

Graduate School Applications

Writing Personal Statements

Writing a personal statement or another type of a graduate school essay is challenging and will take many drafts and much reflection. Don't wait until you have it complete before you share it with others; their input will make it stronger, clearer, and focused. Be sure to follow the directions given by the school.

A Personal Statement is:

An Impression. Your personal statement should produce a picture of you as a person, student, and potential scholarship or assistantship recipient.

An Invitation. The reader must be invited to get to know you, personally. Make your reader feel welcome and show your personality.

A Good Indication of Your Priorities and Judgment.

What you choose to say in your statement tells the committee what your priorities are. What you say, and how you say it, is crucial.

A Story, or More Precisely, Your Story. Everyone has a story to tell, but we are not all natural storytellers. Before you do any writing, spend some time in self-reflective conversation with friends, family, and mentors.

A Personal Statement is Not:

An Academic Paper with You as the Subject. The papers you write for class are typically designed to interpret data, reflect research, or analyze events all at some distance. In a personal statement your goal is to close the distance between you and the reader. You must engage on a different, more personal level than you have been trained.

A Resume in Narrative Form. An essay that reads like a resume of accomplishments and goals tells the reader nothing he/she could not glean from the rest of the application. This type of essay reveals little about the candidate and is a wasted opportunity.

Before You Write

Know Yourself

- What's special, unique, distinctive, and/or impressive about you or your life?
- What details of your life that have shaped you or influenced your goals might help the committee better understand you or help set you apart from other applicants?
- When did you become interested in this field and what have you learned about it (through classes, reading, seminars, research, experience, conversations) that has further stimulated your interest and reinforced your conviction in this field?

Describe Your Unique Talents and Goals

- If you have worked during your college years, what have you learned (leadership, managerial, teamwork skills, etc.) and how has that experience contributed to your growth?
- What are your career goals?
- Are there any gaps or discrepancies in your academic record that you should explain (great grades but mediocre LSAT or GRE scores or a distinct upward pattern to your recent GPA)?
- Have you had to overcome any unusual obstacles or hardships in your life?
- Do you have strong academic successes you want to highlight?

Know and Discuss Why You're the Best Candidate

- What skills (leadership, communication, analytical, etc.) do you possess? Use examples.
- What personal characteristics (integrity, compassion, persistence, etc.) do you possess that would improve your prospects for success?
- Why might you be a stronger candidate for graduate school and more successful in the profession or field than other applicants?
- What are the most compelling reasons you can give for the selection committee to be interested in you?
- Identify a specific program, research interests, or a faculty member you might like to work with and why.

Writing Tips

- Plan on devoting a significant amount of time writing this essay. It is common to write several drafts of your personal statement.
- Proofread your essay several times. Make sure you have no punctuation or grammatical errors. Solicit comments from your Career Coach, professors, peers, and other individuals you trust to give feedback.
- Keep it brief. Most instructions specify how long the essay should be. If length is not mentioned, stick to one to two pages, single-spaced.

"Applying to graduate school takes a lot of time and energy. I had to prepare for the GRE, write my personal statement, and keep my grades up-all at the same time. My Career Coach at Career Services critiqued my personal statement and kept me motivated until I got into a graduate program."



Monica Barrett
MS, Electrical Engineering

My professional goal is to have a career in environmental education with public outreach and research components. It would be extremely fulfilling to spend my professional life gaining knowledge through research of my own and others, and then effectively sharing that information with the public. I am applying to Southern Oregon University's Master of Science in Environmental Education program because I believe it will provide the curriculum, learning experiences, and knowledge necessary for me to become a competent professional in environmental education.

My love for science and the natural world has always been a part of me. As a child, I was extremely shy and anxious, and being outside made me feel calm and confident. Fortunately, there was a pinyon-juniper forest behind my house that I was free to explore at my own pace, which helped me find activities I enjoyed and boosted my confidence. I pushed my physical abilities, climbing trees and seeing how far my legs could carry me to discover new areas. It also stimulated me intellectually, aiding in developing my navigational, problem solving, and critical thinking skills. Being outside created a learning environment and sanctuary for me. My story is likely not unique in this way – having a longstanding passion for the outdoors through childhood experiences and finding sanctuary in the natural world could almost be described as common throughout humanity. This universal connection is part of the reason why environmental education can be such a powerful tool that many people can relate to and benefit from, which is one reason why I would like to pursue a career in environmental education.

While attending Utah State University (USU) I earned a B.S. degree in Wildlife Science with minors in Environmental Studies and Fisheries Science. The coursework was fascinating to me, and the professors were excellent. I especially enjoyed my ecology courses, General Ecology, Ecology of Our World, and Wetland Ecology and Management, for big picture ideas and concepts as well as learning about the interaction of organisms. Monitoring and Assessment in Natural Resources was a course that gave me a new understanding of and appreciation for the scientific and research process. I gained valuable knowledge in two courses, Limnology and Water Quality and Pollution, about river and lake systems and the influence of anthropogenic activities in these systems. Although these classes were interesting and built a strong foundation in science, it was the classes about people interacting with nature, such as Natural Resources and Society and Environment and Society that really caught my attention. I would stay up late to read extra articles and books, discuss ideas and concepts I learned with friends, and wake up early excited to go to class.

