The statement of purpose in graduate program applications: Genre structure and disciplinary variation

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Abstract

Recent research of student writing has included a few studies of the statement of purpose submitted as part of the admission process to programs of study, which have indicated variations in expectations by disciplinary gatekeepers. These studies indicate a need for further study of statements of purpose submitted to different departments, informed by the views of disciplinary specialists. In this paper, we first report on a survey of print and electronic resources on writing the statement, which revealed that information on writing statements for specific master’s programs is not consistently available. This lends support to the “semi-occluded” status of this genre. We also discuss a genre analysis of successful statements submitted to three master’s programs (Linguistics, Business Administration and Electrical Engineering) at a university in the US, drawing on the views of informants from these departments. Our findings indicate that, although statements from the three disciplines may contain the same rhetorical moves, they differ in the constituent steps used to realize some of the moves. These findings lead to implications not only for EAP instruction but also for master’s programs soliciting statements from prospective graduate students.

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1. Introduction

After much research on published academic texts, such as the research article, recent studies in ESP have attended to student writing, focusing mainly on culminating genres of graduate students such as master’s theses and doctoral dissertations, and to a lesser extent on undergraduate writing. This scholarship has considered the structure of student genres, cross-disciplinary variation, and the ways that student texts reflect their acculturation into disciplinary communities (Bunton, 2002, 2005; Charles, 2006; Paltridge, 2002; Pecorari, 2006; Prior, 1998; Thompson, 2001, 2005). One student-produced genre that has only recently been the focus of investigation is the statement of purpose (also known as the personal statement) produced as part of the application process to gain entrance into a university course of study (Barton, Ariail, & Smith, 2004; Bekins, Huckin, & Kijak, 2004; Brown, 2004). Although statements of purpose or personal statements do not appear on Swales’s (1996) list of occluded genres, authentic samples of successful statements are still not easily available to potential writers of this genre, particularly with respect to specific disciplinary expectation of these texts. The study of such “semi-occluded” texts that are “typically hidden . . . from the public gaze by a veil of confidentiality” (Swales, 1996, p. 46) produced by writers poised to enter a disciplinary community can yield useful discipline-specific insights.

The few studies on statements of purpose have shown that different norms are indeed found in statements written for different programs, such as medical schools, medical residency programs, and a clinical psychology Ph.D. program. Brown (2004), in his study of statements submitted to a Ph.D. program in clinical psychology, determined that the successful applicants focused on research experience and interests rather than practical experience, thus demonstrating a commitment to scientific epistemology. In Barton et al.’s (2004) study of statements submitted to four medical residency programs, the successful construction of a personal self is evaluated more favorably than the construction of the accomplished self. As will be discussed later, such discipline-specific information is not readily available in electronic and published resources about applying to all graduate programs. Nor may formal instruction on writing statements of purpose be always aligned to the views of disciplinary specialists. For example, Bekins et al. (2004) found that some of the discourse strategies (such as a hook) taught in a workshop for writing medical statements may not always lead to texts evaluated positively by the medical community.

The results of these recent studies indicate a need for further genre analysis of successful statements of purpose for different disciplines. This research can also be informed by discussions with specialist informants on the discursive construction of this genre and its role in the admission process. In the present study, we examine statements written by applicants to three master’s programs for their discourse structure and also consider the views of application gatekeepers concerning the genre in order to explore disciplinary variation in this genre. We also conducted a small survey of published and electronic materials regarding the writing of this genre in order to determine if indeed there was information on the structure of this genre in these disciplines and to explore the kinds of information available. The writing of master’s students has received considerable interest in recent years (Paltridge, 2002; Prior, 1998; Samraj, 2000, 2002, 2004) and a study of the statements of purpose written by prospective master’s students can add to our knowledge of writing required of this student population. In addition, a study of statements can enhance our understanding of a genre for which successful exemplars are not always readily available.
Data for this study consisted of successful statements of purpose submitted to master’s programs in three departments, Linguistics, Electrical Engineering and Business Administration, at a large public university in California, and interviews with specialist informants from these departments. The results of the genre analysis indicate that although there are broad similarities in the organization of this genre across these disciplines, there are intriguing differences, adding to our current knowledge of disciplinary variation in academic writing. Our findings also indicate that this genre can still be deemed occluded to a certain degree, for although some information exists on the general structure of graduate school statements of purpose, there is little specific information that is relevant for the writing of statements for specific master’s programs.

2. Methods

Websites offering information on writing statements of purpose were located using search terms such as “personal statement” and “statement of purpose.” These internet searches yielded a large number of websites and ten sites that purported to provide information for graduate programs were selected as examples of the kinds of websites available for further analysis. In order to gain a general understanding of the kinds of information available for prospective graduate students in print, books sold in a large popular bookstore (Barnes and Nobles) under the section “Applying to universities” were analyzed. In addition, relevant books in the library of a large public university in California were also analyzed. Although this is not an exhaustive survey of the sorts of handbooks available, this small survey affords a preliminary understanding of information easily available to prospective students.

