

# A Guide to the Personal Statement

“It is not in the stars to hold our destiny but in ourselves.”

*William Shakespeare*

Name: \_\_\_\_\_



## WRITING YOUR PERSONAL STATEMENT

- Explain **why you want to study the course** you are applying for.
- If you mention your personal interests and hobbies, try to link them to the skills and experience required for the course.
- The personal statement could be used as the basis for an **interview**, so be prepared to answer questions on it.
- This may be your only written work that the course tutor sees before making a decision: make sure it is organised and literate.
- **Get the grammar, spelling and punctuation right.** A statement filled with errors will give a negative impression of your skills and the effort you have put in to being accepted.
- Writing about yourself is probably not something you do very often, so you might need to practice writing in this particular style.
- It is a good idea to list your hobbies and achievements, and then you can decide which ones demonstrate your strongest skills and personality.

## ATTENTION GRABBING

- Some statements start with quotes, some include jokes, some set out to be unusual or eye-catching. Sometimes it works, but it might have the opposite effect to what you hoped. The admissions decision maker may not share your sense of humour so be careful when trying to make your statement stand out.

## WRITE WHAT COMES NATURALLY

- In your personal statement you need to put your meaning across directly and simply.
- You can do this by keeping your sentences to an average of 12-20 words, and using English in a way that is natural to you.
- Avoid sounding either over-familiar or over-formal and write to get yourself and your message across clearly.
- Check that each sentence adds something new, otherwise it is just adding to the word count rather than adding value.
- The quality of your writing reflects the quality of your thinking.
- Show that you know your strengths and can outline your ideas clearly.
- Use words you know will be understood by the person reading your statement; you might find it easier if you imagine you are talking to them across their desk.
- In fact, you can sometimes spot where your statement doesn't work well by reading it aloud.

## RESEARCH

### WHAT? WHERE? WHY?

#### CHECK YOUR COURSE SPECIFICATION:

- Know what you want from a university course and the University itself.
- Be clear, confident and enthusiastic about your chosen course. The most demanding universities want to see evidence of a real *critical engagement* with the subject.
- Know the grades/UCAS Tariff points needed.

#### WRITING ABOUT THE COURSE

- Most courses have an Entry Profile that you can view in Course Search - these explain what the university is looking for in their students and what qualifications or experience you'll need for the course.
- Check these because they'll give you some ideas about what to include in your statement.

Two of the most important things to include are:

- 1) **Why you're applying for the course you've chosen:** this is particularly important when you're applying for a subject that you have not studied before. Tell the university the reasons why that subject interests you, and include evidence that you understand what's required to study the course, eg if applying for psychology courses, show that you know how scientific the subject is.
- 2) **Why you're suitable for the course:** tell the universities the skills and experience you have that will help you to succeed on the course.

#### Also think about:

- how your current or previous studies relate to the course(s) that you have chosen
- any activities that demonstrate your interest in the course(s)
- why you want to go to university or college.

## SKILLS AND ACHIEVEMENTS

Universities like to know the types of skills you have that will help you on the course, or generally at university. They also like to see if you've been involved in any accredited or non-accredited achievements. Include:

- ASDAN (Award Scheme Development and Accreditation Network)
- CREST awards
- Nuffield Scholarship
- Diploma of Achievement
- Duke of Edinburgh Award
- EPQ
- Millennium Volunteers Scheme
- Music/Dance Grades
- OCNW Level 3 Certificate in Personal Development for Progression  
Vfifty award
- Villiers Park Scholars and Residential Programmes
- WorldWide Volunteering Certificate of Volunteering Achievement
- Young Enterprise.
- NCS
- Scouts or Cadet Training
- Also: any other achievement that you are proud of e.g. Form Prefect or being selected for a Sports' Team or Charity Work.

## **HOBBIES AND INTERESTS**

Think about how your hobbies, interests and social activities demonstrate your skills and abilities:

The Assistant Registrar for Undergraduate Admissions from University of Warwick says that: 'The strongest applicants are those who can link their extra-curricular activities to their proposed course of study.'

