

THE PERSONAL STATEMENT 2020

Myths and truths

THE PERSONAL STATEMENT

How to sell yourself effectively without telling lies!

Important skill even if not applying to university

What is it?

Important part of your UCAS application:

- Personal statement
- Academic profile
- Reference
- Admissions test results
- Interview

What is it for?

It's your chance to:

- Show why you want to study your chosen course
- Show enthusiasm and motivation for the subject you're applying for
- Outline the experiences, abilities, motivations and achievements that will make you a fantastic undergraduate on their course
- Stand out from the crowd

Who is going to read it?

- At least 4 or 5 different admissions tutors
- Joint applications will be seen by both subject admissions tutors
- Assume the reader is an academic who has devoted their life to their chosen subject

What are they looking for?

Applicants to demonstrate, through examples, some of the following attributes:

- Passion for the subject
- Ability to lead
- Effective communication
- Commitment ,dedication and enthusiasm
- Hard work
- Understanding of roles within teams
- Maturity of thought
- Awareness of current affairs
- Sense of responsibility
- Intellectual prowess
- Motivation to study independently
- A well-rounded individual with a range of interests

Advice from admissions tutors:

- It's your **one** chance to **SPEAK** to us
- Don't give us a load of old flannel
- There's no such thing as a model statement – yours must be ORIGINAL
- Most of all, we're looking for enthusiasm for the subject
- We're busy, grab our attention, what makes you different?
- We like you to be individual, but not TOO different
- Weird is not a selling point
- A touch of dry wit can be engaging, but it can also irritate
- We want to know what makes you tick
- If an adult has helped you write it, we can tell

- Be selective, you've been alive for 17 years, you can't fit it all in
- If you have relevant experience, what did you LEARN from it?
- Tell us why you want to study the subject and demonstrate that you have some of the skills to be successful
- We want to know what you THINK, not just what you do
- Write a strong opening sentence
- Talk about your EPQ
- If applying for Joint Honours, we want to know about BOTH courses
- If you're applying for deferred entry, what are your gap year plans?

Some comments from admissions tutors:

- Less is more (Law, Cardiff)
- We're especially interested in the SUPER-curricular (Oxford)
- If I read about Freakonomics one more time, I'll scream! (Economics, UCL)
- We want depth and substance, not hyperbole – if you say you like Cervantes, let's hear what you THINK about him! (UCL)
- People who write 10 lines about English and the rest about rugby, clarinet and their job in Sainsbury's don't interest us (English, Warwick)
- Build a reasoned, coherent case for your application (Law, QMUL)
- Don't write too much about your science subjects, or you won't stand out (Medicine, BSMS)
- We mark the statement against our selection criteria (Radiography, Cardiff)
- Focus a significant amount of it on your chosen subject (Nottingham)
- We would much prefer to hear about what you learned from observing one filling, rather than a list of every procedure you saw (Dentistry, QMUL)

- <https://www.ucas.com/ucas/undergraduate/getting-started/when-apply/how-write-ucas-undergraduate-personal-statement>

Structure

- 4000 characters (or 47 lines)
- 80% academic and 20% non-academic
- 3 or 4 sections:
 1. **Introduction** - punchy, should grab their attention
 2. **Your interest in the subject** – key section and the longest
 3. **Wider skills** – relatively brief but interesting
 4. **Conclusion** – short, strong, affirming, to the point
- Ultimately, you are applying as an **ACADEMIC** candidate for an academic course
- Your **ACADEMIC POTENTIAL** is what **REALLY** matters

Section 1 - Introduction:

Why you want to study this particular course.

- Provide a brief but convincing explanation on why you want to study your subject at university
- Needs to capture the reader's interest straight away
- Possible angles are:
 - **Your personal trigger** – what got you interested in the subject?
 - **The big picture** – why is this subject important?
 - **Specific areas of interest** – are there any topics being taught on your chosen course that really grab you?