Statements written by both native and non-native speakers of English provided by the three programs were included in this study. The numbers provided by the different departments (given in Table 1) are not equal because these are the numbers that the advisors chose to provide although they were asked for ten statements each. Although distinguishing the discourse structures of texts produced by native and non-native speakers of English (in this case they corresponded to American and international applicants) was not a primary goal of this study, any interesting differences that emerged through the analysis will be noted. The three sets of texts were analyzed for their discourse structure in terms of moves and steps following previous work in genre analysis (Bhatia, 1993; Swales, 1990). The moves that have been identified in earlier studies of statements (see above) and those found in other related persuasive genres such as letters of application (Bhatia, 1993; Henry & Roseberry, 2001) were considered in determining the structure of the genre.

The texts used in this study were produced in response to slightly varying task specifications in the application instructions. At the time when the data were collected, only the Linguistics and Business Administration programs specified more than “Personal statement of graduate program goals,” which was the instruction given to prospective Electrical Engineering students. Here is the instruction given by the Business Administration program:

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1 The statements and interviews used in this study are a sub-set of the data used in Monk (2004). The statements were re-analyzed for this paper.
2 The sites are listed in Appendix A.
3 The books analyzed are listed in Appendix A.
This is your opportunity to describe your special characteristics or skills and to articulate how your goals are compatible with the program to which you are applying. This should be 1–2 pages in length.

The Linguistics program asks students to provide “A statement of purpose (250–500 words) demonstrating an understanding of the program and indicating an area of research that is within the department’s scope of expertise.” On the whole, it seems from these specifications that the departments desire not just a discussion of the student’s background where the writer convinces the reader about his or her worth, but also a discussion of the student’s reasons for selecting the program. Each department also required statements of similar lengths, that is, between one to two pages or 250–500 words.

One specialist informant from each department was interviewed by one of the authors regarding the use of the statement in the application process, the structure of the genre and what constituted a successful text. The specialist informants were either graduate advisers in the program or a member of the graduate admissions committee for the department, and had been reading and evaluating personal statements for a number of years, ranging from seven to 19 years. Although only one informant was interviewed per department, the person interviewed was important in the graduate admissions process. It is true that interviewing more than one informant from each department would have given rise to a more complex picture of specialist views. However, the interviews conducted did yield useful information that could be used in conjunction with the results of the text analysis. Although the interviews were organized around a set of questions (given in Appendix B), each interview was open-ended and dealt with some unique issues that may not have arisen in the other interviews. In addition, the interviewer also brought with her a sample text from the department and referred to the text in some questions. Each interview, which lasted between 60 and 90 minutes, was tape recorded and transcribed. The views expressed by the specialists will be drawn on in discussing the results of the move analysis.

3. Results and discussion

We will first discuss our findings from the survey of print and electronic resources before discussing the generic structure of the statements of purpose from the three departments.

3.1. Survey of books and websites on writing the statement of purpose

Guides and handbooks for students applying to graduate programs seem to fall into three broad categories (see Table 2). The first category includes books for the general prospective graduate student population and does not distinguish between disciplines. An
example would be Kaplan’s (2003) *Get Into Graduate School: A Strategic Approach*. The second category includes books specifically targeting more popular graduate professional programs, such as law and business (for example, *How to get into the top MBA Programs* by Richard Montauk (2005)). Interestingly enough, our survey also yielded a small third category of books intended to help entrants to more specialized programs such as psychology graduate programs. The books in all three categories concern the whole application process but devote at least a chapter to writing the statement and often also include samples of successful statements and even the views of admissions advisers and faculty members. In addition, our search yielded one book (Stelzer, 1993) devoted entirely to the writing of personal statements, which also included the views of admissions officers and faculty from a range of disciplines.

It should be noted that the books in the first and third category do not normally distinguish between master’s and Ph.D. programs. Books in the first category tend to prescribe general advice about writing the statement, such as instructing writers to explain “why you’re applying to graduate school, what interests you about this program and what your future goals are” (Kaplan, 2003, p. 137). These books also provide general instruction on the writing process, telling applicants to revise and proof-read the statement. In contrast, books in the third category may include categorizations of essay types or themes requested from universities and provide more specific suggestions for the content for such essay types. For example, a book on applying to graduate schools in psychology and related disciplines states:

**Research experiences.** A common type of essay theme, especially from experimental or scientist-practitioner oriented doctoral programs, requests specific information about the area in which you might like to do research and any research experiences you have already had. For a few programs, a research-oriented essay is *all* that is requested, for example, “*Include a detailed letter (2–3 pages) describing your research interests.*” (Keith-Spiegel, 1991, p. 245) (original formatting)

As can be seen from the above example, when more specific instruction is given, the admonition seems to be more suitable for Ph.D. applications. Books in the second category that target specific professional master’s programs such as the Master of Business Administration (MBA) or Master of Social Work (MSW) provide detailed information on strategies to employ in writing a statement that is relevant for the specific profession. For example, a handbook for applying to social work graduate programs (Reyes, 2002) reminds applicants not to foreground personal psychological issues and treatment.

