

I wrote this statement of purpose as an undergrad for my MA + some (scary to think of it) PhD applications. It is full of the very same mistakes I now see students making in their statements. Yes, it was enough to get me in the door of some MA programs, but if you're trying to get into a PhD program, do not follow this model. It is generic. Naive. And it does not show much (or any) intellectual capabilities -- especially for a graduate program app.

Academic Statement of Purpose: What not to write.

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My interest in the Middle East has been kindled largely from my upbringing and the corresponding identity that has been formed. My parents immigrated to California from Ahwaz, Iran in 1976. They moved to Northridge, a community in the San Fernando Valley of Los Angeles. As Iranian-Americans, my family found the close distance to Westwood – locally referred to as “Tehrangeles” due to its overwhelming population of Iranians – a welcome reminder of their native land. Being raised in a demographically diverse location formed a thoroughly liberal perspective of people’s identities and backgrounds. It also allowed me to develop my own character as an Iranian-American, with a strong sense of traditional Iranian customs intertwined with local American norms. I did, however, struggle as a teenager in correlating my sexuality with the Iranian portion of my identity. This created a desire to find a balance between my innate nature and that of the social customs I associate with, inciting my concern with the Middle Eastern perspective of people like me: categorically Iranian, American, Muslim, and gay.

As a master’s student in the Middle Eastern Studies program at the University of Texas at Austin, my research will consist of an intersection of elements regarding gender, sexuality, and the effects religion and government have in its development. An overriding factor of gender and sexuality in any society is directly affected by the mores of a given culture. In understanding the underpinnings of Middle Eastern societies through their religious and political development, appealing conclusions are reached in the individual and collective behaviors that are currently propagated. A specific example of this gender development is illustrated in different Iranian regimes using the gender-specific hijab politically in their projection of “secularness” or “Islamicness.” The issue behind veiling reveals a tumultuous history of barring it in certain periods, while forcing its use in others. From Reza Shah Pahlavi’s attempts at modernization by following Mustafa Kemal Atatürk as a model to the current clerical influence in Iran, the politicization of the veil delivers recognition of the religious and governmental persuasion over gender. My research in the master’s program will further my knowledge on this subject, while also providing an opportunity to advance the scholarship of gender and sexuality.

My academic interests and involvements have been a core factor of my interest in Middle Eastern Studies. In May 2011, I will be granted a bachelor’s degree in English with a dual focus in Creative Writing and Literature from California State University, Northridge (CSUN). My undergraduate experience at CSUN has developed my critical and analytical abilities through an intense study of literature from theoretical perspectives. Though the curriculum within the Department of English solely focuses on British and American literature, I have had the opportunity to expand my analytical study to Asian American literature under the mentorship of Professor X, as well as Middle Eastern literature with the guidance of Professor Y. Under the tutelage of Professor Z, I have come to an understanding that many of the societal mores that surround each society are brought about or expounded upon through the literature that is written. For example, exploration of Al-Jahiz’s *Book of Misers* renders a greater understanding of the gender, sexual, moral, and cultural norms of ninth century Arab society. My undergraduate background in English has afforded me the skills of interpretation and analysis, which will be invaluable to my graduate involvement in Middle Eastern Studies.

While my experiences at CSUN have been imperative in forming my scholarly capabilities, I was provided the opportunity to expand my academic scope through the Russian Language Immersion Program, which is a component of the Southern California Consortium of California State Universities for the Strategic Language Initiative. This initiative is an effort to have students in California gain fluency in one of five languages the government has deemed “strategic” and of “great importance.” Due to my fluency in Persian, I chose to apply to the Russian program to

Commented [ANS1]: This was me trying to sound smart.

Commented [ANS2]: This is all irrelevant information.

Commented [ANS3]: All true, but poorly phrased.

Commented [ANS4]: I had no idea what I was talking about. I took one gender/theory course in undergrad and thought I knew it all.

Commented [ANS5]: This literally does not make sense. I don’t know what I was writing.

Commented [ANS6]: Again. 1 class in undergrad. I thought I was being original.

Commented [ANS7]: It would introduce the subject to me. Not further it. I had no knowledge at that point.

Commented [ANS8]: Alas, this is how I tried to legitimize transitioning from English to History. I wish someone had told me that MA programs don’t really care what your major was in undergrad. But I thought I had to explain why I could do History...

Commented [ANS9]: No, it doesn’t. And I couldn’t think of any other source to cite so I just used this one.

Commented [ANS10]: Yes, an English undergrad taught me analysis. It did not teach me how to sell myself to an MA or PhD program.

Commented [ANS11]: Facepalm.

