THE STATEMENT OF PURPOSE

Write for each school
Your statement should read as though you wrote it specifically for the school to which you are applying. This may mean that you can leave 5 paragraphs the same for each school and change just the 6th for each application. However, sometimes it means tweaking other parts of the essay as well. Mention specific faculty you would like to work with. You may wish to also mention how your interests are specifically aligned with the work a faculty member has done or is doing.

Leave roughly 1/3 of the essay to talk about the future
Describe your interests, goals, career plans after graduate school, and why the school you are applying to is a good choice at which to pursue these interests. If the statement is required to conform to a stringent word limit, make sure you nonetheless include this information, even at the expense of leaving out other material. Your history should be reflected elsewhere in the applications, through your recommendations, c.v., etc. anyway.

Don't list experiences and awards
If awards are listed elsewhere in the application (which they are according to nearly all forms), don't put them here again. Not only is it a waste of space but it also conveys arrogance. If there is something listed on your c.v. that deserves explanation, you can put it in here, but even then it could be better to have a letter writer mention it, if the award is something s/he is familiar with.

Don't get too personal
Remember, it's called a "statement of purpose", NOT a "personal statement." This is not an essay about your emotional development. If something in your personal life is integral to your studies, then you should include it. But keep in mind that reviewers do not want to read about your personal life. The statement of purpose should read like the professional document it is.

DO mention/account for rough patches in your record, if you have them
If there is a specific reason you had a semester where your GPA was a 2.0, then very briefly mention it in the statement. If there is a separate optional essay for this sort of thing, include it there and don't mention it in the statement. In any case, be as brief as possible and do not make excuses; just account for the matter and move on.

Use professional language
Convey passion, but avoid using "passion," "love," and similar words to describe your research. Also avoid superlatives. Avoid phrases such as, "this is the best program for me." There are far more nuanced ways to express your deepest interests in a program. Try using terms of subtle surety, such as "ideal." Do not use colloquial language in your statement. The statement of purpose is NOT a message texted to a close friend; it is in fact a critical representation of the kind of thinker you are. Intellectual maturity should be the overarching tone.

Avoid clichés
Many students will say, "I've always wanted to be a psychologist/scientist/writer/historian," or, "ever since I went to the X museum when I was five, I knew I wanted to study Y." These stories will make the committee members’ eyes roll and they don't do anything to explain your current knowledge, ideas, and goals. If you should have a meaningful anecdote that demonstrates your intellectual development, by all means use it; but avoid throw-away sentences. And please, DO NOT MAKE UP A STORY TO MAKE YOUR EXPERIENCES SOUND MORE ENGAGING THAN THEY ARE – the committee will likely smell your insincerity. But more importantly, the old adage is here apropos: "if you always tell the truth, you never have to worry about remembering your lies."

Be concise
Many applications will have a page or word limit which typically runs to about 1 single-spaced or 2 double-spaced pages. CONFORM TO THESE GUIDELINES AS IF THE WERE LAW. Even if an application does not have a word limit, you should cut unnecessary information and verbiage wherever possible. Use an economy of language. Be thorough but efficient in your writing. A committee member is more likely to read your essay thoughtfully if it is tightly constructed.

Adapted from http://www-personal.umich.edu/~mooreks/sop.html