Some of the books surveyed also include the views of admissions officials and, to a lesser degree, those of faculty members. Views on a range of issues are expressed. Among other things, the informants discuss the role of the statements in the admission process, common mistakes made in the statements, how statements from international applicants

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<th>Category 1</th>
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<td>Program</td>
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Table 2

Types of handbooks and guides for prospective graduate students
are evaluated, strategies to avoid, such as praising the department, and the content to include in this genre. Although these views can be useful to writers of statements, it is not usually clear which bits of information would be relevant for an applicant’s particular disciplinary audience. In addition, the views of these specialists are not always tied systematically to the instruction given on the construction of the genre. An exception to this is the book on applying to psychology graduate programs (Keith-Spiegel, 1991) where information on the composition of the statement is juxtaposed in some places with the views of the specialists as in the excerpt below:

**Specific graduate faculty of interest.** Almost a fifth of the essays ask that you identify, from among their faculty members in the program, someone with whom you might like to work . . . Clearly, they will use applicants’ responses for the purpose of assessing good fits, not between students and overall program this time but between students and the individual faculty members who are active in the program . . .

Some programs ask you to specify a faculty member with whom you would like to study. If you are at all uncertain, go to your library and do a literature search on the faculty members to find out about their research areas.

Victor H. Denenber
Professor of Biobehavioral Sciences and Psychology
University of Connecticut (Keith-Spiegel, 1991, p. 251).

The views of faculty members (in contrast to admissions officers) tend to mostly concern applications to Ph.D. programs rather than master’s programs (other than for professional degrees such as the MBA). In fact, in the book, *How to write a winning personal statement for graduate and professional school*, by Stelzer (2003), which includes the greatest number of views from admissions officials and faculty members, only one out of 26 views is from a faculty member who served as a director of a master’s program. Thus, although it can be argued that the views of specialist informants on this genre are available, our survey leads us to believe that such is not the case for the genre produced for master’s program admission (excluding professional programs).

As indicated earlier, ten websites on writing the statement were selected for more detailed analysis. These websites can also be placed into several categories. It is probably common knowledge that there are several commercial sites that provide help in the writing of statements for a fee. Some of these sites also provide what are labeled sample authentic statements. These sites are problematic for two reasons. First, the authenticity of the samples is difficult to verify. Second, the general instruction given for the construction of statements, such as “Remember: Detail, specificity, and concrete examples will make your essay distinctive and interesting” (http://www.accepted.com/grad/personalstatement.aspx), is not usually related to any academic source. In addition to this first category, there are sites such as the Princeton Review site that can be seen as electronic equivalents to major published books such as Kaplan’s (2003) *Get into Graduate School: A Strategic Approach* and that provide similar information. The third category of sites are those created by writing or career centers at universities such as the one by The University of California, Berkeley, where presumably advice has been constructed for the university’s undergraduates applying to graduate schools. Although these sites, like those in the first two categories, tend not to provide information that differentiates between Ph.D. and mas-
ter’s programs, and across disciplines, they might include more specific information such as advice to use “the language of the field” (http://career.berkeley.edu/Grad/Gradstatement.stm) or acknowledge the varying importance that the statement of purpose plays in different fields (Wensel, 2005). What is more surprising and interesting is the presence of sites produced by faculty members that provide information for specific disciplines. Out of three surveyed, two were for computer science departments, of which one specifically targeted Ph.D. programs and the other was for both master’s and Ph.D. programs. The third website, produced by a psychology professor (http://www.psych.sjsu.edu/~glennc/gradschool/sevenparagraphessay.pdf), does not specify if the audience are prospective Ph.D. or master’s students. However, the author provides a seven-paragraph format for constructing the statement, making this the most specific set of instructions found in the survey of print and electronic resources for writing the statement of purpose.

This survey of print and electronic resources for the construction of statements for graduate programs indicates that information on this genre is not nonexistent. However, it is clear that information on this genre for professional master’s programs (such as the MBA) is more readily available than information on statements for other master’s programs. Additionally, when information on this genre is available for specific disciplines, such as computer science or psychology, it appears that the instruction given is more suitable for Ph.D. applications, even if the distinction between applications to master’s or Ph.D. programs is not usually made clear in the information provided. The analysis of the resources also revealed a range of specificity in the advice given from a list of “Do’s” and “Do not’s” for writing a statement given in a commercial website to a template on the genre from a disciplinary faculty member.