Section 2 - Your interest in the subject:

Probably the most important section and likely to be several paragraphs

- What have you done in school that makes you a better candidate, but that also makes you stand out from your peers?
- What have you read around and beyond your subject?
- What have you done that shows genuine interest?
 - Wider reading
 - Course-related programmes, summer schools, taster days
 - Lectures, performances (wider watching, listening)
 - Relevant work experience
 - Other activities (trips, visits, academic competitions)

Reflect on your experiences

- What have you learnt from these experiences, books, documentaries, trips that will help you succeed on your degree course?
- Name-drop: directors, places, companies, books etc.,
- Talk about your current studies - but only if you can do so impressively and academically
- Tell them how your current studies have been a springboard for further reading in your own time
- Name-drop what you read, who wrote it and why it was interesting
- You have to show that you are self-motivated enough to do things outside the classroom

Gap Year Plans

- If you're deferring
- Briefly explain what you plan to do
- Tells them you're organised and that you want to pursue interests outside of your studies
- If you can relate it to your course – that's even better!
- Remember it's an academic application – keep this bit short

Section 3 – Wider skills:

Where you explain your non-academic achievements and the key skills you've developed.

- better suited to studying your course
- a well-rounded individual
- **Communication** – Shirley Reading Scheme
- **Problem-solving** – work experience
- **Teamwork** – netball team
- **Adaptability** – living abroad
- **Leadership** – directing a play
- **Responsibility** – Lower School Prefect

Section 4 - Conclusion:

- Summarise exactly why they should select you
- what you're looking forward to about studying this course and/or university life
- 1 or 2 lines that needs to show how much you're looking forward to it

Last thing the tutor will read – needs to be strong and relevant

Ten most common opening lines...

1. From a young age I have (always) been interested in/fascinated by...
2. For as long as I can remember I have...
3. I am applying for this course because...
4. I have always been interested in...
5. Throughout my life I have always enjoyed...
6. Reflecting on my educational experiences...
7. [For eg] Nursing is a very challenging and demanding career/course...
8. Academically I have always been...
9. I have always wanted to be/pursue a career in...
10. I have always been passionate about...



So say the other X
thousand applicants.
PLEASE try to avoid
this old cliché

Admirable, but a bit
vague.

What made you feel
this way? Have you
specific plans?
Have you seen
particular social
injustices that you
want to put right?

I have always wanted to
study Pharmacy. It is an
incredibly interesting
aspect of scientific
application and a rewarding
subject because it will allow
me to put something back
into society by helping
people.

*“Incredibly
interesting”? Surely
you can manage
something a bit
more dynamic?
WHICH aspect is
interesting? WHY
are you attracted to
this work? Be
specific and link
your interest to your
studies*

Same subject but more passionate:

Wider awareness and an ability to see the bigger picture

I strongly believe that the way in which we in the developed world share or withhold our pharmaceutical knowledge with regard to the developing world is a critical factor in the battle to improve the quality of life for other people.

Motivation is revealed and capacity for practical action

On a recent visit to my church's missionary camp in Kebkabiya, Africa, I saw scenes which made me determined that I would use what my teachers have always called my 'aptitude for sciences' in an ethically acceptable way.

Development of the specifics - knowledge and application

I believe that Chemistry is the basis of all biological processes: it is a discipline that underpins most of our medical advances. The importance of applications of the naphtha faction to the pharmaceutical industry formed the basis of my special investigation project for my Chemistry coursework, and was supported by work shadowing at Bayer laboratories in Harlow, which, in turn, has led to the offer of sponsorship if my University application is successful.

Much stronger and more memorable opening paragraph – which also says something different

EVIDENCE OF SUCCESS & ESTEEM OF OTHERS

Another one hits the waste-paper bin...

Veterinary Science is not about cuddling fluffy bunnies. This candidate may not fully comprehend what is in store.



I have always wanted to be a vet. I adore animals and really love the idea of working with them. I have had ten pets of my own in the last eight years and have had sole responsibility for their welfare.



Whilst one might expect an interest in animals, this is the most competitive discipline you can apply for – something more than pet ownership is called for. What has been learned or observed?

This may be an excellent candidate, but the admissions tutor won't be able to guess this from such a woolly & vague personal statement. The candidate is simply not 'selling' him/herself in the best possible way.

Er... ten in eight years doesn't sound like good odds for number eleven. *Is this essential information?*

Don't tell lies – you'll get caught out!

