

CREATING AN EFFECTIVE UCAS PERSONAL STATEMENT

Reflections on what admissions tutors tell us

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UCAS BASICS

You apply to university on-line through UCAS

In your application, you have to provide:

- **personal details**
- **all your qualifications** (taken & to be taken)
- a maximum of **5 choices**
- **your personal statement** (it's like 1 side of A4)

Your school/college then adds your **academic reference** (also 1 side of A4) and **estimated grades**

HOW IMPORTANT IS THE PERSONAL STATEMENT? - 1

**“If there’s one place left on a
competitive course, it will go to the
applicant with the best personal
statement”**

**(Paul Teulon, Director of Admissions,
King’s College London)**

HOW IMPORTANT IS THE PERSONAL STATEMENT? - 2

Most courses will read it, but not all

It's especially crucial for:

- High-demand courses
- High-demand universities
- **Professional courses** (like Medicine, Nursing, Optometry, Radiography, Veterinary Science, Social Work)
– these will be assessing your suitability for the **profession**, not just for the course

HOW IMPORTANT IS THE PERSONAL STATEMENT? - 3

- Many unis look at your application **holistically**, so every part counts, including the personal statement
- It's often a **deciding factor at Confirmation** if you don't quite get the grades
- Some vocational courses at some unis **SCORE** the statement against their selection criteria
- But some courses say students stress too much about it (Geography at Southampton said - "**we just want you to show your enthusiasm for the subject**")

HOW LONG IS IT?

- 47 lines maximum
- 4,000 characters maximum (including spaces)
- 1,000 characters minimum

- Do it in Word first
- Use pt 12 Times New Roman

- Use **paragraphs** if you can....
-but you can't underline/indent/use bold or italics

IT'S MUCH EASIER IF YOUR 5 CHOICES ARE ALL FOR THE SAME COURSE....

...because you can only write one statement for all 5 choices

BUT WHAT IF YOUR 5 CHOICES AREN'T ALL THE SAME? Possible solutions:

If there are slight differences:

No problem, just make sure everything is relevant to all 5 choices

If there are big differences it might be fatal, **SO GET ADVICE**, but you could:

- **Blend** it, so all of it is relevant to all 5 choices OR
- Be **honest** in it and explain why you've chosen different courses

If one of your choices is completely different, ASK THEM

- They might consider a **separate** statement sent directly to them.....
- or they might tell you just to include a subtle hint

If you're applying for Medicine/Dentistry/Vet and want a 5th choice:

- Some 5th choice courses will accept your Medicine statement, but **IF IN DOUBT, CHECK IT OUT – DON'T ASSUME**

HOW TO MAKE THE WRONG IMPRESSION



- Exaggerate
- Waffle
- Plagiarise - *you WILL be caught by UCAS detection software*
- Use vocabulary you wouldn't use in real life, like:
“It was in Year 10 that my love for maths came fourth”
- Try and cram too much in
- Repeat yourself or list the subjects you're taking
- Start with ***“from a young age”*** or ***“since I was a child”***
- Start with a quotation, like: ***“Socrates once said....”***
- Make spelling/grammar/punctuation errors, like:
“On Saturday’s i work at Raymond Blancs Brassiere”

HOW TO MAKE THE RIGHT IMPRESSION



- Focus on **why** you want to do the course
- **Reflect** on the skills, interests, experiences and qualities you will bring to it (academic and personal)
- Convey **enthusiasm** for learning and a **passion** for your chosen course (**but without using the word “passion”**)
- ‘Pitch’ it right but also write **naturally** as if you were **speaking** to them (the **Starbucks** scenario)

“BE YOURSELF and make sure your ENTHUSIASM FOR THE COURSE shines through” (Nottingham)

- ***“WE WANT TO HEAR YOUR VOICE” (Southampton)***

AND.....DO YOUR RESEARCH!!!

Check out what your chosen course or unis look for.....

