

# Supporting students to write personal statements



University of Birmingham / University of Bristol / University of Cambridge  
Cardiff University / Durham University / University of Edinburgh  
University of Exeter / University of Glasgow / Imperial College London  
King's College London / University of Leeds / University of Liverpool



London School of Economics and Political Science / University of Manchester  
Newcastle University / University of Nottingham / University of Oxford  
Queen Mary University of London / Queen's University Belfast  
University of Sheffield / University of Southampton / University College London  
University of Warwick / University of York

## Starter for 10...

- How many personal statements are submitted to UCAS each year?
- How many lines/characters are allowed?
- What have UCAS identified as the “most overused opening line”?



# Starter for 10...

- How many personal statements are submitted to UCAS each year?

681,880 (for the 2021 UCAS cycle)

- How many lines/characters are allowed?

4,000 characters or 47 lines of text, whichever comes first

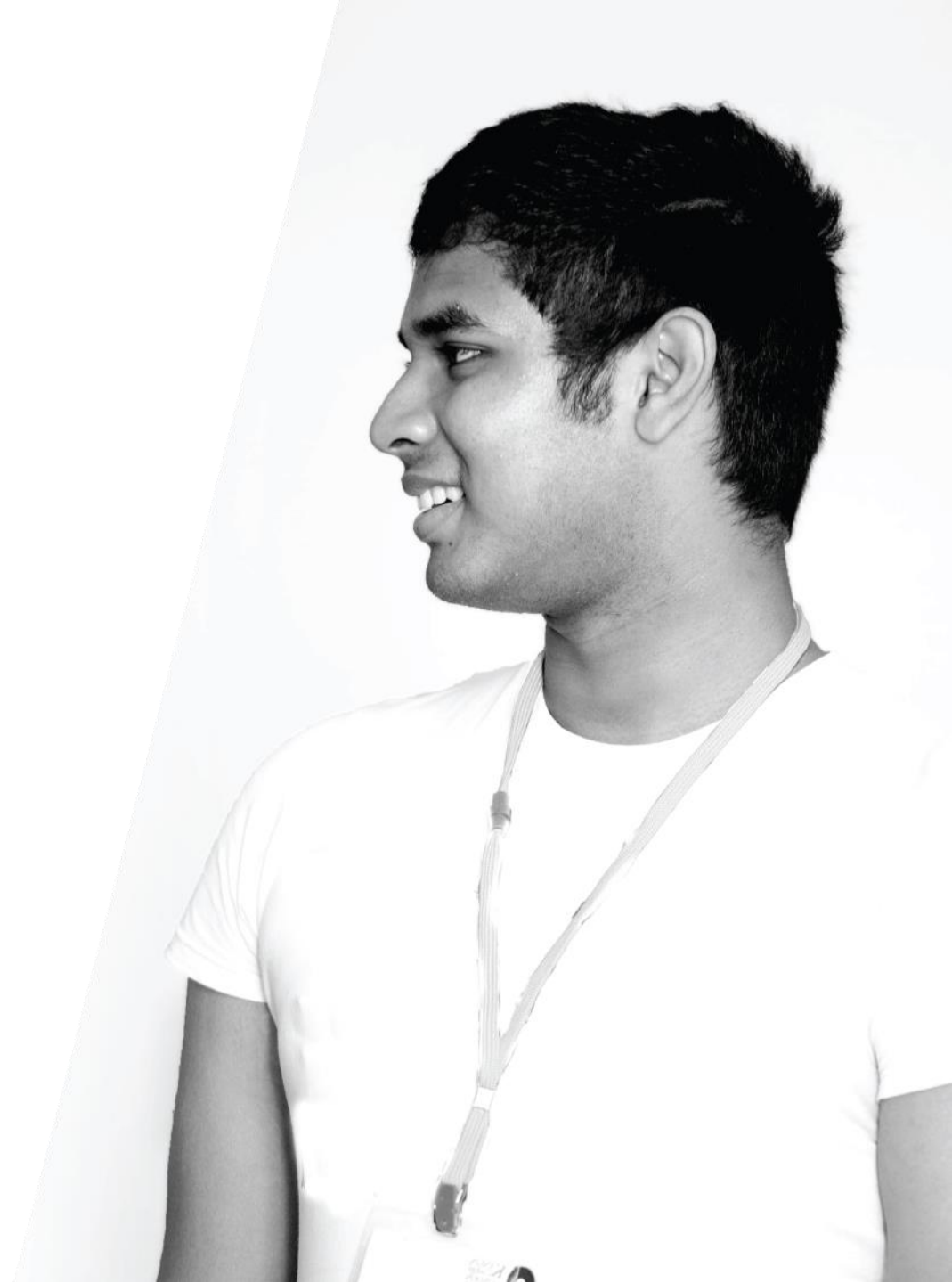
- What have UCAS identified as the “most overused opening line”?