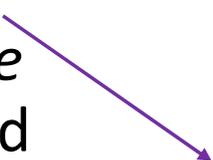
I have a strong interest in the relationship between power and iconography and the relevance of this to the revisionist historians' view of the bloodless revolution of 1689. Having read GM Trevelyan on the subject, I recently read Steve Zwicker's appraisal in his book, *Lines of Authority: Politics & Culture in the Restoration*. I found his ideas very interesting.

IT SOUNDS FANTASTIC, DOESN'T IT?
BUT IT NEEDS TO BE **TRUE**.
You'll need to be able to talk about this.

Assume that your interviewer will have read both books and will ask you about them.

DANGEROUSLY VAGUE!
EXPECT TO BE QUIZZED ON THE PRECISE NATURE OF 'VERY INTERESTING' IF YOU ARE CALLED TO AN INTERVIEW

I have thoroughly *enjoyed my studies for Unit 2 of the course*, and hope to extend my understanding of this interesting aspect of Biology when at university.



Don't restrict yourself to the A Level syllabus – everyone will have that in common. What makes you different?

Here's one that worked! A successful KES application for PPE

I was taught to play Monopoly aged five, by my sister. Having decided to apply my mother's advice about saving, I avoided all expenditure and lost the game. I would be lying horrendously if I claimed that at a tender age I was grasping the concepts of economic scarcity. I suppose my unconscious study of the subject began when I asked for a definition of 'monopoly'. As my first economics teacher, my sister also taught me, at the simplest of levels, about capitalism, communism and the collapse of the USSR. I went on to do a 3rd year project on Soviet fragmentation.

Don't:

- Waffle
- Bluff
- Repeat yourself
- Use clichés
- Use lists or bullet points
- Start every sentence with 'I'
- Use lots of exclamation marks!
- Write: don't or I'll or I'm – this is a formal document
- Use negative words like: never, hate, useless, mistake, tiring, stressful
- Overuse the thesaurus – it must sound genuine
- Tell them what A levels you are currently studying (they'll know this)
- Feel you have to mention all your subjects - just focus on the most relevant

Don't:

- Tell them: 'Maths helps with my problem-solving skills, English helps with my essay writing and Biology has given me an understanding of human anatomy'
- Give them a dictionary definition of the subject - Admissions tutors they know what their degrees are about – they want to know what you understand and enjoy about the subject

Do:

- Use plain English
- Write in continuous prose
- Make it sharp, crisp, interesting, to the point and clear
- Remember it is a formal piece of writing

The ABC rule:

- **Activity or Achievement** – provide specific evidence of what you've done
 - **Benefit** – what transferable skills have you gained?
 - **Course** – how will this prepare you for the course?
-
- Ensure that each point in your personal statement follows the ABC rule

Show – don't tell

- EVIDENCE!
- REFLECTION!
- **HOW** did you develop your customer care skills working in the pub?
- **HOW** has basketball improved your teamwork?
- **HOW** did you get Simon, the man with dementia, to tell you about his past life?

The 'so what' test:

- Could an admissions tutor say 'so what?' to anything in your personal statement?
- If so, work on it more or consider ditching it altogether...
- Some examples of what not to write:
 - I read The Economist every week. 'So what?'
 - The doctors took a great deal of care with the elderly patients. 'So what?'
 - I did a week's work experience at a law firm. 'So what?'
 - Spanish is my favourite language. 'So what?'

Sense of balance...

- Be yourself but don't use humour
- Demonstrate a good vocabulary but don't overuse the thesaurus
- Be confident but not cocky
- Show your passion but don't use the word 'passion'
- Show your skills but don't list them

Personal Statement v Reference

Modesty is a virtue – your tutor and teachers can sing your praises more effectively than you can:

- Personal statement: entered into the maths competition
- Reference: how brilliantly you performed

- Personal statement: secured work experience
- Reference: glowing quote from your mentor at place of work

Talk to your TUTOR about what you will write and what aspects he or she could highlight or add into the Reference instead

Ownership

Don't:

- Plagiarise
- Recycle your brother's
- Borrow or buy
- Let your mum or dad dictate it

It must be your own words

Committed academic interest

What **evidence** do you have that shows **what you have done** to illustrate your **intellectual interest in** and commitment to **the subject**?