- Search course websites for tips and advice; unis are increasingly posting info on what they're looking for on their websites (like Bristol, who have an admissions statement for every subject....)
- For professional courses (like Midwifery), also visit the relevant career websites + read professional journals, get experience, or talk to people in the profession to find out what's going on in it
- Go to university open days and ask

ADVICE FROM UNIVERSITIES 1

- There's **no such thing** as a model statement
- Most of all, we want people who are **enthusiastic** about the course
- Tell us **why you want to study the subject** and show us that you have **some of the skills to be successful** in three paragraphs
- Don't patronise us, **engage** us
- Be **specific** from line 1

ADVICE FROM UNIVERSITIES 2

- The personal statement is your one chance to **speak** to the admissions tutor
- It's a pleasure to read a statement where the applicant's **own voice** comes over clearly
- If you've had relevant experience, we want you to **reflect** on what you **learned** from it
- Tell us what you **think** not just what you do

ADVICE FROM UNIVERSITIES 3

- If an **adult** has helped you write it, we can tell
- If you're applying for a **joint or combined** course, we want to know about **BOTH** subjects
- We want to hear about your **wider reading**
- What you say in your statement may come up in an **interview**, so you must be able to justify it
- Tell us something that makes you **stand out.....**

ADVICE FROM UNIS ON STANDING OUT FROM THE CROWD

- “We’re busy, grab our attention, what makes you **different?**”
but....
- “We like you to be different, but **not TOO different!**”
- “**Off-the-wall** won’t work”
- “**Weird** is not a selling point”
- “Don’t be **outrageous**, you’ll stand out, but not in a good way”
- “Don’t try to be **flash**”

So, a better way to stand out is to....

- “Convince me WHY you want to study my subject and why I would want YOU in my seminar group”
- And open with a **strong opening sentence** that engages because it’s **relevant and personal**, not gimmicky

DON'T BE VAGUE, BE SPECIFIC

They don't want to hear vague, gushy claims like:

“I genuinely believe I am a highly-motivated person”

Instead, give **examples** that **prove** it, like:

“Reading Sir Alex Ferguson’s autobiography gave me a new insight into.....”

“Working on the fish counter at Asda has shown me the importance of.....”

“Hearing a Radio 4 podcast on climate change led me to question accepted truths about”

....SHOW, DON'T TELL!

PROVIDE EVIDENCE! REFLECT!

Give them examples that demonstrate what you think, understand or do, such as....

- **How** has playing basketball improved your teamwork skills?
- **How** did you get the old man with dementia in the nursing home where you volunteer to tell you about his past life?
- **How** has studying enzymes in Chemistry enhanced your understanding of Biology?
- **How** did the article you read in The Times last week help you understand the reasons behind Putin's actions in Ukraine?
- **How** did Hosseini's use of the concept of foreshadowing impact on your appreciation of "The Kite Runner"?

BALANCING ACADEMIC & EXTRA-CURRICULAR CONTENT

For most courses, at least 50% of the statement should be about your academic interests

In fact, Russell Group unis say it should be at least 75%

“People who write 10 lines about the subject and 37 lines about rugby, clarinet and their job in Sainsbury’s don’t interest us” (English at Warwick)

“But we are interested in your outside interests too, because we want you to contribute to the uni as a community as well as to the course” (UCL)

BUT...DIFFERENT APPROACHES FOR DIFFERENT COURSES

Courses in **'academic'** subjects want more emphasis on your academic and super-curricular interests (75%ish)

Examples: History, Physics, Philosophy, Maths, Economics, Languages

Professional courses will want much more emphasis on your "experience"

Examples: Medicine, Nursing, Veterinary Science, Midwifery, Physiotherapy

Courses in other **'vocational'** subjects may not need as much "experience" as you expect – it depends on what is motivating YOU to study the subject

Examples: Law, Politics, Engineering, Architecture

NURSING, MIDWIFERY, PHYSIOTHERAPY AND OTHER HEALTH CAREERS

- “If you mention Call the Midwife or One Born Every Minute, you won’t even get an interview” (Bournemouth)
- “Lots of applicants say they were inspired by Florence Nightingale – it’s irrelevant, she’s been dead for 100 years” (South Wales)
- “We want to know what you understand about the profession (or branch) and your reflections on what it is about you and your experience that makes it the right career for you” (Southampton)

