American Society for Horticultural Science 2023: Applying to Graduate School in the Plant Sciences

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*The content of these materials was adapted from Cornell University
Contacting Faculty

**Etiquette:** Until you establish a relationship with a faculty member, address them in a formal fashion. You may be able to relax this a bit once you get to know one another.

- The subject line of your email should reflect what your email is pertaining.
- Address your recipient by title and last name e.g., Dr. X or Professor X.
- Keep it brief. You are more likely to receive a response if you keep your correspondence concise.
- Use complete sentences, proper grammar, and punctuation.
- Sign your email with a complimentary close e.g., “Sincerely” or “Best” and then your name.

**Emailing a Potential PI for the First Time:** When you email a faculty member you hope to work with, your goal should be to set up a time to meet with them.

- Make a connection between your interests (and experience if you have some) and the work they do. If you don’t have much experience, let them know why you want to work with them and how a graduate degree in their research area/program aligns with your goals.
- Attach a copy of your CV or resume. If you don’t have much background in the research area yet, list relevant coursework you are taking/have taken. Some faculty won’t read your attachment, but the best-case scenario is that they do!
- If you do not receive a reply at first, know it is not personal. Send a follow up email in about a week – it is possible that the email has gotten lost in their inbox. If they do not reply after that, move on to the next faculty you are interested in.
- After meeting with them, send a polite follow up email thanking them for their time.
  - Reach out to graduate students in a lab you are interested in. Feel free to ask a potential PI to put you in contact with their previous and current grad students.

Here is an example of emailing a potential PI for the first time – but note you should tailor it to the individual and be more descriptive when making your connection to their interests. They will be able to tell if you have simply copy & pasted a template and emailed it to every faculty member you are interested in.

**From:** student@university.edu **To:** professor@university.edu

**Subject Line:** Prospective Grad Student for Fall 2024

Hi Dr. XXXX,

I am currently a horticulture undergraduate student at the University of [XXXX] exploring master’s/PhD programs for fall of 2024.

Your work in [XXXX] caught my attention because it aligns with my previous experience in [XXXX] (resume attached). I am really interested in [XXXX topic the PI works in] because my ultimate goal is to one day work in [XXXX job or XXXX field].

If you’d be willing, would you be available to zoom sometime to talk about the current research you have going on and whether you are taking on new graduate students?

Thanks,

[Your first and last name]
Academic Statement of Purpose

What is it? The academic statement of purpose is your chance to help the admissions committee understand your academic objectives and determine if you are a good match for the program. The goal of this document is to convey that you have solid background and experience in your area of interest and that you have the potential to be successful in graduate study.

Information to include:

- **Introduce yourself and your academic interests**
  - Provide background on your area of interest and how it became of interest to you.
  - Share how and why you decided to pursue a graduate degree in this field.

- **Describe your academic background, preparation, and training**
  - Discuss skills you have learned from academic, lab, or research experiences (e.g., undergraduate coursework, research internships (at your home university or elsewhere), scholarly writings, jobs in the field, scientific presentations, etc.). Give specific examples to illustrate the points you are making.
  - Talk about the research you conducted – project focus, research mentor, your specific role, what you learned, and the outcome. If there were challenges, mention what you learned from them! This shows persistence and resilience in the face of adversity.
  - Mention any academic awards or scholarships to show your caliber as a student
  - Share extracurricular opportunities you have had that show leadership, ability to work with a diverse group of people, teaching skills, written/oral communication skills, etc.

- **Show them you are making an informed decision**
  - Indicate what you would like to study in graduate school in enough detail to convince the faculty that you understand the scope of research in the discipline
  - Show them you have thoroughly researched the program, its faculty, and research focus areas and state **how the program aligns with your academic and career goals**
  - Describe why you are a good fit for the program & why the program is a good fit for you
    - If there are specific faculty you are interested in working with, check the program’s ASOP instructions and determine how best to mention this in your essay. Some programs require you to name a professor(s) with whom you would like to work. If it is not required, it is still good to name who you plan to work with so they can push your name forward in the application review process – but make sure you have confirmed this with your potential PI before you submit you application.
    - What aspects of the program are of particular interest to you (facilities or resources unique to the institution, opportunities for collaboration with other faculty, research centers associated with the program, etc.)?
    - Include information that is important to you outside of the program e.g., supportive environment for identity-based groups, strong grad student community among your department of interest, opportunities to participate in professional/career development programming, etc.
  - Professional goals – outline what you plan to do after you complete the program to show how a graduate degree aligns with your career goals
Academic Statement of Purpose Cont.

