

CRAFTING A PERSUASIVE RESEARCH STATEMENT

CHALLENGE

What makes a RS so difficult to write is that it is asking you to assume a distance from your project—to reflect on it—when you are quite possibly, still, very much in the process of completing it. Here are some strategies that might help:

GOALS

The primary goal of a research statement is to walk the search committee through the evolution of your research, to highlight your research accomplishments, and to show where your research will be taking you next. To a certain extent, the next steps that you identify within your statement will also need to touch on how your research could benefit the particular institution to which you are applying. This might be in terms of grant money, faculty collaborations, involving students in your research, or developing new courses.

While you may not have a good sense of where your research will ultimately lead you, you should have a sense of some of the possible destinations along the way. You want to be able to show a search committee that your research is moving forward – and that you are moving forward along with it in terms of developing new skills and knowledge. The more clearly you can articulate the journey your research has taken, and where it will take you as a writer/thinker/professor in the future, the more convincing and interesting it will be to read.

Whether you are just getting started or in the process of revising, these questions can help you begin as well as develop your writing.

STAGE 1

Use these questions to guide you in the first section of the RS:

- What got you started in your research?
- What was the SPECIFIC/PARTICULAR piece/event/reading/observation that compelled you to embark on this project?
- What was the driving question that you wanted to explore?
- What motivated you to spend so much time and effort answering your research questions?

(Note: Communicate your enthusiasm; readers will be looking for an engaged, enthusiastic colleague. Use concrete examples to ground your abstract concepts/arguments)

STAGE 2

Use these questions to guide you in the second section of the RS:

- What challenges did you encounter along the way, and how did you overcome these challenges?
- Why is your research important within your field?
- How did you answer your research questions?
- What did you find as a result of your dedication?
- Why are your discoveries significant?
- What would make other Art Historians, outside of your specialization, interested in this?
- If you are applying to a teaching vs. research institution, you may also want to speak to how undergrads can engage with your work

STAGE 3

NOW think about how your research past connects with your research present and future. You can do this by showing how your conclusions or research resulted in new questions or a book project. You can also name your publication and funding plans – try to be as concrete and honest as possible

This final part of your research statement should build on the first two parts. Yes, you have asked good questions, and used good methods to find some answers, but how will you now use this foundation to take you into your future? Since you are hoping that your future will be at one of the institutions to which you are applying, you should provide some convincing reasons why your future research will be possible at each institution, and why it will be beneficial to that institution, or to the students at that institution

- What direction will your research take you next, and what new questions do you have?

To Workshop:

- In response to ONE of the prompt questions above, freewrite for five minutes. Focus on what you want to say in your research statement, not on how you're saying it. (Ideally you would do this for 30 minutes, and you would postpone doing any revision to the content you're generating during this time. Try this at home.)
- In exchange: Underline places in the RS that answer the above questions directly. Identify any questions that you wish had been addressed.

REVISING

STYLE. TONE

It is critical to remember that you are no longer writing here for your advisers, for professors who have been working with you for years and are sympathetic to and deeply familiar with your project. Now, your audience has shifted to include Deans and professors outside of your area of expertise, in a different department. It is critical, therefore, that you speak to them. Your writing will need to reflect this new audience by finding ways to engage them.

CRITICAL TO KNOW:

- Jargon Alienates
- The more broadly appealing you can make your writing about your research, the better you will persuade your committee that you can turn your dissertation into a book. Very important!
- Expertise is not revealed by the complexity or technicality of your language but by the ease and clarity with which you can describe a complex idea.

To Workshop:

1. **Exchange work:** Underline any language that is unfamiliar or confusing or too abstract—writing that you skip over. This should be intuitive: don't second guess yourself or 'read generously.' Don't, in other words, give the student the benefit of the doubt. If you can't understand it, underline it. When you receive your RS back, explain to your reader what you meant by that writing/those words. Then use that spoken account to return to your writing and help you clarify your prose—without jargon, etc.
2. Mark out those places that struck you as very clear, as capturing a strong idea.
3. Are there places where you might vary your sentence length for stronger effect? Are there metaphors that might convey well your vision? Are there familiar ways of writing about these works that you might move away from to enact more powerful descriptions?

FOR CLARITY

This is the hardest kind of writing. It becomes easily overtaxed by the weight of years of research and the complexity of your thinking. Some critical writing strategies to help clean up your prose:

1. Make it explicit how each sentence is developing out of the previous one.
2. Put your active subjects at the beginning of the sentence and follow closely with its verb...then add to your sentence.
3. Avoid jargon and replace with straightforward descriptions
4. Avoid nominalization (turning verbs into noun subjects: ending in -ing, --tion). This

turns active sentences into passive ones that are difficult to understand. [Example: The production of effects created by this new technique were several. Vs. This new technique produced several effects...] Where you see this happening, find the active subject, place it at the beginning of the sentence and follow with a verb.

5. Provide concrete examples at each stage.
6. TELL A STORY. Provide the kind of watertight causal connections that make a story compelling (i.e. therefore, in order to, as a consequence, because of..)
7. Every great story has turning points (and yet, despite, paradoxically...)

To Workshop

1. Read through your RS. **Is there a beginning, middle and end or does this read more as a discrete series of paragraphs, describing a research project?** How might you revise the parts of your RS to read as a story: include more causal language, provide new paragraph breaks if necessary, show the trajectory of your initial driving question: how did you get from there to here (where you are now).
2. Look at the transitions between paragraphs (last sentences and first sentences). **Locate a weak transition** and work on clarifying the relationship.
3. Tackle one paragraph of sentences: Underline the subject and the verb in each sentence. Are these easy to locate? Can you rewrite those sentences that have a missing or delayed subject or nominalization and aim for greater clarity—with the subject and verb up front?

AUDIENCE

In reading your statements, readers will consider whether your research topic, your qualifications, and the significance of the work match the mission and interests of the institution and fulfill the expectations of the position. Can your work be completed and continued at this institution, given its resources? How can you take advantage of its resources to develop your research?

To Workshop:

1. Look at your RS, underline any writing that indicates the particular institution you're writing for. If this is missing, do some research online and answer the following: What is the mission of the institution you're applying for? What are its interests? Once you feel comfortable articulating these, see if you might better craft or revise your writing to show how your research aligns with and develops the institution's mission/interests.