

## How to write a good UCAS Personal statement

The Personal Statement section is the only part of the UCAS application form which gives you a chance to say something about yourself, and at the same time make a positive impression. It is vital to get it right and this guide explains how to put a good Personal Statement together.

Over the years the space allocated to the personal statement has grown from a few lines to a whole page, emphasising how important admissions tutors think it is. You should give it similar attention. Take as much time and care as you can to make it effective.

The most important thing is to explain why you are applying for your particular courses: what attracts you to that subject area, how your current A level studies have influenced you, career plans etc. The Personal Statement should also include details of your achievements in and outside school/college, experience of work, travel, responsibility and helping others and what you enjoy doing in your spare time.

Quite a daunting list, but If you follow the guidelines below you will find it (relatively) painless!

### Tackle the writing in stages

Getting started can be tough, but if you approach the task as a series of steps, you will find it easier. Work off-line so that you don't feel under time pressure and can cut and paste as much as you want

Here is a step-by-step procedure.

- 1 List everything which might be relevant.
- 2 Decide what is best to include.
- 3 Decide on the order to put your points in.
- 4 Sort out where the supporting detail should come in, and what it should be.
- 5 Write a draft and show it to your adviser. Be prepared for a couple more drafts!

Each step is described in more detail below.

### Step 1: List everything

Start off by make a list of everything you might include, under three main headings:

- your reasons for choosing the course,
- worthwhile personal achievements and experience,
- a description of your spare-time interests.

Don't worry about order, length, expression: those will come later on

### Course choice:

You need to explain why you have chosen the courses you are applying for. Even if it follows directly on from one of your A levels you should explain why you want to spend three more years on that subject. If it's an area you haven't studied before you definitely need to show you know what's involved. The university course details and the course entry profiles you'll find on the UCAS website will give you an idea of the qualities admissions tutors are looking for.

Here are some ideas:

- 1 **Reasons related to your A levels.** Are there aspects of the A-level subjects you are taking (content or/and approach to learning) which you particularly like and which are relevant to the degree you want to study? If so, write about them in your Statement. NB It is not

enough to say 'I like Economics, therefore I'm applying for an Economics degree'. You need to say **why** you like Economics.

- 2 **Career plans:** Need mentioning, even if you are still undecided. If you have a career in mind you should describe why you are attracted to that career. This is really important for 'professional' careers (Law, Medicine, etc.)
- 3 **Experience:** Include any relevant experience via family and friends, work experience or shadowing, etc. This is essential for medicine-related courses and valuable for any other career-oriented course. **Have you any** other experiences (such as part-time job) which help reinforce your commitment

### **Experience, achievements and interests:**

Work through the checklist below to draw up a list of things you can say. Don't worry about the order at this stage:

- **Responsibilities:** In school, as a member of a club, in the community
- **Voluntary work:** For example, with children, old people, the disabled.
- **Sport:** Sport you play in or out of college. Emphasise any special achievements such as college/club/county, etc teams.
- **Awards:** For example, music, Duke of Edinburgh, sport, drama.
- **Work:** Spare-time jobs, work experience, etc.
- **Hobbies, etc:** The things you get up to in your spare time, activities in or out of school etc.
- **Other interests:** For example, reading, listening to or making music.
- **Travel:** Holidays, field-trips, exchanges, education abroad.

Show the list to friends, teachers, parents, etc. and ask for suggestions. They may well remind you of things you had forgotten or thought unimportant. You are not expected to be expert in everything you include here, so don't shy away from mentioning minor interests. On the other hand, the personal statement is a major source of discussion at interview so don't invent.

### **Step 2: Decide what to include**

Now that you have a list of possible things to say, you need to think about how to use the ideas. Don't worry yet about the exact words or order of sentences, but think about how the things you have listed might fill the available space.

Your reasons for choice of course should take up 30% or more of the Statement Achievements, experience and interests will occupy most of the rest, leaving a final line or two for a conclusion. You can enter up to 4,000 characters (including spaces) or 47 lines of text (including blank lines between paragraphs), whichever comes first. With any luck you will find that your points just about fit the space - you don't have to fill every line, but a half-filled page looks thin.

If you have too much material, drop the points which are old / trivial / repetitive, and thin out points which emphasise the same area of achievement (eg lists of awards). If you have too little material, review your lists from Step 1. Did you leave out something because you felt it wasn't important enough? You don't have to be an expert to be able to include an interest – you just need to be able to say a little bit about the interest if you go for interview. Another option is simply to say more about the points you have got.

Supporting detail is an important part of the statement anyway (see below). But...it is better to be concise than to fill lots of space with generalisations – quality is more important than quantity.

If you are asking for 'deferred entry' (you have decided you want to have a GAP year) you must include a brief comment on your plans for the year off. This often fits naturally at the very end of the personal statement.

### **Step 3: Sort out the order in which you write down the points**

Try to connect your points so that there is a flow of ideas, but don't waste space on long connecting sentences which do not themselves convey information.

Start with your reasons for choosing the course, particularly if you have good supporting information (e.g. helping in a hospital supports an application to study medicine).

