

# Personal Statements

## Aims of the Personal statement

Many universities don't interview applicants, so the only information they have about you is your UCAS form. Most of the UCAS form only contains your details, the bits the universities are interested in is your grades, your references and your personal statement. The personal statement is the only bit you really have control over, so this is your chance to present a good image to the admissions tutor, even if your grades don't really reflect that image.

If you are applying to an oversubscribed university course, and everyone applying is likely to have good grades, the personal statement is the only thing that tells you apart from other applicants, so you want to try and make yours as good as possible. When the admissions and subject tutors look at your personal statement, they are likely to be asking two main questions:

1. Do we want this student on this course?
2. Do we want this student at this university?

These can be broken down into a number of easier to answer questions:

Is the student suited to the course that they are applying for?	Does he/she have the necessary qualifications and qualities?
Is the student conscientious, hardworking and unlikely to drop out?	Will the student cope with the demands of the course?
Can the student work under pressure?	Will the student be able to adjust to their new environment?
What are their communication skills like?	Are they dedicated to this course and have researched it well?
Do they have a genuine interest in the subject and a desire to learn?	

These are the sort of questions you need to answer in your personal statement. Unfortunately you cannot answer them directly, you need to provide evidence and make it sound believable. Ultimately, admissions tutors are human too, and may well have hundreds of personal statements to shift through, so even if you think you've answered all these questions really well you may still be unlucky. There are other techniques you can use to make your statement stand out and appeal to admissions tutors, but remember they are all different and may have different ideas about what they look for in a prospective student. Some of these techniques are discussed in the personal goals section.

## Notes about yourself

Now you have some idea of why you're writing a personal statement you need to think about what you're going to write in it. You don't need to start thinking about the wording or structure yet, just get down some ideas of the things you think you could put down. The best way to do this is to use a set of headings and write bullet points about how you relate to these headings. Here are some headings to think about.

What you want to study at university and why	Specific aspects of the courses that interest you
Examples of coursework you have completed	Practical work you have enjoyed
Things you have read related to the subject area	Work experience or voluntary work in this area
Conferences you have attended	Where you hope a degree in this subject will lead
Personal experiences which lead to the decision to take this subject	
Experiences which show you are a reliable and responsible person	Part-time job
Business enterprise	Community and charity work
Sixth form committee	Helping out at school events and open days.
Young Enterprise, World Challenge, Duke of Edinburgh award, Asdan Award Debating societies and what you've gained from these experiences.	
Your interests and skills	What you like to do in your free time
Sport and leisure activities	Subjects you study which are not examined
Musical instrument which you play	Languages which you speak
Prizes you have won or positions achieved in your interests	
Why you're taking a Gap year (if you are)	Why you want to take a gap year
What you plan to do	How this may relate to your course
(If you're not taking a gap year avoid this section. If you are it could still be left out, but you may be asked why you're taking it at an interview)	

You should now have lots of bullet points about yourself, all of which will be useful in preparing your personal statement. Don't worry too much if you don't seem to have done much off the list, just think about things you've done which show all your good qualities, or could be written so as to show your good qualities.

The important thing is that you have a good reason for why you want to study the course; it doesn't matter if the reason sounds stupid at the moment - you can work on the language later. All admissions tutors will be looking for people who are enthusiastic and passionate about the subjects they want to study, so make sure you really are. If you're choosing this course just because you can't think of anything better to do, that's not a good enough reason, and maybe you should consider looking for a course you enjoy more.

Now you've got some ideas together it's time to think about turning them into a personal statement - almost.

### **You and your subject**

Saying why you want to take your course is possibly the most important part of your personal statement. You can have perfect grades, great extra curricular activities and be a really great person, but if admissions tutors feel you aren't committed to your course, you won't get a place.

Hopefully the notes you have written for the section above have already given you a good idea of what to write about why you want to take your course. If not then you should at least be sure you want to take that subject - writing a personal statement is a lot of work, and you don't really want to get to the end of it and decide you want to study a different subject, so before you go much further be sure you have chosen the right subject for you. Remember you don't actually have to choose the course you want to take yet, just have a rough idea of the subject area or areas you might be interested in.