Perhaps we can state that some genres, unlike the submission letter (Swales, 1996), may possess different degrees of occlusion for its members. In other words, not all subcategories of this genre are equally occluded. The genre, statement of purpose, may not be so occluded when we consider a sub-genre, such as a statement that is part of an application for an MBA program. However, the situation appears to be somewhat different in the case of other discipline-specific statements such as those submitted to master’s programs in Linguistics.

3.2. Function and organization of the statement of purpose

Brown’s (2004) study indicated that the statement plays a crucial role in applications to Ph.D. programs, but the role of the statement may not be as straightforward in the application process to other programs of study. For example, Barton et al. (2004) state that the role of the statement in admission to medical residency programs is more ambiguous. The specialists interviewed in this study also provided nuanced views on the role of the statement in the application process. All three were clear that the statement was just one piece of the set of information used to recommend a student for admission. The three informants also believed that the quality of the statement would generally be in line with the judgments that the admissions committee reached based on the other admission information such as graduate record examination (GRE) scores and letters of recommendation. However, they noted that they have on occasion admitted students whose statements did not completely meet the department’s expectations because the applicant scored well on the other criteria. Poor statements can also keep students out of a program, at least as stated by the informants from Business and Linguistics. The Linguistics informant made the following statement:
I think if it (the statement) was especially weak, I’d notice that. And I would flag it and would potentially use it as a reason for not recommending acceptance. But I try to recommend based on the whole application.

It was clear from the three interviews that the informants had certain expectations for this genre and dutifully read each statement as part of the admissions process. As the Linguistics informant stated, “It (the statement) gives me a better sense of the student and I feel more confident of my recommendation if I have read it.”

The analysis of the three sets of texts following Swales (1990) and Bhatia (1993) in terms of rhetorical moves and steps revealed that they contain five moves with component steps: (1) Introduction, (2) Background, (3) Reasons for Applying, (4) Extra-Curricular Activities and (5) Conclusion. Although these moves appear in this linear order for the most part, the second and third moves can be intertwined. The frequencies with which the moves and steps are found in the statements are given in Table 3. The total number of statements that include at least one step of each move (with multiple steps) is given at the end of each move. Of these five moves, three are optional with only background and reasons for applying appearing in all the texts. The primary rhetorical purpose in the Background move is for the writer to portray his or her expertise and experience and hence suitability for the program and, in the other obligatory move, the prospective student discusses his or her reasons for pursuing the master’s degree. In other words, in these statements, the applicants seek to accomplish two rhetorical goals: one, to argue why the program should desire the applicant and two, to argue why the applicant finds the program or degree desirable. As we will see later, these two moves can be linked because an applicant can use his/her background to justify why he/she finds the program desirable.

A key step in the Introduction is a statement about the decision to apply and/or the applicant’s goals in doing so. The applicant might also give a synopsis about his/her background. More uncommonly, the applicant might make generalizations about life or the profession or discipline. Excerpt 1 includes all three steps found in this move:

(1) Change and growth are inevitable components of today’s business environment. While some people view these elements of life as unstable or threatening, I regard them as opportunities to best utilize my strengths. Throughout my life I have earned the reputation as a problem solver, and consider myself to be someone who is not afraid to risk doing things differently when necessary. I am applying to the University Masters of Business Administration program, specializing in Management, to acquire the skills and training that will accentuate my strengths and to help make me an effective leader in challenging and innovative projects within a growing organization. (MBA 8)

If all three steps are present, they appear in the order given in Table 3. It should be noted that a few texts might include the first or second step of this move without including the third and the goal for applying is only discussed later in the text in Move 3. This introductory move is somewhat similar to the first move identified in medical residency statements where applicants both state their decision to apply and describe their personal background.

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4 Excerpts from the statements have not been edited for any errors.
mostly in terms of a narrative. As Barton et al. (2004) have noted, the personal self constructed in this move and in a later move in the residency statements are crucial for the evaluation of the genre. However, the personal background given in step two of the introductory move in our corpus is not very common and does not appear to be important for the genre’s evaluation.