“From a young age I have (always) been [interested in/fascinated by]...”



## Coming up...

- Personal statements – the basics
- What does the research tell us?
- Structuring the statement
- Discussing example personal statements





# Personal statements – the basics

# The basics

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## The personal statement should:

- Be 4,000 characters or 47 lines of text (including spaces)  
– whichever comes first
- Portray the applicant's character, knowledge, experience and ambition

Answer the following questions :

- Why are you applying for this course?
- What do you know about the subject and which aspects particularly interest you?
- What personal qualities, skills and experience will help you in this subject and how did you acquire these?



# How are personal statements used?

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Different courses and universities will consider the personal statement in different ways. Personal statements enable universities to:

- Understand the person applying
- See how much preparation they have done
- Determine whether they are likely to succeed on the course
- Differentiate between similarly qualified applicants.

Russell Group universities receive tens of thousands of applications. The personal statement can make a **difference between an offer and rejection.**





# What do different universities say about personal statements?

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In your personal statement, we'd like you to explain your reasons for wanting to study the subject at university, demonstrate enthusiasm for and commitment to your chosen course, express any particular interests within the field and outline how you've pursued your subject interest in your own time. This information is often used as a basis for discussion at interview.

**University of Cambridge**

The information you provide in your personal statement may be considered for subjects that are high in demand and will definitely be considered for the professional subject areas such as Medicine, Veterinary Medicine and Dentistry.

**University of Glasgow**

Our courses are very competitive, with often many more applicants predicted to meet the entry requirements than we are able to offer places to. Where this occurs, the personal statement is important to enable us to select potential students for the course. It is considered very carefully by our staff, and is especially important to us when we are making decisions about who to make offers to.

**University of Warwick**

# What do different universities say about personal statements?

We no longer use the personal statement as a weighted component of our selection criteria. Should we need to differentiate between applicants who have identical scores at interview when making offers, UCAT scores will be used as our primary differentiator. Should there be a situation where applicants achieve the same interview result and UCAT score, only then will the personal statement be used as a deciding factor.

**University of Bristol Medicine course (as of 2022)**

The personal statement is an important part of your UCAS application. It helps admissions staff at the University decide whether to make you an offer. Some courses have many more applicants than places and there may be many students with good grades applying for the same course as you.

**University of Leeds**

Your personal statement is one of the many factors in the overall assessment of your application, and is your opportunity to introduce yourself to the university and inform us of your commitment to the programme and how the programme fits into your career plans, as well as any work experience or extracurricular activities you have done.

**King's College London**



What does the  
research tell us?

# Academic research in to personal statements

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There have been only a small number of academic studies on personal statements, but some good research has been carried out at the University of Manchester:

*“Ensure That You Stand Out from the Crowd”: A Corpus-Based Analysis of Personal Statements according to Applicants’ School Type*

STEVEN JONES

Many nations make use of a “personal statement” (or equivalent) in their higher education admissions system. This article examines how statements differ according to applicants’ educational background. Among the indicators used are fluency of expression, quantity and quality of workplace experience, and extracurricular activity. Findings point to major variation among statements composed by equal-attainment applicants: a broader range of social and cultural capital is drawn on by privately educated young people. Ramifications stretch beyond admissions policy in the United Kingdom, where this study was located, not least because of claims that nonacademic indicators of potential, such as the personal statement, bring greater fairness to university admissions processes. No support for this position is found.

