



Every year I read a lot of grad school applications from accomplished people that don't give me the info I'm looking for. It feels like a major hidden curriculum thing. So here's (my opinion on) how to write a great Statement of Purpose/Research for a PhD program. 🧵 1/

☰ Author	Roman Feiman
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Roman Feiman [@RomanFeiman:](#)

Every year I read a lot of grad school applications from accomplished people that don't give me the info I'm looking for. It feels like a major hidden curriculum thing. So here's (my opinion on) how to write a great Statement of Purpose/Research for a PhD program. 📖 1/



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I read around 50-100 graduate applications every year. Maybe 95% of them make the same major mistake: they tell me very little about what the applicant actually wants to research. 2/



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Most students assume (understandably!) that a grad school statement should be like an undergrad 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. 3/



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Unlike an undergrad statement, a grad school SOP needs to tell the reader (the prof(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 and to imagine where they might be able to advise you. 4/



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The best SOPs I've read are written in three acts.

Act I: Research interests

Act II: Supporting evidence (background/experience)

Act III: Fit to the faculty/department

5/



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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 study. 6/



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Act II: What is the experience and background you have that enables you to carry out graduate work on these issues? Your thesis/RA experience shouldn't be autobiography, it should be evidence -- look, I really have the skills, ability, perseverance, etc. to do this work! 7/



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Act III: How do your interests match specific faculty members at the department you're applying to? This is the part that changes the most between applications. Your core interests (Act I) shouldn't change much -- they're what you generally want to work on, regardless of where! 8/



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This leads me to an important point: Act I should really be the actual reason you're applying. 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, that's not a knock on you! 9/



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But if you find yourself feeling like you're making stuff up or only trying to appeal to a PI just to get accepted, take a step back and ask yourself why you're applying. A PhD takes too long and pays too little to do something you're not genuinely excited about. 10/



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Finally, this is all just my opinion and I'm sure not universal. Still, I hope it helps some prospective students! My 1st draft grad app was an autobio too. Luckily, I had the chance to show it to a prof (thx [@Ori Friedman!](#)) who gave me this advice. I rewrote and it helped! 11/