No one step is obligatory for the Background move, a key move in this genre, where writers construct a picture of themselves, a relevant self, in the words of Bhatia (1993). The steps, discussing work and education, seem crucial for the construction of a relevant self. Most of the Linguistics (10 out of 12) and MBA statements (11 out of 14) include discussion of previous work experience. In Linguistics, although not always foregrounded explicitly, versatility with a second or third language and experience with teaching English are perceived to be attributes that are valued by the admitting program, as indicated by their frequent presence in the Linguistics statements:

(2) More recently I have worked in international banking with Bank of America in San Diego. This job entailed dealing solely with Mexico and my work was carried out in Spanish all day with co-workers and Mexican clients. My teaching experience has consisted of working part-time as an English teacher at a private language school in San Diego and teaching English at private language schools in France and Spain during the summer. (Ling 11)
Not surprisingly, the Linguistics specialist evaluated this description of background favorably saying, “I thought this person’s work experience was very rich and would be useful background and a broad background to bring to our program.” Excerpt 3 is from an MBA applicant. Somewhat differently from the writer in excerpt 2, the writer in 3 employs a narrative and explicit evaluation:

(3) One of the projects of which I am most proud was the successful management of my department, and of the company, through multiple software upgrades. During this process I handled the planning and implementation of the upgrades. I also ensured that staff company-wide were notified of and prepared for the conversions ... At the end of the process, the results of the department’s 2nd annual customer satisfaction survey that I had created showed significant improvement compared to the previous year on almost all variables of internal customer satisfaction. (MBA 8)

The next step, “education,” where writers discuss highlights of their education, is also found in the statements from all three disciplines. However, the “work” step is more common than the “education” step in the MBA statements. This is not surprising for two reasons: first, applicants may not have a bachelor’s degree that is relevant for the graduate application; and, second, applicants may have spent quite a few years in the workforce before applying for graduate admission. When asked about discussing work experience in the statement, the Business gatekeeper simply stated, “We prefer students that have work experience coming into the program because it’s a business program.”

In the “education” step, applicants most commonly discuss highlights of their undergraduate education, foregrounding training that makes them attractive candidates. In an interview regarding statements published in Issues in Writing (2004), John Swales and Chris Feak note that applicants from Asian countries tend to give details about their rank in a class or the percentage points accrued in a particularly difficult program. Indeed, only one international applicant in Electrical Engineering eschews mention of percentage or rank information. All four others do. The following is an excerpt from an international application to Electrical Engineering:

(4) I have completed my bachelor of engineering course from University B.D.T. College of engineering... Over 50 years old, it is one of the most prestigious and reputed institutions in India. Needless to say the competition is very intense. The quality of education and the general standard of student ability are of the highest order. As a result every mark is hard earned and nothing is made available on a platter. I have been amongst the top 10% in the Instrumentation Technology department in the last three semesters. (EE1)

These discussions also point out the rigor and status of the universities where they graduated from, as seen in excerpt 4. However, American applicants also provide evaluations of the alma mater, albeit less frequently, with one student stating that “the University of Illinois has a reputation nationally as a premier institution in the areas of electrical and computer engineering ...” (EE 6). Interestingly, the Electrical Engineering informant seemed tolerant of such references to rank and grades:
I do get that because they know by their own schools that most US universities only admit the top 10% and so their advisors and stuff have instructed them to make sure they know you’re up there. And so I do get a lot of that. So they do refer back to their grades and their transcripts . . . but that’s okay.

A noteworthy step of the background move that is frequent only in the Electrical Engineering statements (found in eight out of nine texts) is the one where applicants discuss research experience. Most of the research experiences discussed are a part of the applicant’s undergraduate experience and some applicants even describe seminars that they had conducted based on their research projects:

(5) Also I have given a few seminars on “SIMULATION OF FIR FILTERS USING VERILOG HDL” – my final year project in which I have discussed the designing of an 8-tap low pass filter. The hardware part of this project is simulated using VERILOG HDL and the MATLAB SOFTWARE generates the 8-bit symmetrical coefficient for an 8-tap low pass filter with Hamming window. (EE 8)

It appears that a scientific epistemology is constructed in the Electrical Engineering statements more so than in the ones from the other disciplines. The ethos of the student is one of an active, albeit novice, member of the disciplinary community who is engaged with the developments in the field. In example 6, another Electrical Engineering applicant states that s/he reads journals in communications and computer science after recounting a research project, again attempting to construct a self that would fit into the disciplinary community:

(6) I am an avid reader of numerous journals on communications and computer science, which include the spectrum magazine of the IEEE and Computers Today, which is largest-selling computer magazine in India, of which I have been a member for the past five years. This has served to sharpen my inclination to engage in active research within this area. (EE 7)

Interestingly, the advice given in print and electronic resources on the writing of statements for Ph.D. programs, where applicants are instructed to detail their research expertise, concurs with this construction of a researcher persona.