## Academic research in to personal statements

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- Steven Jones (2013) carried out an analysis of 303 personal statements for entry to a Russell Group university. All of the statements were from students who eventually achieved BBB at A-Level. He looked for differences based on applicant school type
- Statements from comprehensive schools and sixth form colleges contained more spelling, punctuation and grammar mistakes compared to statements from grammar or private schools
- Students from private schools were able to draw upon a wider range of high-prestige work experience and a wider array of extra-curricular activities. More advantaged students are therefore able to draw upon their higher levels of “cultural capital”

## Sutton Trust research

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- Steven Jones and HEAN (2016) tested an “Academic Apprenticeship” scheme providing a structured approach to personal statement writing
- Those who followed the approach were much more likely to receive an offer from a Russell Group university when compared to a control group
- However, this research threw up something else which was interesting – the things which teachers think make a personal statement more effective can be different from what admissions tutors think make a personal statement more effective

## What types of personal statements increase the chances of success?

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The researchers describe their more successful approach to personal statement writing:

“The Academic Apprenticeship took a new approach to the personal statement which sought to provide students with a set of structured activities enabling them to analyse wider reading and academic activities related to their course. Instead of listing wider reading texts or simply naming other enrichment activities, Academic Apprentices were encouraged to scrutinise academic materials and course-related activities in greater depth. Through a set of subject-specific pathways, the Academic Apprenticeship advised students to create personal statements that focused on showcasing their academic suitability for a course, particularly by offering detailed analysis of a topic that went beyond the A-level syllabus. In the case of vocational subjects such as medicine, applicants were encouraged to scrutinise a work experience placement in depth.” (Sutton Trust/Steve Jones/HEAN, 2016)

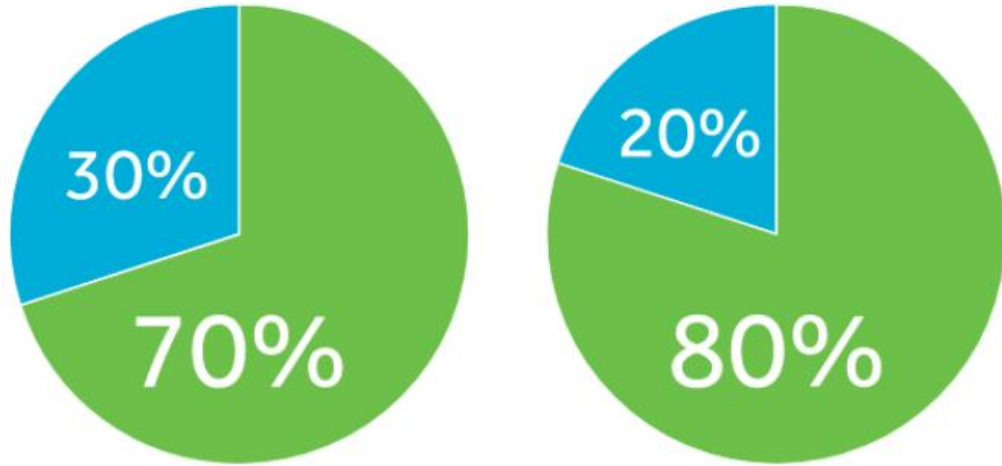


# Structuring the statement



# The structure

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- Between 70% and 80% of the personal statement should focus on **academic and course-related information**
- The remaining 30% to 20% could include other relevant information for example **part-time employment, extracurricular activities, positions of responsibility etc.**



# What to include

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The bulk of the statement should be **academic** in its focus

1) Introduction

2) Interest in subject

3) Wider skills

4) Concluding statement

70-80%

20-30%



# The competitive edge

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Writing the personal statement shouldn't feel like a chore if students have chosen the right course for them. Points to consider:

- Details of wider reading with **accompanying critical reflection**. This can go in to a **research paragraph**.
- Extra reading: quality vs. quantity
- Details of work experience for competitive vocational courses with **critical reflection**
- Extra-curricular vs. **super-curricular** activities (for the most competitive courses, extra-curricular activities may not add much value to the statement)
- Narrowing it down to one subject
- Students don't need to summarise the whole subject – it's OK to focus on something niche.