While pursuing my undergraduate degree, I worked at USU Water Quality Extension (WQE). This is where I truly found my passion for environmental education. I started as a volunteer, helping at an annual event where fourth graders rotated through water quality, soil, plant, and wildlife stations. At the water quality station, I helped introduce students to a few families of aquatic invertebrates that they would find in our local river and discussed relationships between these organisms and water quality. After the introduction, I assisted the students in finding and identifying the insects in the river. Could this get any better? First, I was learning. Before volunteering I went to a workshop to learn about what I would be teaching and how to effectively convey this information to fourth graders. Second, I shared this fascinating newfound knowledge with others. Not all of the students were interested in water quality or enthused about looking for and handling bugs, but many of them were. There were also many who were hesitant at first to touch an insect but by the end of the day they were the champion stonefly catchers for their classes. Third, it was inspiring to watch these students explore for themselves and make new discoveries that they could share with me. This is what I want to do with my life. I contacted Nancy Mesner, the Water Quality Extension Specialist. I secured an internship and then full employment at WQE where I enjoyed many more environmental education opportunities such as teaching in classrooms, at 4-H groups, water fairs, teacher workshops, and public events. I also helped revise and develop water quality related lesson plans. The staff at WQE was supportive and encouraging, and my teaching ability greatly improved as I gained experience with revising and creating lesson plans and also teaching those lesson plans to students of all ages.

I have also developed a passion for research. My first research position was as a seasonal technician conducting plant surveys in remote locations in the Colorado Plateau, near Moab, UT. I learned some research fundamentals, how research could be important and interesting but also meticulous and repetitive. It could be challenging at times, but I found great joy in being outdoors all day and collecting data that could help answer important ecological questions about plant and herbivore interactions. During my second seasonal technician

experience, I further developed my plant ecology research skillset and gained experience with wildlife, specifically geese. Although the technical research skills I acquired on this job were valuable, learning how to live in an exceptionally remote location with three coworkers who had previously been strangers, made me stretch myself and improve my communication abilities. While this situation could be onerous at times, living, working, and spending “time off” with my three coworkers, I actually found enjoyment in being present, focusing on the tasks at hand, and developing relationships with my coworkers.

One experience I think best qualifies me for graduate school is having conducted undergraduate research. I learned how to write a proposal, manage a budget, carry out fieldwork, analyze data, and present results orally and in writing. A key lesson I learned from doing this research is that being prepared is important, but it is arguably more important to be flexible and adaptable in ways that will improve the research. I learned that animals, specifically elk, did not act as I (or any of my advisors) had predicted. We had to completely re-think and overhaul the project multiple times. Also, there were times when I was on my own, had to think on my feet, and use my best judgment to figure out solutions to obstacles that I came across. I found this challenging but also invigorating and exciting to think of creative ways to accomplish my research goals. Another major lesson I learned is that going through the publication process, although taxing at times, is extremely rewarding and made me grow as a writer. My advisors, co-researcher, and I wrote a paper, “Identification of Diet Supplements for Management of Elk Distributions,” that has been accepted by *The Wildlife Society Bulletin*. Finally, the most important lesson I learned from this experience is that collaboration is critical. I could not have accomplished any of this alone. I am indebted to my three outstanding advisors and co-researcher, along with employees at my field site that made this project a success.

I am currently a technician for the Ecology Center at USU. This job has been crucial in preparing me to pursue graduate school myself. I have been involved in several projects with many graduate students spanning an array of subjects: controlling invasive species, improving tools for range management, and studying species interactions, to name a few. As I have worked on these projects, I have gained firsthand knowledge of the importance of thinking critically, being efficient, and being adaptable and creative. I have loved being able to talk with graduate students about their projects to learn why they are doing what they are doing and why they think their research is important. I have enjoyed brainstorming with them about solutions to problems that come up in the field or in lab work and feel great satisfaction in identifying creative solutions. Although I have enjoyed assisting graduate students in their research and have gained valuable knowledge and skills related to success in graduate school, I am ready to further my education and pursue research projects of my own, as well as a career in environmental education.

There are several reasons why I would like to attend Southern Oregon University’s Master of Science in Environmental Education program. I feel the curriculum would contribute the necessary building blocks for me to pursue a career in environmental education. I am especially interested in the following courses: Trends of Environmental Education, Teaching in Environmental education, Aquatic Ecology, and Fish and Fisheries. The qualifications of the faculty and staff in this program are impressive. I am especially interested in the research of Dr. Michael Parker, specifically relating to anthropogenic impacts on aquatic food webs. The option to complete a project or thesis appeals to my passion for research. Also, when I looked up Ashland, I immediately felt a strong connection to the place. It seemed astonishingly similar to my cherished hometown of Cedar City, Utah. Ashland’s size, close proximity to abundant outdoor opportunities, and Shakespearean festival were all benefits of my hometown that I hold in great esteem. After further research, I realized the Shakespearean festival of my hometown was modeled after that in Ashland. The school, as well as the place, sounded like a perfect fit for me. All of these factors made it an easy decision for me to apply to Southern Oregon University’s graduate school.