leadership and communication skills,” is a generalized statement with no evidence to back it up. But a more specific statement such as “I initiated, organized and led 30 staff in the implementation of our highly successful week-long Children’s Author Festival at XXXX Library which was attended by over 500 people” gives proof that you indeed have these qualities.

**Frame your statement from a positive perspective.** It can be difficult to ‘sell yourself’ in your personal statement, but don’t talk about why you haven’t done something. Employ a positive perspective. Focus instead on your assets and on what you have done and intend to do.

**Show, don’t tell.** Demonstrate your commitment and motivation between the lines. Tell a story rather than list your skills. What have you learned from one skill you have perfected? What have you learned about your future goals, your career? For example: “Training as a professional coach made me realize that ongoing communication is a necessary tool to resolve and overcome the “background conversation” that blocks change. As change is instrumental to the survival of public libraries, I ensure that my team has ample opportunity to view change as potential for personal and professional growth by using staff meetings, one-on-one conversations, and an open door policy to reframe the conversation.
This has led to improved staff engagement at my branch and a team that is resilient and ready to handle the challenges we face moving forward in uncertain times.”

Avoid over-used clichés, jokes, quotes and personal trivia. Phrases such as “I have always wanted to be a…”, “I like to help”, “It has always been my dream to…”, “I have always been fascinated by…”, “I was born to work with books” – even “I have a passion for” – are very over-used and are found in hundreds of personal statements. If they don’t make a useful contribution to your Statement of Purpose, then leave them out.

Highlight your ’wow factor’. What is special about you? Showing your genuine enthusiasm and engagement with your chosen field through telling your stories about the first book you found in the library as a child and providing specific evidence about the project you achieved success with will make your statement stand out from the others and garner attention in your personal brand. This is how one participant put it: “I have learned a lot from reading too much as a child. One of the first books that had an impact on me was The Lion, The Witch and The Wardrobe by C.S. Lewis, where a cupboard door in an old house opened to a world of possibilities. As a library leader I continue to embrace this story of adventure and courage as I challenge and inspire others to recognize their unique strengths and to reach beyond their goals in their careers, relationships and personal successes.”

Write it

Now you know why you want to write a Statement of Purpose and have some raw material to start you thinking. All that is left to do is write it! Let us be very clear on this: thinking about writing it, planning to write it, and writing it in your head are NOT the same as actually writing it. That is why the bulk of the OLA session we delivered on this topic was devoted to actually writing it – so we have something tangible in hand to work on. Let this not be one more of the interesting things you’ve heard about; instead, let it be something you have actually done!

These are the instructions for writing your first draft:

- Use plain English, no jargon or lingo.
- Tell about your experience, your contribution, your intention.
- Form conclusions that explain the value of your challenges and learning.
- Be specific.

You can use examples to help. Please also keep in mind that the statement should sound natural when spoken out loud. When we write, we tend to lead into the topic, and write towards our conclusion. When you craft your SOP, it is good practice to lead with your “wow” and then back it up. How about this: “I’m a visionary leader! It comes naturally to me – from school days, through years of chairing community groups, to my current position as a manager. I utilize
confidence and sensitivity to persuade, engage and develop people with the ultimate goal of getting the best from the team for those we serve.”

If you find this exercise difficult, you are doing it right. For most of us in the library profession, it is easy to use more words and elaborate. If we try to distill to the essence, we really need to know what that essence is. And getting a handle on that essence is the good/hard/rewarding work that comes before and during the statement crafting. The key piece, though, is to put pen to paper and start – don’t overthink, don’t stay in your head.

**Steps for writing your SOP:**

**Step 1:** Write it down, mumble along, develop, craft, construct. This is a first draft, nothing more.

**Step 2:** Introduce your draft to the world. This will be awkward (sometimes even cringe-worthy), but it will be giving you the feedback you need to make it better and make it yours. Ideally you can try it out on three or four people, and you can always start in front of the mirror, pretending you’ve just been introduced and asked about what you do / your project is about / how you plan to change the world: “I enable successful new immigrant integration in my community by offering …”; “Through funding this project we can ensure teens have a safe and appropriate space to develop leadership skills by…”; “I care about people and how we can bring out the best in them. As a Branch Manager I ensure that staff and customers can use and treat the library space as an enabling resource that…”

The workshop environment at Super Conference was an ideal playground for this, but you can buddy up with a friend or colleague to work on this as well.

**Step 3:** As you verbalize your Statement of Purpose out loud, listen to yourself. Assess whether it:

- Clarifies the purpose behind your story.
- Communicates your values and your contribution in a clear, concise manner.
- Invites further conversation.
- Flows.

**Step 4:** Make changes for a second draft accordingly. Again, saying the (new and improved, second draft version of your) SOP out loud is important because that’s when you find out whether it works. Does it feel true? Give you energy? And, again: does it invite further conversation? Does it flow?

When you first start using your Statement of Purpose in conversation, it can feel off, awkward, even slightly embarrassing. Examine whether this is because you are simply not used to speaking this way, saying clearly what you are about,
consciously communicating your values, or because it sounds nice but doesn’t ring true and doesn’t really represent you. The cure for the former is practice, practice, practice: for the latter, rewrite, rewrite, rewrite.

The test for a good Statement of Purpose is whether it is an expression of who you are and what you stand for. Yes, it should be memorable and clear and everything else we’ve talked about so far. But, its core is the essence it communicates, not the packaging. The packaging is designed to support the understanding of that essence, nothing more.

Your completed SOP

Are you ready to write a “final” draft? A SOP is not a static product: as we incorporate more experience and more self-knowledge into our lives, our Statement of Purpose should change and grow with us. It will become easier to craft, sometimes emerge spontaneously as we respond to a question about ourselves, the work we do, the project we want supported. And it will be a valuable tool to move us towards the life, and impact on the world, we want to have.

Works Cited


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