Now you need to think about exactly why you want to take this subject. Even if you are 100% sure that this is the course for you, you still need to get this idea across to the admissions tutors. If they accept you, you are going to be studying this course for at least the next three years, and you need to convince them that you are committed to it. Have a think about exactly why the subject appeals to you, and write down as much as you can about it. It doesn't matter if you only scribble a few notes, you can modify them before you write the statement, the important thing is you can be sure of the key reasons why you want to take the subject. Write down as many as you can, if you have too many you can always just pick the best. Other than that I can't give you much more advice - only you know exactly why you want to take your chosen course, but bear in mind, if you can't think of any good reasons - should you really be taking that subject?

What if I want to do a joint degree? There are two options you can use to tailor your personal statement to joint degrees (ones where you take two subjects e.g. economics and politics). You can talk about just one subject which you feel is most important, and not mention the other. This has the advantage that you can apply for two different joint degrees and only talk about the common element e.g. for economics and politics and politics and law, you would only talk about law. If you decide to do this make sure you talk about the qualities you have which show you are suitable for the other part of your joint degree. Alternatively you can just talk a bit about why you want to do both subjects, which approach you choose will probably depend on how closely related your subjects are.

What if I want to apply for different subjects? There is no easy way to write personal statements for two unrelated subjects. If the subjects are similar such as mathematics and statistics or accounting and business studies you may find you can write a general personal statement which applies equally to both courses. If this is the case you may not want to mention either of the subjects by name, and instead talk about the related work that you've already done and how you've enjoyed it. If your subjects are totally unrelated there is no way you can write a personal statement which will cover all of them. Instead you need to come up with a statement that gives you the best chance of being accepted. For example if you are applying for one subject at four of your choices and another subject at the other one, you may just want to write a statement related to the subject you chose to study at four universities and either forget about, or change the course at your other choice.

You also want to consider your predicted grades in relation to the universities you are applying to. Universities which normally make lower offers are less likely to be concerned about a badly targeted personal statement, whereas for universities which make high offers, the statement will be much more important. Try and alter your statement so it is more specific to the universities which ask for higher grades, as this will give you the best chance of being offered places at all your choices.

There will probably be some cases where there is nothing you can do, for example, if you are applying for three totally unrelated subjects each at two different universities. There is no advice which will help in a situation like this, except just to consider whether this is really what you want to do. Even if you do apply for three different courses, you will only be able to study one of them, so if you can try to limit your choices to similar subjects.

## Read example statements (some are at the end of this document)

Some people may know exactly how they are going to lay-out and write their personal statement, but for the rest of us it's a bit more difficult. Even though you now know what you're going to put in your statement, do you know how to make it read well? The best way to get an idea of how to go about producing your personal statement is to look at some other people's statements. This gives you a chance to see the sort of structure and language other people use, how they explained why they wanted to study their chosen course and also their own interests and abilities.

When you read through statements have your own notes from the section above ready, if you find anything you've done but haven't already thought about note it down. Also after reading lots of personal statements you will be able to judge which ones you think are good or bad, and fine parts of statements you really like or dislike, this will come in useful in the next section.

## Personal goals of your statement

Ok now you've looked at some personal statements you may have an idea of how you think yours might go. Whether you do or you don't you should have seen lots of statements which you do like, and also a few that you don't. Use this knowledge to decide how you are going to write yours. At this stage you don't need to think about structure very much just think about what you are, and what you are not going to do, to give yourself a set of guidelines to follow when writing your statement. If you still have no idea what I'm talking about here are some example guidelines or goals for a personal statement:

Not to sound arrogant and pretentious	I would try not to start many sentences with I
Try and have an interesting phrase to start and finish on	Not to lie outright and stay as close to the truth as possible
Try not to quote books, magazines or publications and make it sound like I had only read them so I could put them on the statement	

Goals like this give you an idea of things to focus on and think about when writing your own statement. They also stop your statement from looking too much like one of the examples which you might have copied bits from. Some example goals you may or may not want to use:

Don't try to be funny or make jokes in your statement	Don't start every sentence with I
Don't include your hobbies and interests unless they are relevant	Don't use vocabulary you don't normally use
Don't use famous quotes in your statement	Don't repeat things already on your UCAS form
Don't just write a list of all your hobbies and interests	Don't lie or embellish the truth
Don't include boring phrases or hobbies which everyone does	Don't take any political viewpoints

Remember you don't have to have any of these goals as your own. If you think you are really witty and some light humour will go down well in your statement then put it down. These goals are really just ideas you might want to use - remember a personal statement is supposed to be personal and you should write whatever you think will work for you.