- Field work
- Work experience
- Work shadowing
- Correspondence or contact with someone in your field of study
- Wider reading
- Study out of school
- Summer school
- Courses
- Conferences/seminars/lectures
- Appropriate gap year plans
- Extended project
- University visits
- Research
- Involvement in academic discussion groups/societies/clubs/blogs
- Give specifics

Intellectual curiosity...

Beyond A-Level subjects. Have you:

- Discovered an author?
- Followed a political commentator or a science journalist?
- Kept up to date with a significant court case?
- Become a 'specialist' in something that you have made your own?
- Regularly read a journal/magazine relevant to your course?

Where to start...?

- Skim your chosen newspaper and notice which sections really interest you.
- Which headlines grabbed your attention?
- Was it a news story about a space expedition, or the political situation in a particular country, or was it a book review or interview with a film director?
- Why did your chosen article grab you?
- What questions did it make you ask?
- Why did you want to know more?

How to begin writing your personal statement

- Lists (perhaps under sub-headings)
- Most relevant skills, experiences
- Check your competencies and activities in Unifrog
- Word document
- Copy into UCAS document

- Help: [Unifrog](#), [UCAS](#) and [KES](#) websites

Only one personal statement

- 5 choices but only 1 personal statement
- Has to 'read' equally effectively for all 5 choices
- Keep choices in similar area
- Similar courses can have different names
- History/ History & Politics / History & International Relations = OK
- History/ Psychology / French = Not OK
- Combined courses - PS will be seen by both subjects
- PPE – need to convince admissions tutors about all 3 subjects

Top Tips

- **Be ruthless:** get rid of any repetition or waffle. Spelling, punctuation and grammar must be perfect. No Excuses.
- **Re-draft many times:** the first few drafts are bound to be rubbish; it's the same for everyone!
- **Initial order doesn't matter:** Don't necessarily try to write the opening paragraph first.
- **Be honest:** don't be tempted to exaggerate. Admissions tutors often refer to personal statements at interview.
- **Don't try and sound clever:** You are clever and this will shine through; have faith in your achievements.
- **Start early:** to allow plenty of time for re-drafts.
- **Proof-read it:** reading it out loud will also help you spot bad punctuation and messy wording.
- **Show it to your parents:** ask for their comments and suggestions
- **Listen to your tutor:** they will have comments and constructive criticism to give. Give them enough time to do this – it's worth it!

Draft, Draft and re-draft!

- Tricky document to write
 - Will take many drafts – **THAT'S OK**
 - Ask parents to read over your 'final' draft
 - It's fine to get their opinion
 - But remember it **must be your own words**
-
- When you're happy with it, email your tutor
 - They will offer suggestions / advice
 - Eventually it will be 'approved' and up-loaded to your UCAS application
 - Finally sent to UCAS and on to your chosen universities

Next steps

What to do now:

- Go on google classroom
- Identify the subject area (s) you're broadly interested in
- Spend some time looking at the sample personal statements
- If you're able to work in 2s or 3s together (maintaining social distance) it might be useful
- Scrutinise and assess some personal statements:
 - Good / bad points
 - Strong / weak opening sentence / paragraph
 - Reflections on experiences given / simply a list of experiences
 - Solid / poor reasons given for wanting to study the course
 - Good communication style / poor grammar, punctuation, prose
- Think: How could I make this Personal Statement better?

Start to write your own Personal Statement:

- Easiest to start with lists under some key sub-headings:
 - why this course / these courses / this general subject area?
 - main achievements
 - academic interests
 - co-curricular activities / work experience / gap year plans
- Research your course requirements and structure – use Unifrog and UCAS search
- Match your skills and experience with what they are looking for
- Use all the resources available: this presentation, Top Tips, PS template, KES website, Unifrog and UCAS

- Does not need to be finished today!
- But use the time to make a decent start
- (If you're not planning on Uni – still a v. useful exercise and template for writing any application document)

Start to write your own Personal Statement:

- Does not need to be finished today!
- But use the time to make a decent start
- Beginning of next term will be v busy
- Reminder of deadlines for completed UCAS applications:
- Oxbridge, Medics, Dentists, Vets: Friday 18th September
- All the rest: Week before half term, 16th – 23rd October

- (If you're not planning on Uni – still a v. useful exercise and template for writing any application document)