Two steps in this second move are little used. One is the step where the applicant presents general information about his/her background pertaining to travel or family. The other is the step, “personal attributes” where applicants state what they believe to be attributes that make them attractive to the program. Excerpt 7 is an example of this:

(7) My strengths, which will help me to excel not only in graduate school environment but also in ‘real world’ situations, are the ability to work well in groups, creativity, and self-starter skills. (MBA 12)

This step can be said to achieve the same function as the move “Self promotion” identified in earlier analyses of statements (Bekins et al., 2004; Monk, 2004). However, self promotion was not deemed a separate move in this analysis because self promotion can be interspersed within various steps in the Background move as manifested in example 3 discussed earlier.
The second key move, Reasons for applying, seeks to convey to the audience the applicant’s reasons for pursuing a master’s degree, at this institution, and, more broadly, reasons for engagement in the discipline. As mentioned earlier, there can often be an explicit tie between a step in the previous move and this move. For instance, it is not uncommon for applicants to arrive at a gap in their background after discussing their work experience or for an applicant to discuss what they attained in an undergraduate degree and relate that to further gains from a graduate degree. However, it must be emphasized that the rhetorical forces of these two moves are somewhat different. In the Background move, the applicants seek to establish their relevant strengths and their suitability for the program (i.e. why they need to be pursued), while in this move they focus on reasons this venture is worth pursuing for them.

The following is an example of the step, “gap in background,” which follows from a description of the applicant’s background:

(8) I studied and taught ESL in St. Petersburg, Russia. My five-year TESL experience was limited to teaching exclusively Russian students with the instruction in their native language. Since TESL in South California requires a different strategy, taking the fundamental training offered by the Department of ... appears to be a must. (Ling 4)

Interestingly, ten out of 14 of the MBA statements (in contrast to two out of nine in Electrical Engineering) point out a gap in their background as a reason for their decision to pursue the degree. In the following excerpt, the writer moves from his/her background to a gap in it (having to only “rely on intuition, experience and guidance from supervisors”), which leads to a statement of how the MBA will benefit him/her:

(9) I have managed engineers and product development, negotiated and managed customer contracts, and led the development of business and marketing plans. However, while in these roles, for management, marketing and financial skills, I have had to rely on intuition, experience, and guidance from supervisors. Although I have proven myself in senior management roles, I have always felt that an MBA would complement my experience and technical education, and support my career path towards senior management in the technology sector. (MBA 11)

Only the informant from Business explicitly mentioned a lack in an applicant’s work experience motivating his or her application to a graduate program, stating that she would expect an applicant to “tell me what they got out of it (their work experience) and what else they’re lacking, why are they going back to graduate school. Why are they getting their MBA, what are they lacking in their career now.”

In excerpt 9 we also see the next step, which usually follows from the “gap” step, namely, one that describes gains to the applicant from pursuing the degree (“support my career path towards senior management”). It is not necessarily the case that this step be paired with the preceding one, for a statement of gains can appear without any statement of a gap. In addition, expressions of general interest, as seen in 10, are also included in this step.
(10) I feel that in graduate school I can exploit my broad training, received in different fields at the undergraduate level, in the pursuit of a more advanced and deeper technical expertise in a specialized area of computer engineering. I am deeply interested in the design and development of micro-architecture and circuits, and from that perspective, the ... University is a perfect fit for me. (EE 6)

Reasons for applying to the department can also be specified in terms of the program or the university being applied to. Here the applicant is not just saying why they want to pursue a master’s degree in a particular discipline but also why they want to pursue this particular program. As such, they state what is appealing about the program in terms of the faculty research interests, course offerings, specializations offered and, even in some cases in Electrical Engineering, the companies for internships in the locale. The following excerpt is from the same statement as example 10 above:

(11) I am deeply interested in the design and development of micro-architecture and circuits, and from that perspective, the ... University is a perfect fit for me. The university offers an ideal graduate program in electrical and computer engineering with opportunities in related research applications. Moreover, the greater ... area harbors a dense hardware industry, in addition to being also a place of numerous scientific and academic institutions which will present opportunities for greater learning and exposure to new technologies. (EE 6)

The Electrical Engineering informant reacted rather unfavorably to this step in this statement, stating that the applicant talks “about our school basically and how we can help him which really isn’t what we’re after either. We know how we can help him. We want him to let us know what he wants …” Later in the interview he stated that he wants the applicants to discuss their interests and goals and not why this university is the best school for them. This view is in contrast to that expressed in the Linguistics department website where applicants are instructed to demonstrate an understanding of the program and indicate an area of research that is within the department’s scope of expertise. This view was reiterated by the informant who stated “I’m looking to see if they have a goal that meshes with our department or if they have enough understanding of what our degree is about …” and went on to say that she would like the applicants to “somehow tie their experience to what the goals are for the program.” This is an interesting example of variation in departmental expectations about this genre where one evaluator wants the writer to make an explicit connection to programmatic features while the other prefers to infer a fit with the department through a description of the applicant’s goals and background.