## Language of the statement

From looking at example personal statements you have probably found some language which you like or think works well. The first thing to remember is don't directly copy any of it - not even a single sentence! The reason is, copying statements is plagiarism, and if an admissions tutor sees a statement they recognise they will probably reject you instantly. You should also not copy single sentences for the same reason, sentences which stick out in your mind, may stick out in the examiners also. It is ok to find a sentence or paragraph which is saying what you want to say and adapt it to fit yourself though.

You need to use language which makes you sound enthusiastic about your courses and an interesting person. If you're still wondering what sort of language to use look at existing personal statements, prospectuses and on the web to find sentences which you think fit your views. University prospectuses are a good place to look, find your course, see how it is described and see if you can work anything similar into your personal statement. Write down a list of words or sentences you would like to use like this:

to gain greater understanding of the world around you	sends a signal to prospective employers and graduate schools
students of economics become problem-solvers	the fact is economics affects our daily lives.
a challenging and diverse discipline	develops analytical skills, quantitative skills, research skills
it's interesting and relevant	

Don't copy the sentences you find outright, change them or write your own sentence in a similar style. If you can't find any sentences you like try and write your own - it is a personal statement after all.

## Structure of the statement

Now it's time to think about the structure of your statement, you should have read lots already, and may have a fair idea about how yours is going to look, but this section should clarify things a bit if you don't.

Most statements are written in an essay format, but you don't have to do yours like this. I wouldn't recommend writing it as one large block of text. Even though you can fit more words in, this just makes it hard to read. You could however use headings rather than write in an essay style. I haven't seen many statements which do this but if you think yours would work better like that then do it.

A starting guideline is to spend half the statement talking about the course and why you want to take it, and spend the other half writing about yourself and your own abilities, though once you get into it this can be easily changed. Another approach is to split up your notes into a few categories and write a paragraph on each category. For example:

Paragraph 1: Introduction to my subject, the parts I'm interested in and why  
Paragraph 2: What I had done related to my subject which wasn't on the UCAS form  
Paragraphs 3 and 4: work experience (if appropriate) and things I had done in school  
Paragraph 5: My interests outside of school (also contained my responsibilities)  
Paragraph 6: My goal of going to university and closing comment

Again this is only a guideline, and depending on yourself and your course you may want to change things. The last option is to simply find a statement you like and use it as a template. Take its structure and write your personal statement using this structure, being careful that you don't use any of the language mentioned there.

Spend most of your time on the start and finish of the personal statement. A good start will interest the reader and cause them to read the statement properly rather than just scanning it. A good ending will mean the reader remembers what you wrote, and hopefully will recommend you. In my opinion it's a good idea to start with why you want to take your subject, and finish with why you want to go to university or what you want to do next.

## Writing the statement

Ok, hopefully you now have your notes ready, you've thought about how you want your language and structure and the goals of your statement. You are almost ready to start writing it, here are a few things to bear in mind before you start.

Remember the aims of a personal statement. You need to show the admissions tutor why you should be accepted on your chosen course at your chosen university. In addition to what you say in your statement, the language you use and the way it is laid out will be judged as well.

Remember you only have a limited amount of space, but don't let this put you off too much. A long personal statement can easily be trimmed down. It's harder to increase the length of a short personal statement, but if yours is too short don't worry. There is no requirement that you fill the entire space, it's better to have a short and well written statement than a long and irrelevant one.

Be positive and interesting, if there is something you are unhappy about, try to portray it in an attractive light. Before you go, have a look at the websites and prospectuses of universities you are applying for, and see if they say anything about writing personal statements. This information would probably be written by the admissions tutors, and would give you a much better idea of what sort of things to put down.

Now you're ready to go. You want to write in a way that is informative, interesting and useful. Along with writing about what you've done, try and explain why you did it, or what you think you learned from it. For example:

I currently have a part time job and this has taught me much about teamwork, responsibility and time management in the workplace.

Ok from this point you're on your own, move on to the next section when you've got a complete (draft) statement.