A FEW OTHER TIPS ON SPECIFIC COURSES

- **LAW:** “Get your motivation across – why do you want to study the subject and what will you bring to the course?” (Birmingham) “Less is more!” (Cardiff)
- **HISTORY:** “Engage us by talking about some of your recent work and what you think about it, not *‘it all started when I saw the Colosseum in Rome’* or *‘History is vital to understanding the world we live in’*” (Cambridge/Durham/Goldsmiths)
- **SPORTS SCIENCE:** “All sport and no science will not impress” (Bath)
- **ENGINEERING:** “We don’t want to know that you played with lego as a child or that the first word you ever uttered was hydraulics” (Durham) “Instead explain why Engineering interests you and any relevant reading, experience or things you do that demonstrate technical aptitude, problem-solving, teamwork or good time management” (Dundee)
- **MATHS:** “Reflect on your participation in maths competitions or what you find exciting about the subject” (Bristol)
- **MEDICINE:** “Don’t give us any flannel” (BSMS) “We say what we want on our webpage - most applicants don’t look ” (Keele) “Make your conclusion brief, maybe 3 lines” (King’s)
- **DENTISTRY:** “Don’t give a list of every procedure you saw - we would much rather hear what you learned from observing one filling” (Queen Mary)
- **PRIMARY TEACHING:** “Your insight into what it is to be a teacher is crucial” (Middlesex)
- **PPE:** “You need to engage with P,P and E” (Oxford)

WHAT YOU COULD INCLUDE

1. Why you want to study this subject/course at uni and what has inspired you (or, better, what's currently inspiring you)
2. What you enjoy most about your current courses - and how one or more of them have prepared you with relevant knowledge or skills for your degree
3. Any relevant reading or research beyond your syllabuses
4. Any extra-curricular achievements or interests that are relevant to your degree OR that just show you will be a well-rounded student or that you manage your time well
5. Work experience, other relevant experience, career or gap year plans – if appropriate
6. What you want to achieve from your degree

EXTRA-CURRICULAR ACTIVITIES AND THE “SO WHAT? FACTOR”

- Question: If you play **badminton** in your spare time or do the **Duke of Edinburgh Award**, should you write about it in your statement?
- Answer: **Apply the SO WHAT? Factor**
So what?
Compared with all the other things you could say in your statement, will it give them some important evidence that will make the more likely to want you on their course?

ENGAGING...OR NOT?

Lily (International Relations)

“As Head Girl I quickly learned to overcome my fears by frequently addressing 1200 fellow pupils without notes”

Tommy (Computer Games Technology)

“In my spare time I go into Portsmouth with a stick and hit people”

Mark (Primary Teaching)

“Last week I spent an afternoon with a very challenging Year 5 PE class”

Kim (Music)

“Hi, I’m Kim and I’m a tuba player”

GETTING STARTED 1

ADVICE FROM UCAS

- On the **UCAS WEBSITE** you will find:

MIND MAP

WORKSHEET

TIMELINE

VIDEO

GETTING STARTED 2

MORE ADVICE FROM ME

One Stop Guide to Creating Your UCAS Personal Statement
(£2 from Amazon – but published in 2010, so a bit outdated in a couple of places)

Or see my 30 articles on the **Which? University website**, including

- 10 things to put in your statement
 - 10 things not to put in your statement
 - How to get started
 - How to get writing
 - Top ways to sell yourself
 - How to make yours stand out
- + 15 more articles to be published soon!

www.university.which.co.uk

ALMOST FINALLY

TALK TO YOUR REFEREE

- Alert him/her to any important **selection criteria** that need to be evidenced in the reference
- Make sure he/she knows about your **achievements or what you do outside the classroom**
- Ask him/her to include in the reference **anything you don't have room for in your statement**

AND FINALLY....

GET IT FROM THE HORSE'S MOUTH

Go to some open days and seek advice, because the best place to get good advice is from.....