Your statement will be more convincing and personal if you write about why an experience, activity or interest makes you a good candidate for the course. Include enough additional information to make it interesting and to demonstrate your own interest. Rather than making a statement such as:

- 'I enjoy badminton'

Try to provide context and show what you have learnt:

'I play badminton twice a week with a club that plays in local competitions and I play in both singles and doubles matches. Doubles matches require good team working, an ability to support your partner, to devise a game plan but be able to adapt it as required and fast reactions. I enjoy the social side of the club and take responsibility for organising the social activities and fundraising events. This gives me an opportunity to develop my organisational and planning skills. Fitting in all these activities while keeping up with my academic studies demands good time management and I think I do that very well.'

## **WORK EXPERIENCE**

Include details of jobs, placements, work experience or voluntary work, particularly if it's relevant to your chosen course(s). Try to link any experience to skills or qualities mentioned in the Entry Profiles. For example, rather than just saying

'I spent two weeks working at a department store. I enjoyed speaking to customers and helping them with their enquiries'

You could say:

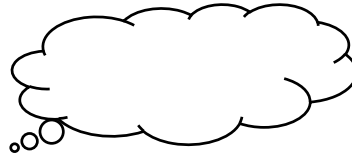
'I spent two weeks managing customer enquiries at a department store. I learnt how to interact with customers and handle complaints. The experience highlighted the importance of positive communication between a business and its customers, and taught me how to manage difficult enquiries effectively. I would like to develop this skill further by studying a degree in public relations.'

## **FUTURE PLANS**

If you know what you'd like to achieve after completing a university course, explain how you want to use the knowledge and experience that you gain.

**GETTING READY TO WRITE!**

Use this page to gather your thoughts...



<p><b>COURSE/APPRENTICESHIP 1:</b> What, Where, Tarif?</p> <p>Any additional information (e.g. year in industry or abroad?)</p>	<p><b>COURSE/APPRENTICESHIP 2:</b> What, Where, Tarif?</p> <p>Any additional information (e.g. year in industry or abroad?)</p>	<p><b>COURSE/APPRENTICESHIP 3:</b> What, Where, Tarif?</p> <p>Any additional information (e.g. year in industry or abroad?)</p>
<p><b>COURSE/APPRENTICESHIP 4:</b> What, Where, Tarif?</p> <p>Any additional information (e.g. year in industry or abroad?)</p>	<p><b>COURSE/APPRENTICESHIP 5:</b> What, Where, Tarif?</p> <p>Any additional information (e.g. year in industry or abroad?)</p>	<p><b>SKILLS AND ACHIEVEMENTS</b></p>
<p><b>HOBBIES AND INTERESTS</b></p>	<p><b>WORK EXPERIENCE</b></p>	<p><b>FUTURE PLANS</b></p>

## GETTING READY TO WRITE

You might have your own idea of how you want your personal statement to read – however, this model is worth using as a starting point! You are going to write multiple copies!!!

## HOW TO STRUCTURE THE STATEMENT

**Section 1 (40%)** – Choice of course/subject

**Section 2 ( 35%)** – Current studies

**Section 3 ( 25%)** – Extra-Curricular: Skills and achievements, hobbies and interests and work experience.

### SECTION 1: THE COURSE (16-18 LINES)

Why this course/subject?

Why are you interested?

For how long has this interest been apparent?

What particular area of study appeals most, and why?

**You might need an attention grabbing but relevant opening sentence to engage the reader's interest and make them want to read more! A strong opening creates a strong first impression.**

Avoid clichés like 'I have always wanted to be a....', 'My passion has always been for...'; and if you decide to use a quote, remember that many applicants begin their personal statements with quotes, so it needs to be pithy, relevant, meaningful and sourced.