## After writing the statement

By now you should have a pretty much complete first draft of your statement. Don't worry if it sounds disjointed, you've missed bits out or it's too long or too short, you can correct things like this later.

First read through what you've written slowly and try to read it from someone else's point of view. Make sure it's easy to read and not confusing, make sure you've said everything you want to say and not under or oversold yourself - if you are confused by reading your own personal statement, it is likely anyone else reading it will be too.

Next get other people to read it, mainly your family, friends, teachers and anyone else who you think will be able to give you a good opinion. As well as checking for spelling and grammar mistakes, they will be able to tell you if they think there is anything you've missed out. Also show it to head of year or career advisers, people like this will have seen a lot of statements, and have a good idea what they should sound like.

You could also get people on the internet to look at your statement, and see what they think. There are many web based communities where you can post your statement or email it to people and they will happily give you advice for free. There is one downside though: if you post your statement on a message board or forum, anyone can look at it, so you may get people who steal parts of your statement.

Hopefully by looking at your statement again and showing to other people you should have a whole bunch of changes to make to your original statement. Before making these changes, save a copy of your original statement so you can go back to it if you need too. Keep making changes, showing people your statement, and making more changes - it's not unusual for people to have done 10-20 drafts before they are happy with their statement.

Once you've got a statement which reads well, and you are happy with it, it's time to look at the size of it.

## Word, character and line limits

Firstly remember, there is no word limit – instead you're concentrating on a character limit (4000 characters including spaces) and a line limit (47). Both of these must be satisfied to allow you to save your personal statement. Checking you're within the character limit is easy, just use the "word count" tool on your word processor which should show you how many characters you've used.

The line limit is more difficult, as the length of the lines is predetermined, any lines longer than 93 characters (including spaces) are wrapped onto the next line. You can check you don't go over the line limit using a word processor which shows the cursor position (the upright bar which shows where you're typing) and creating a new line after you've typed 93 characters – if you're doing this make sure your word processor doesn't wrap lines automatically before this.

## Other things to remember

No formatting of any type is allowed in your personal statement, except using capital letters, so any bold, italic, or underlined words will disappear in the preview. Tabs and multiple spaces will be condensed to a single space, so it is no longer possible to indent lines. Single spaces at the beginning of lines will also be removed. You have a very limited set of "special characters" to use along with all the upper and lowercase letter and numbers you can use the following symbols:

!"£\$%^&\*()\_+'|/ ,.:;@#~[]?\*- =

Common symbols which are not allowed are €, long dashes (–) and the special quote characters " ' " which will simply be removed from your statement, so remember to replace long dashes with - and quotes with " and '. Some of these problems stem from Microsoft Word's autoformat feature, so you might want to turn it off before starting your statement. Backslashes (\) are also not allowed but will be replaced with forward slashes (/) and curly brackets will be replaced with normal ones.

## Examples

### Mathematics Candidate

I have always been fascinated by my mathematical studies and, having a flair for the subject, there was never any doubt that I would choose mathematics as a degree. It is a pivotal subject on which so many others depend (such as physics and chemistry). I relish the challenge of problem solving that mathematics provides. For me, it is an endlessly intriguing subject, as the discipline appears limitless, allowing so much scope for further study and research.

Having studied all four branches of the syllabus, I believe I am a well-rounded mathematician. Pure mathematics is my personal favourite because of its focus on thought processes and problem solving techniques. As I am the sole candidate for further mathematics in my year group, I am studying it without support from school. Having no lessons has meant that I have had to develop an independent, self-reliant approach to mathematics, which I believe is invaluable, especially when faced with a system of learning where the emphasis is placed on the student rather than the tutor. Due to clashes in my sixth form's timetable, I studied AS physics at a college in Leeds city centre. Although this meant travelling several times a week during school hours, I still thoroughly enjoyed the subject, as it allowed me to apply mathematics to different situations, and I am continuing to study it for A2.

Last year, I qualified for the British Mathematical Olympiad, run by the UKMT, which I hope to qualify for again this year. I also enjoy reading books of a mathematical nature, allowing me to extend my mathematical knowledge beyond the content of my A-level courses. I recently represented the school in a national debating competition, arguing the case against the right to privacy for public figures. I also work for the sixth form paper. I have participated in several school concerts and productions as a member of the choir and as a violinist, at which I am Grade 5. Last year, I also captained three form groups in the Year Nine Music Festival. This entailed organising a choir, an ensemble (which I conducted) and several soloists, rehearsing for several months at breaks and lunchtimes and finally performing in the competition.