Group task – compare  
statements

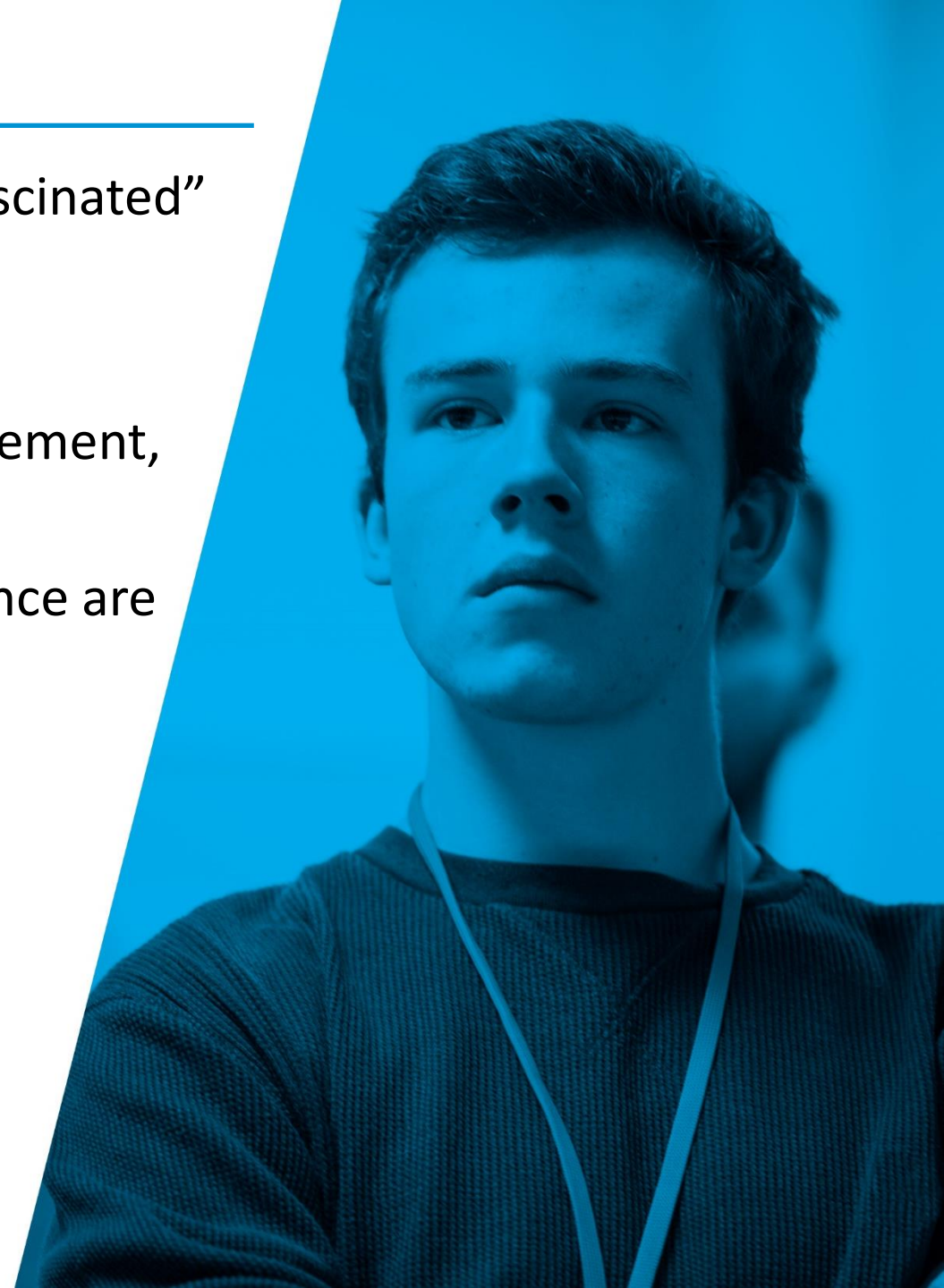
**Read Personal Statement 1.**  
**How could this personal statement be improved? What advice would you give the student who wrote it?**

*Discuss in your groups*

## What's wrong with personal statement 1?

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- Too many clichés – from a young age, “passion”, “fascinated” etc.
- No need to offer a definition of what philosophy is
- The extra reading is just a long list. No critical engagement, and seems too good to be true
- No indication of how the hobbies and work experience are relevant to the subject of philosophy
- The final two paragraphs don't really add anything