Convey a genuine interest in the subject using specific examples and details

Have you read beyond or around the subject/course? (Remember though, that extra-curricular reading must demonstrate a 'critical engagement' with the subject; a list of titles and/or authors alone will not suffice)

Have you attended any taster courses, made university visits, had **relevant** related work experience? (Relevant work experience/work shadowing can help demonstrate commitment to a career choice. This certainly helps with more vocationally related courses e.g. Health and Teaching related courses, Social Work, Law etc., and is sometimes expressly asked for by universities.

(You may find that you refer to Section 3 topics in Sections 1 and 2 where relevant e.g. EPQ based on English Literature or winning a Science Award)

## **SECTION 1 (40% - 16-18 lines) – Choice of course/subject**

Below are some examples of strong opening paragraphs from real personal statements. (All gained offers from Oxford, Cambridge or other selective universities).

### **HISTORY applicant**

*E.H. Carr called History “an unending dialogue between the present and past”, a concept that has always fascinated me. Each age will see something different in the past as being ‘significant’. History tells us not only about the nature of the past, but about the nature of the age in which History is written. For example, the way current historians interpret the Crusades is informed by the present situation in the Middle East but also needs to take into account the views of historians contemporary to those cataclysmic events. The concept of a ‘clash of civilisations’ needs to be tested in both the present and in the past.*

### **ENGLISH applicant**

*The study of English Literature has undoubtedly shaped the way I think. Philosophical deliberation has been a necessity in the reading of both Paradise Lost and Hamlet, for example, with Milton’s attempts to ‘justify the ways of God to men’ being pertinent to Hamlet’s lamentation of the human condition and what he perceives to be the sheer inevitability of suffering through life. The exploration of the historical contexts behind these two works has been equally absorbing with the similarities between the God of Paradise Lost, and the king condemned by Milton, lending a particularly revealing insight to Milton’s own disposition. Indeed, through learning English, I have encountered a wide range of disciplines, and it is the extreme diversity offered by the subject that makes it so wonderful and informative for me, rigorous analytical thought is developed through practical criticism, while the flexibility and creativity of writing is cultivated through essay and prose composition.*

### **MODERN LANGUAGES applicant**

*To me, language in its essence represents a key to another culture, opening the door to a world of new experiences. Since childhood I have been amazed by the vast difference in thinking and lifestyle on opposite sides of the Channel. Visiting France annually with my family, such contrasts have fascinated me, and in studying the French language I have attempted to become more than just an observer, but rather a participant and appreciator. The wealth of cultural thrills that this has imparted is my greatest motivation in taking my study of French to university level, as well as expanding the possibility of such opportunities in the study of Spanish.*





## **SECTION 2: CURRENT STUDIES**

**(14-15 LINES)**

(You may find that you refer to Section 3 topics in Sections 1 and 2 where relevant e.g. EPQ based on English Literature or winning a Science Award)

This should flow on from section one quite logically.

What interests do you have within your current AS/A level courses?

Have they helped steer you towards a particular university course?

What evidence of wider reading or exploration beyond the syllabus can you produce?

Do you have the academic credentials to support your application?

How relevant are your subjects? Do your grades/predicted grades reflect your depth of subject interest and enthusiasm?

### **SKILLS:**

Analytical, numeracy (mathematical), literacy (written, oral, communication), creative, subject specific, leadership, teamwork, tenacity, independent learning, problem-solving, IT, self-development/self-sufficiency, research, etc.

What have you done that can demonstrate any of the above?

Coursework/projects/extension work – evidence of independent learning and self-discipline. Can you show this?

Focus on skills gained at school.

Write fluently; do not write lists or try to bullet point!

