

Write a Great Personal Statement

A personal statement is **used in the graduate program admissions process to assess applicants**. It describes your goals (e.g., research or study areas of interest) and intent for attending graduate school.

Each program is different.

Some may ask for a general personal statement or statement of research interests. You may also encounter essay questions that are very specific to your program of interest. Depending on the nature of the program, it might be advantageous to identify a faculty member you are interested in working with on your thesis or dissertation. However, in professional or practicum-driven programs, this might not be appropriate.

The admissions process is competitive.

Your personal statement needs to sell your unique qualifications, experiences and connections. Programs look for candidates with a strong point of view on what they want to learn and accomplish and a record of success. Even though it's called a 'personal' statement, skip the childhood story about seeing the ocean and wanting to become an oceanographer. Instead, focus on the details of real experiences that have equipped you for the program. Use faculty, mentors, alumni, the Writing Center and other resources to help you create your personal statement. Put your best foot forward!

A great personal statement...	A poor personal statement...
...is a narrative built on concrete skills, detailed experiences and evidence . It explains what you are doing in school/work now and how that relates to what you want to do in the program.	...uses vague, broad sentences (often with too many adjectives) that don't convey your tangible skills and experience, and it doesn't include details.
...identifies specific aspects of the program and/or potential faculty advisors whose work you are drawn to and shows you've done your homework.	...focuses on broad desires for your future and general statements about the state of the world. It's not aligned specifically with the program and is not written to fit each program you apply to.
...explains how graduate school fits into your long term-vision for your career or research plans.	...focuses on childhood stories and inspirations and doesn't include a clear perspective of where you want to go in the program and after.
...is well-organized and cohesive . Each paragraph has a clear purpose with supporting points. All paragraphs flow in a logical order building a case for why you would be an asset to the program.	...is disjointed without a clear path from each paragraph and without clear evidence backing up your points. It meanders (points are made and then abandoned) and includes spelling/grammar errors.

Liberal Arts Sample

Vague Sentences: “As an undergraduate, I took a lot of classes in writing and rhetoric where I learned to be a better communicator. I want to continue learning about rhetoric and the theories about how people persuade each other in graduate school.”

Specific Sentences: “In my junior year, through courses in critical theory, I began to learn how to use the work of theorists like Foucault as a lens to understand and dissect the dynamics of power and knowledge in our society. In particular, I’m fascinated by how power and powerlessness intersect with issues facing displaced people groups and refugees seeking asylum. I’m interested in further developing my understanding of critical theory with a social and ethical focus. I believe Dr. Rutherford’s research into the Syrian refugee crisis would align well with my research interests.”

Natural Resources Excerpt

“Through my interpretation internship with The Nature Conservancy, I was exposed to the ecology of riparian corridors and learned about the complex interdependency between animals and native plant species. While sharing information with visitors about the preserve and answering their questions, I observed firsthand how invasive species can create a new normal in natural systems. For example, I saw the Himalayan blackberries covering the banks of the Willamette River or the American Bullfrog diminishing the numbers of native turtles, fish, snakes and other frogs in Oregon waterways. This understanding was further developed by a research project I completed in partnership with two classmates where we identified and catalogued 10 invasive species in the Olalla Reservoir in Toledo, Ore.

In my graduate studies, I not only want to deepen my understanding of conservation challenges like these, but I want to measure the public’s knowledge of specific threats to riparian ecosystems and correlate this understanding with policy action. Human-nature interaction is complex and presents ever-growing challenges on a local and global scale. I seek to understand both the science of natural resources and stakeholder involvement so that I can position myself effectively for conservation advocacy or policymaking in the future.

I was drawn to Oregon State University’s online Master of Natural Resources program because of its focus on ‘workable solutions for complex natural resources challenges.’ It’s important that we work with the existing economic and environmental systems, developing a full understanding of all public interests, in order to create real change in the Northwest. In particular, I appreciate the balance offered in your curriculum between ecology and human systems, as well as the ability to choose a tailored focus area...”