If you are applying for more than one subject area you have two choices. One is to emphasise the subject which is most competitive, while at the same time making the point that you have a real interest in the safety-net subject too. The second is to find reasons which are applicable to both courses (but beware of vague generalities). Advice on what to say may be more than usually useful here.

Putting the rest of the Personal Statement may prove to be more awkward, but the following example shows how to tackle it. Suppose you have these points to fit in:

- 1 School volleyball team
- 2 House representative
- 3 Like reading
- 4 Scuba diving
- 5 Have travelled
- 6 Helped at play-school
- 7 Got first aid certificate
- 8 Duke of Edinburgh bronze award.

You could start with 2 leading to 6 (both school-based and responsible), on to 7 and 8 (same sort of things, and 6, 7 might have counted towards the award). Then move onto sport. 1 first (still linked to school), then 4 (personal leisure), which might lead to 5 (places where you dived?). This leaves 3, which doesn't follow on quite so naturally, but is linked, just about, through it being a leisure activity.

Each person is different, has different points to make, different details to add, but the principle of finding links to make the ideas flow into each other is the same for all.

Finding a good way to end your Personal Statement needs thought. Like the conclusion to an essay, you need to finish in a way that rounds the writing off. There's no best approach to this, but a good option is go back to your reasons for choosing that degree, or for going to university generally, especially if you can refer to something relevant that you will do between now and when the course begins.

### **Step 4: Decide on the general style and the amount of supporting detail**

When it comes to writing the section, you will need to decide on the general style to aim at and the amount of detail to include.

The style to strive for is one of relaxed intelligence. **Spelling, accuracy of grammar and diversity of vocabulary are all important in creating the right impression.** Aim for a compromise between an impersonal list-like page and one that is too chatty or vague. You will find you need to search for alternatives to starting each sentence with 'I like . . .'

It is important to strike a personal note: it makes you stand out from the crowd, and shows you to be an individual. In some cases this is clear just from the list of your achievements and interests, but most people do not have a huge number of these. This is where adding some supporting detail comes in. For example, don't just write down 'Reading' but include what you read. Ditto for music: what do you listen to? It doesn't have to be high-brow. When describing experiences, **add something about what you got out of it** - a highlight, an impression. 'I have had a regular Saturday job' is not as good as 'I have a regular Saturday job working as a cashier at a local supermarket. Even better is to add 'This has given me an insight into the importance of good customer relations and of the potential of information technology to transform jobs.'

Do avoid clichés, especially if you feel tempted to talk about how travel 'enables me to experience and understand other cultures'. Everyone says that. Find something fresh to say.

If you have fewer things to say you can go into more detail on those points. However, the writing must remain concise, and it is better to leave empty space than to fill it all with vague sentences.

**Helpful comments from admissions tutors include:**

- 'Up to half of the section can be used to support course choice.'
- 'The section should provide insight into the student's thinking in relation to themselves and their future.'
- 'It should be more than just a description of experiences; achievement and effect upon the individual should be emphasised.'
- 'Originality - eg, starting with a quotation from Goethe - should not be discouraged but should only occur where the applicant feels comfortable with the expression of originality. A touch of humour in reflecting on achievement or lack of achievement is probably the simplest and most natural way of making the statement really personal. It is, however, an approach which applicants should use sparingly and with care.'

**Step 5: Write your first draft**

You know what you want to say and how to order your material. Now put it into effective prose. Here are some 'Do's and 'Don'ts:

- **Do** pay attention to the flow of ideas.
- **Do** ensure that your grammar is correct **and that your spelling is accurate. Don't just rely on spell-check** –The reader might be amused by an applicant who promises "I can bare anything I'm asked to" but won't be impressed
- **Do** use a wide vocabulary (but avoid giving the impression you just swallowed a dictionary).
- **Do** include supportive detail (see above).
- **Do** be positive about yourself and show real enthusiasm for and knowledge of your chosen subject area
- **Do** use humour if you like, but use it sparingly. An admissions tutor might not share your sense of fun!.

- **Don't** use repetitive language (I like, I like, etc).
- **Don't** use clichés.
- **Don't** write things out as long lists.
- **Don't** make unsupported claims for yourself. 'I am the best student you will see all year' doesn't go down too well, unless you really can prove it!
- **Don't** copy someone else's Personal Statement or use something you find on the internet, or pay to get it done! UCAS use software to check every Personal Statement for plagiarism
- **Don't** make any mistakes in grammar and spelling
- **Don't** use slang/abbreviations etc
- **Don't** overdo the humour! You want to be taken seriously.
- **Don't** spend ages outlining things you did when you were six.
- **Don't** repeat any information that can be gleaned elsewhere on the form – it is a waste of space

Talk to your adviser about all the above, but don't expect him or her to write the whole thing for you. It is important that the admissions tutor can 'hear' your authentic voice when reading your Personal Statement.

Show your first draft to people whose opinion you respect and ask for feedback. If the feedback makes sense, rewrite the statement! Very few people get this section right first time. If you find yourself sweating blood over it you will be in good company, but don't skimp on the effort. You will be lucky to get away with rewriting it only twice.

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