Important things to remember

• **Details**
  - Pay attention and follow instructions very carefully. Every program is different and some have specific topics they want you to address.
  - Unless otherwise noted, this is an academically focused essay, not necessarily a personal essay. You will likely add some personal details here and there, but be sure to keep the focus on your academic background and future potential.
  - Have as many people as possible read your essay before you submit – research mentors, professors, family, friends. Those outside of your field can provide you with valuable perspective and feedback.

• **Length, format, and tone**
  - Unless otherwise noted, one to two pages is standard.
  - Include your full name and proposed program of study at the top of each page – if faculty are not reading an electronic version of your essay, pages can become separated.
  - Write with confidence and in an active voice. Doing this makes your sentences clear and less wordy/complicated.
  - Language should be positive and focused. Since faculty are the ones reviewing your application, it is fine to use discipline-specific terminology, tone, and style.

• **Final checklist. Have you…**
  - Described your academic background in enough detail to show your experience and preparedness in the field?
  - Demonstrated that you are self-motivated, persistent, competent, and have the skills necessary to be successful in graduate school?
  - Shown that you are a good fit for the program you are applying to?
  - Described why you want a graduate degree in this field and how it aligns with your career goals?
  - Followed the instructions as defined by the program you are applying to?
  - Polished, proofread, and had several others review your ASOP?
Personal Statement

What is it? The academic statement of purpose is about what you want to do, while a personal statement is about who you are. It should give the admissions committee a sense of you as a person. You should use this document to….

1) Describe how your personal background and experiences influenced your decision to pursue a graduate degree and a career in science and your chosen field of study
2) Illustrate your potential to contribute to a community of inclusion, belonging, and respect where scholars representing diverse backgrounds, perspectives, abilities, and experiences can learn and innovate productively and positively together

Content in the Personal Statement should complement rather than duplicate the content contained within the Academic Statement of Purpose, which should focus explicitly on your academic interests, research and professional experience, and your intended area of academic focus during your graduate studies.

Within your Personal Statement, you may also share details from your lived experiences including but not limited to

- Being a first-generation college student or graduate (no parent/guardian completed a baccalaureate degree).
- Identifying with racial/ethnic backgrounds (such as Black or African American, Indigenous, Hispanic/Latine, and/or Southeast Asian) historically excluded from and underrepresented in your field of study.
- Identifying with a gender and/or sexual orientation historically underrepresented in your field of study.
- Holding DACA, refugee, TPS, or asylee status.
- Managing a disability or chronic health condition.
- Experiencing housing, food, economic, and/or other forms of significant insecurity.

Your Personal Statement lets you share experiences that provide insights on how your personal, academic, and/or professional experiences demonstrate your ability to be both persistent and resilient, especially when navigating challenging circumstances.

It also lets you provide examples of how you engage with others and have facilitated and/or participated in productive collaborative endeavors. This is a good place to mention your extracurriculars and ways you have engaged with your community outside of academics and research.

Additionally, it is a place to address any blemishes, gaps, or weaknesses in your academic record. You will want to be honest, but brief. It is best to turn negatives into positives by focusing on how you overcame obstacles, remained persistent in the pursuit of your goals, and showed resilience. Share what you learned from the experience, and how it led you to become a better researcher/scholar/person, etc.

Many websites have examples of successful academic statement of purpose & personal statement essays. Reading good examples will give you a better sense of what graduate admissions look for. Feel free to also reach out to current graduate students at your school of interest and ask them if they’d be willing to let you read their essays.

Remember to have as many people read your essays as possible!
Letters of Recommendation

Graduate school applications typically require three letters of recommendation. Ask your recommenders as early as possible (ideally several weeks or even months before) so they have adequate time to write you a strong letter. This also gives you time to find another recommender if someone declines. Here is an example of how to ask for a letter of recommendation:

From: student@university.edu To: professor@university.edu

Subject Line: Recommendation Letter for Graduate School

Hi Dr. XXXX,

Hope the start of your semester is going smoothly. I am applying to graduate school this year and would be delighted if you would be willing to write me a strong recommendation letter on my behalf.

My application is due [insert due date] by [insert due date time e.g., by 11:59pm EST]. I can share my resume and drafts of my academic and personal statements to assist you in writing the letter.

I believe your endorsement would greatly enhance my chances of admission. Please let me know if you would be able to do so.