Complete Personal Statement: Education

I distinctly remember the moment that I knew I wanted to become an educator of teachers. I stood in the front of a dilapidated classroom in Ghana. Its dusty walls, rickety wooden chairs and single tripod that held a small whiteboard were far from an ideal classroom. I was mid-lesson with my nine students in the Agriculture Education class when one of my students raised her hand and excitedly described an idea. She wanted to teach sustainable agriculture by having her students design and execute a real experimental garden. She was forming a notion of teaching as more than lecture. I saw several proverbial light bulbs flick on as my students envisioned the real situations and possibilities in which they would teach. After several weeks of assigning them lesson design and learning theory, it became concrete. And I realized my path was in developing others into really great teachers.

This moment happened last summer when I joined AgriCorps and moved to Africa. My husband and I were placed at the Kumasi Institute of Tropical Agriculture, an agriculture training college located outside Kumasi, Ghana. It was this experience of teaching collegiate level students that solidified my ambitions. It is thus my goal to earn a Ph.D. in Science Education from Oregon State University with the goal of teaching agriculture at the post-secondary level, focusing on agriculture education and teacher training.

Based on my previous training in pedagogy and agriculture, I believe I would be an asset to your program. I have been building my experience over the last seven years, starting with earning a B.S. in Agriculture Education and a teaching credential at California State University, Chico. Following completion of my degree, I accepted an agriculture teaching position at Liberty Ranch High School in the summer of 2011. This young program provided opportunities for me to write curriculum, create new agriculture classes, write grants, and help build a program from the ground up. The four years I spent at Liberty Ranch were unforgettable. I quickly realized that I found the greatest joy not in the aspects I originally became an agriculture teacher for (county fairs, chapter officers), but in the classroom. The day-in day-out multi-faceted puzzle to create the 'perfect' lesson fueled my energy.

During my second year teaching, I began the online master's program in Agriculture Education at CSU and graduated in the spring of 2014. This degree allowed me to explore advanced learning theory, use scientific inquiry to measure my teaching performance, and provided me with tools to help improve my own department. My thesis investigated the factors in which first- and fourth-year agriculture students enroll in agriculture classes. The research presented many findings, one of which was that the fourth-year agriculture students in my district enrolled in agriculture courses because they were more challenging and dynamic than their non-agriculture counterparts. This process not only enhanced my abilities to conduct research, but also gave insight into the nature of my students.

While teaching at Liberty Ranch, I had the opportunity to work with other education professionals in creating agriculture curriculum through California Foundation for Agriculture in the Classroom. I also presented the curriculum I developed for my Agriculture Chemistry class at California Agriculture Teachers Association (CATA) road shows and biannual meetings. These experiences helped refine my abilities to create rigorous and relevant curriculum.

A sense of wonder drove my husband and I to join AgriCorps in the fall of 2014. The prospect of agricultural development work in conjunction with a teaching position at the collegiate level intrigued me. My work at KITA has included an amalgam of duties such as teaching, administrative work, teacher evaluations and project planning. Progress is slow and cultural barriers often halted achievement. Yet, if there's one thing I've realized in Ghana amidst the limited resources and struggling economy, it's that a good teacher has no border. What works in a small dairy community in Galt, California, often can work in a farming college in rural Ghana. Despite the foreign language and different teacher-student dynamic, I found this realization incredible.

It is this experience that has prompted me to pursue a higher degree in agriculture education and to devote my career to helping new and existing teachers utilize fail-safe teaching strategies. During my studies, I am specifically interested in investigating learning theory with regards to how agriculture teachers can create critical thinkers and problem-solvers in their classrooms, the changing nature of agriculture education with the adoption of new nationwide assessments, and how I can best prepare educators to meet the needs of 21st century students.

After speaking with Dr. Croom last fall, I believe Oregon State University can foster my learning in such a way that provides collaborative opportunities with department faculty and staff, encouragement to explore and research unanswered questions, and provide ample opportunities to enhance my teaching skills.

Instead of a vague 'love of teaching,' the student gives a specific, tangible example to anchor the essay. She avoids terms like 'passion' and 'fell in love with' to describe her educational path.

Student identifies her long-term goal and how the higher degree supports it.

Student discusses her credentials that help qualify her for the program.

Student is mentioning some of the theories and techniques she knows which will be part of the advanced degree.

Student explains the relevance of these experiences in terms of skills that transfer to the program.

Student lays out a direction for her program including what she wants to study and with whom. She also mentions a specific faculty member.
