Personal Statements for Teacher Training Applications

Teacher training is an extremely popular career choice for graduates, with thousands submitting applications each year. When applying for a Postgraduate (or Professional Graduate) Certificate in Education (PGCE) or other route into teaching such as School Direct, you will face stiff competition, especially for popular courses such as secondary drama, secondary sport and primary. It is essential that your application stands out from the crowd by firmly ‘selling’ your suitability for teaching.

Applications for teacher training leading to qualified teacher status (QTS) are made through UCAS. The UCAS application includes a personal statement, which is your main opportunity to convince admissions tutors to offer you an interview. It is important that you take time and effort to write a winning statement.

It is a good idea to complete your statement in a word document before pasting the completed statement onto your online form. This will enable you to check your spelling and grammar before submitting. Remember that all teachers, whatever their subject, are expected to have excellent standards of written English and that it is essential that your statement is word perfect.

You will be asked to: Describe briefly your reasons for wanting to teach giving the relevance of your previous education and experience, including details of any teaching experience, visits to schools and other work with young people. Providers are interested to know the range of skills you will bring to the training programme, for example: practical experience, managing people, working with/leading a team, communication skills etc.

As you only have 47 lines or 4000 characters, you must make every word count. Please note that 47 lines of a Microsoft Word document doesn’t necessarily equate to 47 lines when copied onto the UCAS form, so you may need to do a final edit after pasting your statement onto the online form.

There is a separate section after the statement which gives you 20 lines or 1600 characters to list the factual details (dates, location, job role) of your work experience.

What to include

- Your reasons for wanting to teach the age group that you have selected;
- Work experience that shows you have the skills and qualities necessary for teaching;
- How your degree relates to the National Curriculum, especially if it is not in a National Curriculum subject.

Your reasons for wanting to teach

Sadly some students apply for teaching because they don’t know what else to do and, if this is implied in your statement, admissions staff will question your level of motivation to complete the course and therefore be reluctant to offer you an interview. Showing that you have completed relevant work experience to investigate whether teaching is right for you and that you have been taking steps to progress your career in teaching over a long period of time will help you prove that you have made a well informed, realistic decision.

Your reasons for wanting to teach should be based on experience which shows that you:
- are enthusiastic about your subject, about teaching and about working with children;
- understand that teaching can be demanding;
- have thoroughly researched teaching and are sure that it will suit you.

Making the most of your reasons for wanting to teach

Here are some common reasons that people cite for wanting to teach and suggestions for improvement:
‘I like working with children.’
There are many different careers which involve working with children so this statement, when used in isolation, does not explain why you have chosen teaching in particular. You also need to show that you are prepared for the challenges and difficulties that you may face when working with children, as well as the more enjoyable aspects. The best way to show this is to describe how you faced challenging situations through your work experience with children.

‘I want to give children the chance to learn that I never had.’
This sounds as if you have chosen teaching as a reaction to your experiences as a young person, rather than having made an informed choice based on your own career research. If you use a statement like this, balance it out by stating how your work experience confirmed your desire to teach.

‘I want to inspire young people to achieve their potential.’
‘My teachers helped me to succeed and now I want to give something back.’
Whilst sounding enthusiastic, candidates who give one of the above reasons for wanting to teach risk sounding idealistic and lacking knowledge about the demands, restriction and challenges of teaching. Make sure that you balance out any idealistic statements with examples that show how you have faced some of the common difficulties that teachers contend with on a daily basis (such as managing behaviour in the classroom) and show that you consistently met the challenge with enthusiasm.

Work experience
What sort of work experience should I include?
Highly relevant work experience which admissions tutors will be impressed by include:
- Visits to a school where you work shadowed, tutored pupils individually, assisted or taught parts of a lesson;
- Work with children in a non-school setting, for example: volunteering for a charity, helping with a youth club, leading a scouts or guides club or working at a sports centre;
- Experiences showing that you possess the skills associated with the wider role of a teacher (e.g. administration or organisation);

Less relevant work experience might include:
- Babysitting/ looking after family members;
- Work experience that is related to your subject but has no link to young people or children;
- Work experience that took place before you came to University.

How should I write about my work experience?
Consider the skills and qualities that are important to have as a teacher. These may include:
- Communicating effectively with young people of different ages and abilities both verbally and in writing
- Initiative, innovation and creativity
- Motivating and encouraging pupils
- Being approachable
- Leadership skills
- Ability to resolve problems
- Being responsible
- Being able to think on your feet
- Organisation and time management
- Record keeping
- IT skills

A thorough description about the role of a teacher, the duties that they perform and their skills can be found on the Prospects website at www.prospects.ac.uk/links/eduteachsch. The information here can be used as a check list and can give an indication of the vocabulary that the teaching profession uses to describe skills and qualities.

Next, compile a list of examples from your work experience that demonstrate your use of these skills. The majority of your examples should be drawn from your experience of working with children.

Highlight what you actually did in each example, emphasising what you learnt, how you displayed the qualities listed above and what the outcome of your efforts were.

An example from the National College for Teaching and Leadership shows how one candidate described their experience effectively:

“I have good verbal communication skills and worked in the reception class at a local primary school for two weeks. I learnt how to make information accessible to young children and how to hold their attention. I learnt the importance of making connections that children will remember, such as associating farm animals with letters of the alphabet. This can also expand the children’s vocabulary. I found this fascinating”.

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Your degree and its relevance to teaching

You will need to show how your degree relates to the National Curriculum, especially if your degree isn’t in a National Curriculum subject.