Thanks,

[Your first and last name]

If they agree, you may want to provide them with a template detailing letter requirements, the submission process, and things you want them to emphasize. This can be especially helpful if you do not yet have rough drafts of your essays – you can simply outline the things you plan to talk about in your essays and tell them what points about to emphasize. Here are things you could include in this document:

- **Letter requirements**
  - Institutional (or professional) letterhead
  - Page limit
  - Font and margins
  - Spacing requirements
  - Signature - including the name, professional title, department, and institution

- **Submission process**
  - What day is it due? What time is it due?
  - How will they submit it?

- **Talking points**
  - Our relationship
  - My potential to conduct research
  - Strength of my academic record
  - My character
    - Leadership, independence
    - Adaptability, resilience, persistence
    - Problem solving, organization, written/oral communication
    - Personality, social conscious, and relationship skills
Graduate School Interviewing Tips

Do all programs interviews? No, but most PhD programs in the life sciences do.

Who is selected for interviews? Only applicants who have made the preliminary list of finalists for admission are invited for interviews.

What is the purpose? The purpose of meeting you in person is to see if you are a good fit for the program. But the interview is also to determine if this is a good match for you! Is this the place you can see yourself spending the next several years for a master’s or PhD?

What is the format? Some programs have you visit for a few days or a weekend. You will likely meet with different faculty one-on-one as well as have group interactions with faculty, current grad students, and other applicants. This is your chance to ask questions!

Who pays for travel costs? It is very common for programs to cover the flight and hotel expenses of your visit, but this may not always be the case.

How to best prepare. Be prepared to discuss your interests, career goals, and qualifications. What do you bring to the table? What do you hope to get out of this program? You can always talk with faculty and grad students at your prospective institutions before your visit to ask for advice.

During the interview you should…

- Be mindful of your goals for the interview. You are there to show your interest and that you are a great fit for the program. But do not forget that you are interviewing them too!
- Find out from graduate students their honest views of the faculty and program
- Limit consumption of alcohol and absolutely no consumption of illegal/other intoxicating substances. Never forget that you are under evaluation at all times…Many prospective labs will invite you out for a meal so they can get to know you better. Do not be that person who gets their offer rescinded because you got too drunk at dinner!
- Wear appropriate attire. Unless otherwise noted, business casual is expected. No t-shirts, sweatshirts, or sandals. If you have business professional clothes, consider bringing them with you for more formal events that may be on your schedule. Wear comfortable shoes as you will likely do a lot of walking.

When will I receive my admission decision? You may receive a verbal offer at the end of your visit. In most cases, applicants are notified after their visit has concluded and the admissions committee has had time to reconvene. If you are admitted verbally, do not commit to anything. Wait until you have your offer in writing.

Additionally, wait until you have received all your offers before deciding. Most institutions require you to make a decision by the beginning of April, so do not feel pressure to commit right after your visit if you feel you need more time to think over your options.
Graduate School Interviewing Tips Cont.

Questions to Ask Professors

- What are typical career paths in this field? What skills that are most important for career paths in this field?
- What kind of research projects are your students working on?
- What does a typical day look like in your lab?
- What is your mentoring style?
- Do your students have opportunities for grant writing and publishing?
- Do you support students being a part of professional associations and attending conferences?
  - American Society for Horticultural Science (ASHS), American Society for Plant Biologists (ASPB), National Association of Plant Breeders (NAPB), American Phytopathological Society (APS), Minorities in Agriculture, Natural Resources, and Related Sciences (MANRRS), etc.
- Do you support students doing internships outside of the university?
- How many students have you graduated in recent years? How long did it take them?
- What types of positions (academic and nonacademic) do students find after graduation?

Questions to Ask Current Graduate Students

- Why did you decide to attend this graduate program?
- What do you like the most and the least about your institution?
- What was your transition to grad school like?
- What has been the most unexpected challenge?
- What are your career goals? How will your degree help you meet those goals?
- What does a typical work day look like for you?
- What is your work/life balance like? What do your hours look like?
- What do you value from a mentor? What is your PI’s mentoring style? Does it work for you?
- Tell me about diversity & inclusion at your university/within your department/within your lab
- What is your lab culture like? What is the culture in your department like?
- What are red flags to look out for in a prospective lab and/or program?
- Is there a strong sense of community and support among the students in your program?
- What grad student organizations or university organizations are you a part of?
- What are the stipend expectations?
- What is the cost of living like? Do you struggle to afford living in XXXX city?
- What types of funding or internal fellowships are available? How do I apply for them?