The final step in this move is one where applicants express their reasons for pursuing the master’s degree in terms of the discipline. Applicants may discuss the progress in the discipline, its contribution to the practical world or the research s/he intends to engage in. Here is a particularly good example of this step:

(12) Whatever little I know about NEURAL NETWORKS has whetted my appetite for this field. I can’t help but visualize the glorious array of possibilities that the field has to offer. I believe that it is the field of the future. And it is a belief shared by many others. Be it investment analysis or marketing, artificial intelligence or new age computers NEURAL NETWORKS can provide us with the answers. NEURAL
NETWORKS has applications in such diverse areas as optimization, weather forecasting, vision recognition systems, stock market prediction, process control, fraud detection, medicine, etc. Besides, NEURAL NETWORKS is still relatively in its infancy and unlike many other areas is nowhere close to saturation. There is scope for a lot of work to be done, yet. It is my sincere desire to make my own little contribution to this field. (EE 1)

Although the writer does not spell out a specific research project as the writers of the psychology statements analyzed by Brown (2004) do, the writer ethos here is quite different from that created in an MBA statement where the applicant presents his hopes that the MBA will ensure a move to senior management (see example 9). The writer in the excerpt above constructs a self that is knowledgeable of the discipline and who seeks active participation in it. It is noteworthy that more Linguistics statements (nine out of 12) do not contain research reasons, given that the application prompt instructs applicants to specify the research they would want to pursue within the limits of the department. Even when research reasons are provided, they are not always well developed. As the Linguistics informant explained, there are many applicants who don’t know enough about the field to specify research interests. She further stated:

At a higher level what you’d be looking for in a statement of purpose is research goals basically or areas in the field that the applicant is interested in or wants to explore. But these students are not at that level yet, so at some ideal level of the universe, I’d like them to tell me what they’re interested in exploring, but that happens occasionally, but it’s pretty infrequent. And I think it’s because they’re just applying for an MA, so they don’t have the background in the field to really even be able to say that.

Although it seems that research goals are more important in Ph.D. than master’s statements of purpose, they seem to be more important for some master’s programs (such as Electrical Engineering) than others.

The fourth move detailing Extra-Curricular Information is only found in statements from non-native speakers (who are all international applicants) mostly in Electrical Engineering. This has been analyzed as a separate move and not as a step in the background move because it appears by itself, often after the applicant has constructed Move 3 stating his or her reasons for applying. It might seem that it is the occluded nature of this genre that results in culturally distant aspiring members of the graduate community including a somewhat irrelevant element. When the interviewer asked the Electrical Engineering informant about his response to the following paragraph, which is an instance of this move, he gave a surprising response, indicating that such an exposition was not irrelevant in engineering:

(13) Besides this passion for science, I also have a liking for arts, music & sports. Throughout my academic career I have actively participated in the games of Cricket, Badminton and Table Tennis. As a part of community service I organized a number of blood donation camps and donated blood several times. In the aftermath of the massive earthquake in Gujarat, India on January 26, 2001 I contacted two NGOs – 1. South Asian Coalition of Child Servitude (SACCS) and 2. Voluntary Action Network India (VANI) and sent relief material for distribution to needy persons. Our effort was appreciated by the local civil administration. (EE 5)
The informant was strong in his support of this move saying:

I like this actually. This is about him. This is how I’m getting to know who he is as a well-rounded person. So this is a good thing actually. He’s written a two page proposal, basically a statement of purpose. He’s taken a small paragraph and stuck it in there – “this is me.” That’s what we want to know... we do look for different things than normal... That’s what we like. We like attitude, we like leadership and we like team involvement.

The construction of a personal self then is important in Electrical Engineering just as it is in statements for medical residency programs (Barton et al., 2004). This move seems to set Electrical Engineering statements apart from the statements submitted to the other two disciplines in this study and may be a feature more common in applications to certain professional programs.

In the concluding move, which is present in the longer texts, there is a restatement of the applicant’s short and long term goals, which might be intertwined with a hopeful prediction for success. Finally, the applicant might make one last attempt to sell him/herself by summing up all the attributes needed to convince the reader why the program should admit the applicant.

4. Conclusions

The survey of print and electronic materials on writing a statement rendered partial support for the occluded standing of this genre. Importantly, the analysis of both books and websites revealed some variation in the amount of information available for the same genre produced for entry to different levels of education, the Ph.D. and master’s level, and for different disciplines (professional and non-professional degrees). Further studies could investigate the overlap between advice given in these resources and the structure of successful statements submitted to a particular discipline and level.