I have worked voluntarily in a primary school as an assistant to the Year Four class teacher. While I was working at the school, it underwent an OfSTED inspection, as did the teacher of the class I was designated to. During one of the class inspections, I was entrusted with groups of students, teaching them how to use the data logging equipment, for which I was favourably mentioned in the report. For the past year, I have been working part-time in the busy restaurant of a large department store in Leeds. Although not being particularly high on mathematical content, it has provided me with an opportunity to improve my ability to cope under pressure and my recent performance review has quoted me as a "hard-working, trusted and well-liked member of staff". However, I have now finished this job in order to concentrate on my A2 studies. I would love to pursue a career in the field of mathematics and I believe my choice of institutions matches my capabilities as well as my aspirations to become a successful mathematician.

### Architecture Candidate

I am clear that I want to pursue a course in the area of architecture or planning, because it will enable me to combine the strongest aspects of my personality; a fascination with functional art and design, particularly arrangements of light and space; enthusiasm for solving practical problems; and working with other people. It is my desire to travel around the world and experience other cultures and broaden my horizons. With this in mind, possessing a set of transferable skills and knowledge will be invaluable for the future.

My ambition is to go to university and do a degree in planning and transport, or in architecture.

My work experience last year helped me decide that I wanted to study an area of architecture or planning. I spent part of my time at a hospital and shadowed doctors. The second was spent with an award-winning firm of architects, planners and engineers in Bath. Whilst I enjoyed working at the hospital, I preferred the variety, challenge and social context of the architecture and planning practice.

At school I have been an all-rounder and this can be reflected in my grades. So for A-Levels, I have been torn between arts and sciences.

I opted for a balance, because I knew how important it is to express my creativeness as well as learn more about the physical world. I have a deep interest in literature, which I would like to expand and develop. I have confidence and am a very keen worker who will not give up until I have achieved my full potential. I feel prepared to take responsibilities and am co-operative and willing to accept guidance where ever it will aid my cause. I always try to be enthusiastic and find I get on well with other people and enjoy meeting new people and experiencing new surroundings. I also have the ability, and willingness, to listen and try to understand the view points of others. I have good IT skills, which can be clearly seen in my coursework and analytical and decision-making skills, to assess and resolve conflicting points of view, which is vital in being a town and country planner.

I recognise the importance of having a good balance between working hard and engaging in pastimes. I have a number of hobbies both in and out of school. Out of school I have been practising Taekwondo, of which I have been doing for five years and currently a black belt.

This is a hobby, which I enjoy immensely and would like to in the future teach to others. I also enjoy swimming and training at the gym.

In school I have been playing the flute and I'm currently working towards grade 5. I've been going to orchestra for about two years and have played in every concert since. I hope to continue my music throughout my life and future career. I am also very committed member of the school council, which I find thoroughly interesting and enjoyable.

### English with French Candidate

Since learning to read from a very young age, literature has been my greatest love. I am fascinated by the impact that written words have on society, and how they influence the way that people interpret issues such as war or politics. Literature has shaped our modern world; it is the most diverse subject to study as it encompasses all aspects of life. My passion for reading and writing has encouraged me to write creatively and to read a wide variety of novels and poetry outside school. I enjoy a broad range of classical and modern literature and my favourite novelists include Jane Austen and Charles Dickens. I have loved studying Chaucer and Blake in school but tend to read more modern poetry at home, including the works of Eliot, Heaney and Plath. The interpretation of literature from other cultures is pivotal to our exploration and understanding of historical and social contexts throughout the literary world. French literature complements my study of English, for instance the importance of 'courtly love' and the development of poetic style in each country. I have a great interest in French culture; I enjoy French film and have loved studying the work of Truffaut at A2-Level as well as reading a few simple novels at home.

