

FAQ: Writing a Statement of Goals and Interests for the M.A. Degree in Sociology

Q1: What should I be trying to achieve in my statement?

The main purpose of a statement of goals and interests is to communicate your research interests in order to give the Graduate Committee some idea of your ability to conceive and execute the M.A. thesis, which is a major independent research project. A secondary purpose is to enable the Committee to determine whether your interests are a good fit with the expertise of potential supervisors in the Department. Statements can also convey how strong your writing skills are and how much background you have in sociological research. Finally, statements of interest can also communicate your personality and your motives for engaging in sociological research, and indicate how well you will fit into the culture of the department; however, this aspect is decidedly less important than the other functions.

Q2: How long should I make my statement, and how should I format it?

Statements of interest are typically one or two single-spaced pages in length, broken into paragraphs. Other than a main heading designating the statement as such, headers are not typically useful owing to the brevity of the document. It's in your interest to make the formatting of your statement as unremarkable as possible, so use a serif font, one-inch margins, etc.

Q3: What kinds of information should go in my statement?

Most of your statement should be concerned with your research interests and goals for your M.A. work. Be as specific as you can be.

If you have a definite research question or a plan for your thesis project (not all students do; see below), then explain this in as much detail as you can in two pages or less. Indicate your research question, your methodology, and the importance of this research. You won't be required to follow this plan, but describing it will show the committee that you are capable of mapping out a project.

You don't need to cite sources, but if there are specific books or bodies of literature that you wish to build on or specific authors or theories that have been influential for you, then by all means indicate this.

If there are specific professors in the department whom you would like to work with because you believe their expertise will contribute to your own research, mention this in your statement, especially if you have already communicated with them and they have indicated that they could be willing to act as your supervisor or thesis committee member.

Try to show how your current research interests build on or extend from work that you have done for your B.A. If you have plans for how your M.A. work will contribute to your career after the M.A. – whether inside or outside of the university – tell us about these.

If you're finding that most of these items don't apply to you, don't despair ...

Q4: What if I don't have any idea what I want to write my thesis about?

This is not actually a problem. Many students enter graduate study without having chosen a thesis topic; this is why the document is called a "statement of interest" not a "statement of plans." Write about the issues, questions, or ideas in sociology that interest you. Be as specific as you reasonably can be, and use sociological language if you can. You have been studying in the social sciences for several years; you must have some questions or ideas or interests that would not occur to someone without that training. Tell us about them.

Q5: What if I change my mind between writing the statement and commencing my thesis work?

That is perfectly fine. It's common for M.A. students to have new ideas or change their minds about their thesis work while taking their graduate courses or researching their thesis proposals. After all, you will learn a great deal between commencing your program and starting to work on your thesis. You are not bound by the plans, the ideas, or even the topics that you write in your statement of interest.

Q6: How much should I talk about my own life and my reasons for going into sociology?

A little goes a long way. It's useful for the Graduate Committee to get a sense of who you are as a person and what motivates you to study sociology. However, in the professional world people are more interested in the ideas and knowledge you can produce than in your personality. This applies not just in the admissions process, but in the work that you will do for your thesis. In scholarship, personality is like salt: a little bit of it can add flavour, but it's not a main ingredient.