Commented [ANS12]: Nobody in Texas knows what this is...

Commented [ANS13]: Irrelevant information

increase my facility for the language and culture of different societies. I am of the belief that attaining fluency in other languages provides insight to the actions and thoughts of people, and through this program I feel that I've come closer to understanding a wider range of people. During the first phase of this program – a six week immersion in Russian at CSUN – students were given a task to research a topic related to their interests and tied to Russia. I chose to focus my research on Islam in Russia. My research culminated in a paper entitled “Russia and Islam: the History of Religion in a non-Islamic Space,” which was presented to the instructors and students of the program. This same subject will be expanded within the next six months in order to be presented at the Russian State University for the Humanities in Moscow in July 2011. My accomplishment with the Russian immersion program has shown me the potential I have with languages, which assures me that given admittance to the Middle Eastern Studies master's program, I will be able to apply and successfully complete the Dual Language Track in Persian and Arabic.

Additional research that I've achieved has been with academic conferences. In my undergraduate career, I've presented at three conferences and have been accepted for two more in spring 2011. In November 2009 I presented a paper entitled “The Hijab, Sharia, and Sexual Rights” at the Symposium on Sex and the Nation State at CSUN. This paper, which is pending publication, discusses the politicization of veiling, Islamic requirement of modest dress, and religious textual interpretations from the Bible and Torah in accepting, or lessening the perception of sin, of homosexuality. Another critical paper that I wrote was for the Symposium on the Rhetoric of Threats in spring 2010 entitled “Fanaticism: The West's Misinterpretation of Muslims and Islamic Beliefs.” This paper explores American fanatics, such as Robert Spencer and Pat Robertson, and their rhetoric regarding Muslims. In that same semester, I wrote and published “Wilkie Collins' *The Moonstone* as a Critique of the Representation and Portrayal of Empire and the Other” for the Sigma Tau Delta Colloquium on the Fantastical. With the theoretical approach of Edward Said's “orientalism” and Sigmund Freud's notion of the “uncanny,” I analyzed the othering of Indians and Muslims in nineteenth century British literature. In April 2011, I will be presenting “The Second Coming Genocide: Iran's Revisioning of the Holocaust” at the Associated Graduate Students in English conference at CSUN. Through a rhetorical analysis of Mahmoud Ahmadinejad's statements and a historical examination of anti-Semitism, the paper will illustrate the current Iranian regime's desire to demonize Jews in an attempt at accustoming the world to the destruction of Israel. The significant work that I've been able to produce and present to my peers has given me a confident base in my capability to excel in scholarly work at the master's level.

The intellect I have gained through my undergraduate career, as well as the academic achievements I have made in my research on an array of issues, have prepared me to enter a demanding and competitive master's program to further my education to ultimately attain a PhD in Persian Studies. During a recent trip to Austin, I had the opportunity to speak with Dr. X and Dr. X and discuss my interests in pursuing a master's in Middle Eastern Studies. Since my undergraduate study has not specifically dealt with the Middle East, I concluded that a master's in Middle Eastern Studies would be a favorable avenue in my future attempt at a PhD in Persian Studies. Through my discourse with these professors, I came to understand that a position in the master's program will afford me the opportunity to work closely with Dr. X, Dr. X, and Dr. X to advance my scholarship regarding gender and sexuality through religious and political influences. Since my interests coincide with the department's statements on academic excellence, I am confident that my contributions will be substantial, and I look forward with working with other students and faculty at the University of Texas at Austin.

Commented [ANS14]: Or you could better your grammar skills and cut this sentence down, August.

Commented [ANS15]: This could have been 1 or 2 lines.

Commented [ANS16]: lol

Commented [ANS17]: So “achieved” is better than “done” because it's more active... so I was told. But doesn't make sense in this sentence. I just changed the word without rewriting the sentence. Rookie mistake.

Commented [ANS18]: OH MAH GASH. The contractions. No. Contractions. Ever. This isn't [is not] a casual letter to a friend.

Commented [ANS19]: Lord. This was me trying to show my bona fides. But that's what the CV is for! Also, a 10 minute paper as an undergrad probably isn't that groundbreaking, so why draw so much attention to it.

Commented [ANS20]: Again, trying to legitimize a transition when nobody really cared...

Commented [ANS21]: This is the worst way of putting it: a laundry list. I should have explained WHY working with each of these profs would be beneficial. What is their specific expertise? What can I learn from them?

Commented [ANS22]: It was easy to just copy/paste this cover letter for each application. But it really shows. There was no specificity about why UT Austin was a good fit for me. What was it about their program and faculty that drew me to them? Why would I have been a good fit for the program?