This can be done by thinking about the activities that you have completed as part of your degree. For example, activities such as essay/dissertation writing, delivering presentations or taking part in debates shows competence in using the English language. They can therefore be mapped across to one of the English components in the National Curriculum. You could show how your degree relates to Mathematics in the National Curriculum by highlighting any statistical elements of your course or any times where you analysed numerical data.

If your A Levels were in National Curriculum subjects you can also mention these, however the focus needs to be on your degree.

Note that you can take a Subject Knowledge Enhancement course for some subjects in demand. This course will allow you to get your subject knowledge to the required standard necessary for teaching. To access these courses you will first need to apply for a PGCE, noting your interest in the course within your personal statement.

What if I haven’t got any work experience with young people?

If you haven’t got any work experience with young people you are unlikely to be considered unless you are applying for a teacher shortage subject or you can demonstrate significant other experience relevant to teaching.

Not only will you be competing with other candidates who have a wealth of relevant experience, but it will be difficult to show that you have the skills necessary to work with young people and that you understand the realities of teaching if you have never stepped inside a classroom since being a pupil.

If you are still keen to apply, you need to describe how your other experiences demonstrate that you possess the skills required for teaching.

For example, working as a supervisor in a restaurant could prove that you possess the necessary listening skills, a capacity to solve problems, organisational skills, leadership skills and an ability to motivate others and to think on your own two feet. Or perhaps you have delivered presentations as part of your course which shows an ability to communicate well with groups of people as well as to explain, inform and facilitate learning.

Think laterally about your experiences to identify how they are relevant to teaching. For example, a restaurant supervisor may have helped organise and manage children’s parties, demonstrating an ability to liaise with parents and an awareness of any health and safety precautions to take when working with children, together with an understanding of the things that children are interested in and how to use these in order to relate well to them.

Also emphasise any industry experience that you possess in the subject that you want to teach as this will demonstrate a thorough and practical understanding of your subject as well as possibly providing evidence of skills needed for teaching.

Mistakes to avoid

There is a separate section entitled Work Experience where you can provide objective factual details about your experience (for example start and end dates, your job title or role, names and locations of schools or organisations). The personal statement is therefore NOT the place to include such details, but instead an opportunity to analyse your own personal experiences and skills. You might use phrases such as: ‘During my placement in a Year 5 class, I ……’, but you don’t need to include a sentence such as: ‘In 2012 I undertook a two week placement at St Andrew’s Primary School in Wolverhampton’; this is doing no more than repeating the name of the school and the dates, which should be in the ‘work experience’ section.

In a similar way, you do not need to list your education/qualifications as this will be covered in the Academic History section of the form.

Some people take a philosophical approach in their statement by describing why they think that teaching is important to individuals and societies or by making academic arguments about what makes a good teacher. However, the personal statement is not the place to debate objectively concepts as you would in an essay. Admissions staff do not need you to tell them what makes a
good teacher, instead they need you to prove why you are right for teaching.

The only way to do this is to write directly about your own practical experiences, describing how they demonstrate that you have the skills and qualities of a good teacher. It is best to use pronouns such as ‘I’, ‘my’ and ‘me’ in your sentences. For example:

‘Whilst on work placement in a school I tutored students on a one to one basis, enabling me to develop my awareness of how different young people learn’.

… is better than…

‘Tutoring students on one to one basis whilst on placement in a school has enabled the development of an awareness of how different young people learn’.

Language

The best personal statements are written in plain English, using words that the writer is comfortable with and which they would use naturally in conversation.

It is important to use positive action words which imply that you are proactive and dynamic. Examples of action words include: completed, achieved, organised, created, and negotiated; more are listed on our booklet Effective Applications Forms, which you can download from our Careers Library Online.

Avoid phrases that imply that you did something only because you were told to or that someone else was the main instigator of, such as: ‘I had to’, ‘I helped to’ or ‘I was given the responsibility of’. Also avoid phrases which imply that your qualities are just a matter of opinion such as: ‘I think’, ‘I believe’ or ‘I feel’.

Structure

As a teacher you will have to be extremely organised so it is important to write a well structured and organised statement.

Your statement should therefore be divided into paragraphs with a clear theme for each. Here’s an example of how one student successfully structured her statement:

- Paragraph 1
  Brief introduction explaining how work experience with young people has confirmed my desire to teach.

- Paragraph 2
  Analysis of my classroom based work experience to show what I learnt and the skills I developed.

- Paragraph 3
  Explanation of how my degree subject is relevant to the National Curriculum.

- Paragraph 4
  Analysis of my other work experience and interests to show that I possess the skills and qualities necessary for teaching.

- Paragraph 5
  Brief closing statement to re-iterate enthusiasm for teaching.

It is important that the bulk of your statement is about your work experience. Below is a rough guide which suggests how much space to allocate each section:

- Your reasons for wanting to teach - no more than 5 lines
- Work experience - at least 20 lines
- Your degree’s relevance to the National Curriculum - no more than 10 lines

Further help

Our Careers Advisers are happy to review your personal statement and offer you unbiased and useful feedback. Advisers are available in the Careers Centre on MD Concourse, Monday to Friday from 11:00 am – 4:00 pm in term time and from 1:00pm – 4:00pm in vacations. Special arrangements operate on other campuses. Ring 321414 or see our website for details.

Websites

More information can be found at

- www.UCAS.com
- www.prospects.ac.uk/links/pgce
- National College of Teaching and Leadership (part of the Department for Education responsible for initial teacher training) www.education.gov.uk/get-into-teaching