Focus on more recent studies wherever possible

## **SECTION 2 (35% 14-15 lines) – Current studies**

Below are some examples of strong ‘Current Studies’ sections – remember that this section from flow on from Section 1 and lead into Section 3

### **MODERN LANGUAGES applicant**

*While at school I have gained eight academic prizes, including three for French and two for Latin. My study of Latin has been particularly useful for setting up a framework within which to learn languages, as well as for its rich history and literature. In English, I have nurtured a love for literature and developed analytical and evaluative skills. Studying History at AS helped me come to a greater understanding of the foundations of our European culture, as well as similarly furthering analytical and evaluative technique.*

### **MEDICAL applicant**

*Biology has made me appreciate the complexity of life processes like respiration and photosynthesis. I find the biochemistry part of these processes, such as glycolysis, intriguing as it covers ideas that I have learnt from Chemistry as well. Finally, in Philosophy I have been introduced to important ideas about how the mind and body are connected, as well as looking at key ethical dilemmas related to medicine, including euthanasia and abortion. I am also taking Critical Thinking as an extra AS level in my spare time. This is teaching me how to analyse data and arguments, which will be important in making impartial decisions in a clinical setting.*

### **REMEMBER:**

At the first or even second draft stage, do not be overly worried about length. It is easier to précis (cut down on) afterwards than to ‘beef up’ information.



### **SECTION 3: EXTRA-CURRICULAR**

**(10-12 LINES)**

- What do you do outside of the classroom and/or school? (Especially things that are relevant to your course, university life or personal development)
- What extra-curricular/enrichment activities have you done?
- Can these support what you have said in sections 1 or 2?
- Will they demonstrate that you can offer the university something?
- Universities want motivated, not lazy people. Which are you?
- Do you have any other substantive achievements (e.g. music, Arts awards, cadets, organisations, productions etc.)?
- Do you have leadership potential?
- Have you held positions of responsibility?
- Have you engaged in charity/community/voluntary work?
- Have you been involved in any recent work experience?

#### **SKILLS AND ATTRIBUTES:**

Emphasise skills and attributes if relevant to your application (e.g. motivation, determination, persistence, leadership, maturity, self-belief, caring, organisation skills, sensitivity, responsibilities, initiative, empathy).

This is your final paragraph; you need to finish with one or two 'powerful', 'positive' but succinct concluding sentences.

Again, ensure that you write fluently, and that this paragraph does not simply read like a list!

You could, if you feel it is relevant, mention your intentions for career progression. You do not *have* to do this, but many universities like to know that the people they offer places to are likely to succeed on and benefit from a place on their course. If you do decide to do this, you should try to link it to your chosen course as outlined in section 1.

### **SECTION 3 (25% 10-12 lines) – Extra-curricular activities, achievements and experiences**

Below are some examples of strong final paragraphs from real personal statements that have proven to be successful.

#### **MEDICAL applicant**

*For three years I have been a member of the storytelling group that travels across the country performing in events and festivals. Having to capture the imagination of an audience with only your voice and face has made me a confident and articulate person, which is highly important for a doctor who has to communicate with patients. My leadership skills were demonstrated at my comprehensive school as a prefect and a student council member. These taught me to be strict, reliable and fair.*

#### **HISTORY applicant**

*I have taught myself GCSE Chinese, captained our successful school chess team for several years and completed the Silver Duke of Edinburgh Award. I also have an active interest in politics and served as editor of our school political journal for a year. Debating is a particular passion of mine, and I will represent my school this coming year in the MACE competition.*

#### **GEOGRAPHY applicant**

*Travel constitutes for me a real excitement, whether through school trips to the volcanoes and glaciers of Iceland and the eroded coast of Malta with its hugely exciting opportunities for scuba diving or on journeys with the National Children's Orchestra to the Czech Republic and the County Youth Orchestra to Cyprus. Such travel has given me much food for thought on both economic and physical issues that impinge on globalisation. I have recently accepted an invitation to travel to Australia as a gap year student, mainly to teach hockey and other sports, an opportunity that would not only enhance my knowledge of geography but also improve my leadership skills.*

#### **ANOTHER POPULAR ENDING IS ONE WHERE YOU OPT FOR A LITTLE SELF-PROMOTION E.G.**

*Overall I believe that I have the necessary (academic/intellectual) ability, motivation and stamina to cope successfully with the demands of this subject.*



## **DOs**

**Do** create a list of your ideas before attempting to write the real thing.

**Do** expect to produce several drafts before being totally happy.

**Do** ask people you trust for their feedback.

**Do** check university and college prospectuses, websites and [Entry Profiles](#), as they usually tell you the criteria and qualities that they want their students to demonstrate.

