

CREATING A SUCCESSFUL UCAS PERSONAL STATEMENT

Reflections on what admissions tutors tell us
(and a few tips from successful students)

HOW IMPORTANT IS YOUR STATEMENT? - 1

Most courses will read your statement

It's especially crucial for:

- High-demand courses
- High-demand universities
- Professional courses
 - where you're applying for the **profession**, not just the course

(like Medicine, Nursing, Optometry, Radiography, Veterinary Science, Social Work etc)

HOW IMPORTANT IS YOUR STATEMENT? - 2

“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 YOUR 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** it against their selection criteria
- But some courses say students stress too much about it:
“We rarely reject a student because of a personal statement”
(Physics at Bath)

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'll get caught by the 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”***
- Cram too much in, repeat yourself or list your A-level subjects
- Start with ***“from a young age”*** or ***“since I was a child”***
- Start with a quotation, like: ***“Nelson Mandela 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 preferably without using the word “passion”**)
- ‘Pitch’ it right but also write **naturally** as if you were **speaking** to them (as if you just met them in Starbucks)

“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 (like Bristol, who have an admissions statement for every subject)
- For professional courses (like Midwifery), also visit career websites + read professional journals, get experience or just talk to people in the profession to find out what's going on in it
- Go to uni open days and ask (like Politics at Royal Holloway)

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
- Don't patronise us, **engage** us
- Be **specific** from line one
- If an **adult** has helped you write it, we can tell

ADVICE FROM UNIVERSITIES 2

- The personal statement is your one chance to **speak** to the admissions tutor
- Use it to **introduce yourself** to us
- 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 you're applying for **deferred entry**, what are your gap year plans?
- If you're taking the **EPQ**, tell us something about it, as it's the kind of studying you'll be doing at uni
- **Less** is more
- Give us a **well-written summary** of why you want to study the subject and your relevant academic and personal skills and qualities in 3 paragraphs

ADVICE FROM UNIVERSITIES 4

- Avoid clichés
- If you're applying for a **joint or combined** course, we want to know about **BOTH** subjects
- Beware! What you say in your statement will come up in an **interview / applicants' open day**
- 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** – this isn’t **The Apprentice**”

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”
- Start with a **strong opening sentence** that engages because it’s **relevant and personal**, not gimmicky

DON'T BE VAPID*, BE SPECIFIC...

**Definition of vapid = "bland; offering nothing that is stimulating or challenging"*

It's not the X Factor either

They don't want to hear vapid, gushing claims like:

"Being a nurse is all I ever wanted"

"I was born to dance"

"I genuinely believe I am a highly-motivated person"

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

"Reading Mandela's autobiography gave me an insight into ..."

"On the fish counter at Waitrose I learned the importance of..."

"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 on the BBC website last week help you understand the reasons behind Putin's actions in Ukraine?

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

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, 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

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 use your 47 lines for, will it give them some important evidence that will make them 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.”

Mark (Primary Teaching)

“Last week I spent an afternoon with a very challenging Year 5 PE class.” (followed by 29 lines on what he learned from it)

Tommy (Computer Games Technology)

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

Kim (Music)

“Hi, I’m Kim and I’m a tuba player.”

OXBRIDGE

- They want to see that you read and think critically and analytically
- They're especially interested in the **SUPER-CURRICULAR**
- This means reflecting on ways you engage with a subject beyond the A-level syllabus through wider reading or other independent learning
- They're less interested in your extra-curricular activities (unless directly relevant), but they know you may still write about these for the other unis you're applying to

SOME TIPS ON SPECIFIC COURSES 1

NB: All the tips are subtle hints rather than hard facts, don't take them as gospel

LAW

- Build a reasoned, coherent case for your application (Queen Mary)
- Get your motivation across – why do you want to study the subject and what will you bring to the course? Any experience you've gained of the law in action would be great, but this can be in a very wide range of settings... (Birmingham)
- Or you could reflect on the legal implications of a topical news story (Cambridge)
- Less is more! (Cardiff)

SPORTS SCIENCE

- All sport and no science will not impress (Bath)

HISTORY

- Engage us by reflecting on some of your recent work and what you think about it, not “**History is vital to understanding the world we live in**” (Durham)

SOME TIPS ON SPECIFIC COURSES 2

MIDWIFERY

- If you mention Call the Midwife or One Born Every Minute, you won't even get an interview (Bournemouth)

NURSING

- We want to know what you understand about the field of Nursing you've chosen and your reflections on what it is about you and your experience that makes it the right career for you (Southampton)
- Lots of applicants say they were inspired by Florence Nightingale – it's irrelevant, she's been dead for 100 years (South Wales)