Perhaps it is not surprising that the statements from the three disciplines in this study include the two main rhetorical moves: Background and Reasons for Applying since these are obvious elements of this genre. What is perhaps more interesting is how these moves are instantiated differently in the three disciplines. The Electrical Engineering and MBA statements seem to be the most different from each other. In the Electrical Engineering statements, the applicants portray a research self which is seeking to develop as a researcher. On the other hand, in the MBA statements, the description of the applicant’s background leads to the identification of a gap that motivates a pursuit of positive gains from the master’s program. The Linguistics applicants construct a self that is based on previous education and work experience and express motivation to pursue the master’s program mostly in terms of the ensuing positive gains and the attributes of the program or university. Unlike the Electrical Engineering statements, those from Linguistics tend not to foreground either research endeavors in the applicant’s past or in the future. The Electrical Engineering statements also stand apart from those from the other two disciplines in the valorization of the personal self. Some of these differences can be explained through the expressed goals of the three graduate programs. Interestingly, only the Electrical Engineering master’s program states in the graduate bulletin that students would be given opportunity to do research and the availability of research assistantships is mentioned.
Although the Linguistics program states that the master’s program is suitable for students intending to further pursue a doctorate, research training during the master’s program is not explicitly mentioned. Not surprisingly, the MBA program states that students would be prepared for management positions.

The discussions with the informants from the Linguistics and Electrical Engineering departments yielded some contrasting views on the ramifications of a lack of information on the composition of the genre. The Electrical Engineering informant said “We never tell them what we’re looking for because then we don’t really know what they want to do.” He went on to state, “It’s higher education, you know. It’s not a student coming in from high school. It’s someone who’s been through the works and he should have an idea.” This informant’s view seems to be that any guidance on the structure of the genre will result in statements that are less useful for the evaluators. He also believes that applicants should somehow know what to include in this text, a view that is at odds with the view of the Linguistics informant, who stated the following:

Well, it’s not a genre that you can find anywhere, so they don’t have a model... so they’re kind of groping in the dark to know what they should include in this thing... So I just read what they give me and I think because they’ve never seen examples, that’s why there’s so much variation, you know, in what they tell you.

This informant’s realization of the occluded nature of the genre leads her to accommodate variation in the genre. She reinforced this point later in the discussion when she said that “students are at quite a disadvantage when they write them” because statements are “not a public genre.” In contrast, the informant from Electrical Engineering believes that although there is scarcely any information on the genre, applicants should have a tacit understanding of values embodied in this genre for this field. The views of specialist informants added an important dimension to this study of disciplinary variation in the discourse structure of this genre. However, eliciting views from more than one informant per discipline might also reveal intradepartmental variation in discursive values regarding the statement of purpose.

This study, unlike previous studies on the statement, focused specifically on cross-disciplinary differences and on statements written for entrance to master’s programs. Unlike the case of statements written for the Ph.D. program in psychology studied by Brown (2004), a research focus is not always apparent in the statements (other than those written for the Electrical Engineering program) analyzed in this study. The statements written for master’s programs also do not foreground the personal self as in the case of statements written to medical residency programs (Barton et al., 2004). Although the data set used was admittedly small, disciplinary variation in this genre was revealed. This study also added to previous research on personal statements by considering the sorts of information available to prospective students through a survey of a small number of handbooks and websites. This three-pronged study of information available to prospective students, gatekeeper views, and student texts has yielded a somewhat complex picture of this genre.

The majority of previous studies on the statement of purpose (Barton et al., 2004; Bekins et al., 2004; Brown, 2004) do not culminate with implications for pedagogy. However, since studies in student academic writing across the disciplines have been to a large extent motivated by pedagogical ends (Johns & Swales, 2002), we will discuss suggestions, not just for students or EAP instructors as might be anticipated but also for master’s programs in different disciplines. If statements of purpose are to play a significant role in the
admission process, then it might behoove departments to emerge from the shadows of occlusion and explicitly state the key components desired in the statements solicited. As such, applicants will not be “shooting in the dark” or resorting to commercial websites which purport to know the secrets to producing a successful statement for any discipline or level. Fortunately, EAP instructors can also draw from recent studies to raise the rhetorical awareness of their students to the structure of this genre and possible disciplinary variation. Prospective master’s students might also benefit from discussions with specialists from the disciplinary communities they are seeking to enter with regard to this important, “semi-occluded” genre.

Appendix A. Books and websites analyzed

A.1. Books


Reyes, J. (2002). The social work graduate school applicant’s handbook. Harrisburg, PN: White Hat Communications.


A.2. Websites


Appendix B. Questions used in interviews

1. How does your department process statements?

2. What are your priorities when you read statements from applicants?
   a. Content: background? knowledge of programs? career goals?
   b. Organization of content?
   c. Discourse strategies used?
   d. Accuracy of grammar, syntax, mechanics?
   e. Interesting writing style?
   f. Sense of the person writing?
   g. Other?

3. How would you evaluate this statement?
   a. Is the content relevant? complete? adequate?
   b. Does the opening paragraph capture your attention? Does this make any difference to you?
   c. Is the organization smooth, logical?
   d. Do you notice anything about the language?
   e. How do you respond to X sentence? Why?

4. How do you evaluate the genre overall?
   a. When and how is it valuable to you?
   b. What would you like to say to applicants about preparing their statements?

References


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