**Do** use your best English/Welsh and **don't** let spelling and grammatical errors spoil your statement.

**Do** be enthusiastic - if you show your interest in the course, it may help you get a place.

## **DON'Ts**

**Don't** feel that you need to use elaborate language. If you try too hard to impress with long words that you are not confident using, the focus of your writing may be lost.

**Don't** say too much about things that are not relevant - if you think that you are starting to, take a break and come back to your statement when you feel more focused.

**Don't** lie - if you exaggerate you may get caught out at interview when asked to elaborate on an interesting achievement.

**Don't** rely on a spellchecker as it will not pick up everything - proof read as many times as possible.

**Don't** leave it to the last minute - your statement will seem rushed and important information could be left out.

**Don't** expect to be able to write your personal statement whilst watching TV or surfing the internet - this is your future, so make the most of the opportunity to succeed.



## TECHNICAL ACCURACY

- Sell yourself – emphasise and demonstrate your strengths, be persuasive.
- Vocabulary is important, try to use positive words and not repeat words or phrases unnecessarily.
- Write in paragraphs and consider structure and flow. Don't start each paragraph with 'I...' Universities are looking for a clear, concise and precise prose document that is well written in plain English.
- Ensure correct use of grammar, spelling and punctuation. (Prepare your personal statement using Word or similar software and use spell check (UK) and grammar check...But do not rely wholly on these; get people you trust to read drafts also.
- Don't use lists or repeat yourself.

## THE ACTUAL APPLICATION...

**1,000** to **4,000** characters (this includes spaces) or 47 lines of text (this includes blank lines), whichever comes first. You do not have to use all the space provided.

When you save text, the system will tell you how many characters are still available or if you have used too many characters. You can preview your statement after you have saved it.

Please note that you cannot use *italics*, **bold**, underlining or foreign characters (such as á, ë, ñ) in your personal statement.

Once you are happy that your revised draft is as strong as it can be, cut and paste it into **Apply** and review it to ensure that it fits. (If it does not fit into the 1000 character minimum/4000 character or 47 line maximum limit, you can edit it in **Apply**).

## **UNSUCCESSFUL APPLICATIONS**

- Your personal statement does not strongly support your desire to study your chosen degree.
- Your personal statement did not show sufficient understanding, relevance or knowledge about the course you are applying for.
- You failed to demonstrate sufficient knowledge and interest in the subject in your personal statement.
- There is a lot of competition for places on this course and your personal statement and experience was not as strong as other applicants this year.
- Application form (including personal statement, reference and predicted grades) does not evidence accurate understanding of or motivation for subject.
- Unsuccessful as you have not expressed a strong enough interest in the subject area in your personal statement.

## **WARNING: SIMILARITY DETECTION!**

Please remember that UCAS passes all personal statements submitted in applications through similarity detection software to highlight possible copying/plagiarism.

- Each statement is checked against all previous statements received in the application cycle it is submitted, as well as a vast archive of personal statements from previous application cycles, and all known publications and websites that provide personal statement materials, examples and writing services.
- If a personal statement shows a significant amount of potentially copied or borrowed material after a member of UCAS staff has investigated further, a copy of the statement with the suspicious content highlighted is made available electronically to both the applicant and the chosen universities, and it is then entirely at the discretion of those universities what they choose to do with regards to the application!
- Please bear this in mind when looking at examples from previous personal statements, as these are provided for information, not for copying.

**TARIF:**

**A Level**

**AS**

A\* 56

A 48

B 40

C 32

D 24

E 16

A 20

B 16

C 12

D 10

E 6