PHARMACY

- Demonstrate your knowledge of the science and practice of pharmacy, evidenced by your background reading or work experience (Cardiff)
- You need to be able to interact well with people from diverse backgrounds - anything that demonstrates this looks good in your statement (Portsmouth)

SOME TIPS ON SPECIFIC COURSES 3

MATHS

- Reflect on your participation in maths competitions or what you find exciting about the subject (Bristol)
- Anything that demonstrates your motivation and enthusiasm for the subject is great - we're also interested in your outside interests because we like people who have a life (South Wales)

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)
- 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)

PRIMARY TEACHING:

- Your insight into what it is to be a teacher is crucial (Middlesex)

SOME TIPS ON SPECIFIC COURSES 4

ENGLISH

- Talk about the kind of books you enjoy and why (Aberystwyth)
- Draw out your wider reading or theatre-going (York)
- Be specific from line one, not “**my love for English started when my mum gave me a Beatrix Potter book when I was 6**” or “**I have had a passion for literature from an early age**” (UCL)
- See www.southampton.ac.uk/english/undergraduate/ucas_application.page (to find out why to avoid phrases like “I was encapsulated by To Kill a Mockingbird”)

ECONOMICS

- Reflect on aspects that interest you, your wider reading or engagement or links to any of your other subjects; show you can express an opinion, solve problems and cope with pressure (LSE)
- Demonstrate superb motivation (Warwick)
- Don't skim the surface, make sweeping claims, give us a list or waste space with irrelevant detail (however impressive) or mention Freakonomics! (UCL)

SOME TIPS ON SPECIFIC COURSES 5

MEDICINE (Keele, King's and Hull/York)

- Give us a rationale for why you want to study Medicine
- Whatever environment you've had experience in, what did you spot and what did you learn from what happened there? It's not what techniques you saw but what you saw about the realities of medicine or healthcare...
- Evidence qualities you've demonstrated like commitment, compassion, teamwork, resilience, problem-solving, leadership, creativity, responsibility or critical thinking (like how you took the lead in your D of E expedition)
- Keep your conclusion punchy – maybe 3 lines
- The interview will test whether what you wrote in your statement is justified
- Masses of great advice on Keele University's webpage

DENTISTRY

- Don't give a list of every procedure you saw on work experience - we would much rather hear what you learned from observing one filling (Queen Mary)

SOME TIPS ON SPECIFIC COURSES 6

PSYCHOLOGY

- We want to know that you understand the importance of statistics, experimentation and scientific elements of the course (Bristol)
- We like to hear what you've learned from books, publications, journals, websites, podcasts, lectures or anything that shows independent learning – not standard texts like Freud, Milgram or Zimbardo, but what you've researched for yourself beyond the classroom, like the latest research on the psychology of fear you read up on the BPS website... (Goldsmiths)

GEOGRAPHY

- Show how your life experience within and outside of school has connected with specific aspects of geography - the more detail you give on relevant extra-curricular interests the better (Sussex)

PPE

- You need to engage with P,P and E in your statement (Oxford)

SOME TIPS ON SPECIFIC COURSES 7

MODERN LANGUAGES

- We like to see evidence of your enthusiasm for the language outside your A Level subject (**Surrey**)
- Doing simple things like reading short stories, following a blog, watching a film or documentary or listening to French radio can be extremely valuable if you show what you got out of them (**Oxford**)

CHEMISTRY

- Convey a genuine passion for the subject (**Newcastle**)

BIOLOGY

- Tell me something you find interesting about Biology, a field course you went on, a uni lab you visited or something different or unusual you've done that's connected with it - those sorts of things convey your enthusiasm (**Birmingham**)

ARCHITECTURE

- What prompted your interest? What buildings/places/architects do you like and why? What do you like doing, or do well in academically, that you think is relevant to studying architecture? (**Portsmouth**)

GETTING STARTED: TIPS FROM PAST STUDENTS

Natasha

Started by researching course websites → **SPEECH BUBBLES**

Rhodri:

Started by drawing a **SPIDER DIAGRAM**

Maria:

Started with a **LIST OF HEADINGS** → then under each, wrote what came naturally in a **STREAM OF CONSCIOUSNESS** → wrote 3 pages → then hacked away at it to get it down to 47 lines

Marianne:

Used the **NECKLACE** approach (linked her ending back to her opening)

Lorin & Valentina:

“TELL YOUR STORY” - opened with how they arrived in UK as refugees

GETTING STARTED: ON-LINE ADVICE

Timeline, worksheet, mind map, video at:

www.ucas.com



30 generic and subject-specific articles + 15 more articles
coming soon at:

www.university.which.co.uk



Sample statements for various subjects at:

www.essex.ac.uk/information.../personal_statement_writing_guide.pdf

Still unsure what to study? Try the Spartan Test at:

www.sacu-student.com



A helping hand into higher education

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 VERY FINALLY....

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