My passion for the French culture also extends to my interest in History. This AS-level has not only broadened my knowledge of French history (I studied the French Wars of Religion for my coursework) but has also enhanced my analytical and essay-writing skills. I also study Psychology and have a great interest in human interaction, which complements and supports my study of literature. In English I have developed my writing skills; my comparative and analytical skills have been particularly important for this year's coursework essay, in which I am comparing 'Tess of the d'Urbervilles' by Thomas Hardy and 'The Handmaid's Tale' by Margaret Atwood. I enjoy discussing literature and attend a fortnightly reading group at school, which has continued to increase my understanding and enjoyment of the classics and introduced me to several significant modern works. Being able to hold discussions in French has also given me great personal satisfaction. I enjoy my conversation classes with the language assistant and I recently went on a French exchange to Compiègne. This experience was hugely beneficial in improving my understanding and speaking skills. I spent the week completely immersed in French language and culture; my confidence to speak increased enormously and I came love the country and its traditions all the more.

Outside school, I thoroughly enjoy my musical pursuits. I play the French horn in a Youth Orchestra and intend to take my Grade 8 in 2012; I also sing in a Madrigal Choir. I perform in three to four concerts a year, including the school Christmas concert; this year I will be playing a movement from Mozart's fourth horn concerto. My interest in music has required good organisational skills, as I helped to run a choir at school for a competition. I thoroughly enjoyed this experience, and it allowed me to develop my leadership skills whilst working in a team. My duties as a prefect have also contributed towards these skills; I assist a Year Eight form with a team of other prefects. In July I took part in a World Challenge 'Leadership Day', participating in group activities where each team member had a chance to act as the 'leader'. I am also involved in the 'Pyramid' voluntary organisation, which is an after school activity club for children with low self-esteem or mild behavioural problems. In this capacity, I work with a team of three other club leaders, and each week we organise a new activity for the children.

I know that I am ideally suited to a joint degree in English and French, and I intend to use my skills and interests in contributing to university activities. I am highly committed to my studies, and look forward to pursuing them in a challenging course at university.

### Psychology Candidate

The constant sense of discovery is what I find most captivating about Psychology: looking at an individual's pretentious behaviour in an analytical way allows me to glance at the world in a new and contemporary angle. I have a fascination in understanding how the mind absorbs information, interpreted within certain cognitive processes resulting in a behaviour that is willed or unwilled. My desire to study Social Psychology and especially the question of how an individual's behaviour can have a positive or negative impact on society was first awakened through 'Fear of Freedom' by Erich Fromm. This enabled me to explore factors such as economics, politics and the context in which socialisation creates the environment in which the individual develops and finds meaning.

The A Level Psychology syllabus has confirmed my commitment to Psychology, and encouraged me to challenge and expand upon my perceptions of the subject. The diversity of developmental and cognitive thought I have discovered, in Jean Piaget's experiments for instance, has made me curious, and led me to research experiments including Margaret Donaldson's Children's Minds which

drew my attention to the social context in which a child learns and the child's understanding of that context. What is most intriguing is the fact that children are actively working out what the experimenter wants and may well misjudge the situation through no fault of their own which contradicts Piaget's theory on Conservation.

I feel the A-Levels I study have a number of transferable skills and aid the study of Psychology. I enjoy Economics because we look at the real cost of making choices and also I have learnt how concepts and theories provide a tool to help me understand how economies work and develop. I have found Adam Smith's theory on 'Invisible Hand' most striking because it focuses on the ideas of capitalism, a person pursuing self-interest will result in an increase in the common good. Studying Law has given me an insight into the fundamentals that make up our English Legal System and has helped me realise that the rule of law is crucial in providing a basis for trust and predictability. Both these subjects have taught me to develop my analytical and evaluative skills, and also problem solving skills. I believe all the qualities I have gained through my courses are essential in order to strengthen my competence.

In my spare time, I take pleasure in reading be it short stories or never ending novels. I enjoy playing badminton and tennis: being a member of my local tennis club has enabled me to interact with other people who share similar interests. Something which I find significant is the belief that every one of us can make the world a better place be it by helping others. As someone pointed out we have two hands, one to help yourself, the second to help others. I am been fortunate to take part in charitable events raising money for organisations ranging from Breast Cancer to Aids. My remaining free time goes in working as a sales adviser. The retail experience has given me a great insight in to my interpersonal skills and taught me how to deal with a various range of situations efficiently.

I would be an asset to your university and am very enthusiastic about my subjects. The course you offer will broaden my knowledge, satisfy my curiosity and deepen my understanding; I am very determined and thoughtful, and would find the course you offer highly motivating.