**What about personal statement 2?  
Why might this be a more effective  
statement?**

*Discuss in your groups*

## Personal statement 2

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- This time the applicant doesn't just say that they have passion, they actually demonstrate this through their writing
- There is a focus on the skills which would make the applicant successful on the degree course
- There is a “research paragraph”. It has a particular theme (Stoicism)
- Quality as opposed to quantity with extra reading. The applicant has engaged critically and ties the different pieces into one story
- The applicant still focuses on relevant skills when talking about their extra-curricular activities and employment
- No unnecessary concluding paragraph







And finally...

# What other support does Advancing Access offer?

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- Check our free [“Supporting personal statement writing – top tips”](#) resource
- Download [our resource to help students to write their personal statement](#)
- We have several [webinars](#) on the subject of personal statements
- Read our blog post – [“What can we learn about personal statements from academic research?”](#)



## Personal statement

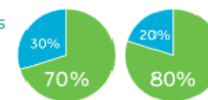
Different courses and universities will consider personal statements differently. The personal statement can make a difference between an applicant for selective and competitive courses.

### Top ten tips for personal statements

1. Ensure that the personal statement gives an insight into your interests. The personal statement is the only place where admissions staff can hear from the student. They will expect the applicant to be enthusiastic and knowledgeable about the subject they are going to love studying the subject for three years.
2. Check spelling and grammar. Spelling mistakes and grammar errors that the applicant has not given the statement sufficient weight to.
3. Ensure that everything in the personal statement is relevant. Not everything needs to be in there; only include information about the subject or the skills required.
4. Encourage your students to express themselves, avoid cliché and writing from other people. Leading universities want applicants to show their own thinking and ideas.
5. Make sure that all the information your students include is relevant. If a student says they have a particular skill, it needs to be explained how they have used it.
6. Students should reflect on their experience and skills. Admissions staff want to understand what a student has done and how they have used it.
7. Make sure the personal statement is unique to the student. Universities want to hear about the individual student. Universities take personal statements very seriously and can reject any applicant who does not provide a personal statement. UCAS screens all forms and will investigate suspicious applications.
8. Make sure your students avoid jokes. Admissions staff want to understand what a student has done and how they have used it, but sometimes a joke can get lost, or the reader may find it offensive.
9. Make sure the student is telling the truth. This is their personal statement and forms part of their contract with the university.
10. Ensure your students are positive. The personal statement should show what the student knows, what they have learnt and how they will make the most of their course.

## Developing your students' skills and knowledge

For students need to develop their subject knowledge, skills and work experience. The balance between subject knowledge and work experience will depend on which universities they are applying to. 70% of a personal statement should be focused on academic subjects and 30% on work experience. 80% of a personal statement should be focused on academic subjects and 20% on work experience.



Transferable skills

Work experience

### Subject

Students should show their knowledge of the subject and become further interested in the subject and themes. They should be able to express their views and experiences and developments in that subject.

Resources to help build your students' knowledge are free. Here are our top sources:



Students should keep up to date with the latest developments and thinking in their subject. They should focus on different topic areas (for example, science) on their course.

Students should subscribe to certain publications that are then made available to students to share their views on these latest developments.

Students should read magazines for further insight into the subject. For example, psychology students could read *New Scientist* and those interested in science could read *New Scientist*. Websites have good websites, so a subscription is not always necessary.

Students should use the reading lists for some first-year courses. This material is designed to help students develop the subject at university level.

Students should use websites that provide subject resources. Websites such as Future Learn have developed online learning programmes that are available to students learning about particular subjects. Future Learn has a list of resources with articles and revision guides for most subjects. They have developed online learning programmes that are available to students learning about particular subjects. Future Learn has a list of resources with articles and revision guides for most subjects.

## ADVANCING ACCESS / Student resources

This worksheet will help you develop your personal statement. For the next 15 minutes think about the subject area you are planning to apply for and answer the following questions.

**What subject are you applying for?**

\_\_\_\_\_

\_\_\_\_\_

\_\_\_\_\_

**Why are you interested in this subject?**

\_\_\_\_\_

\_\_\_\_\_

\_\_\_\_\_

**Are there any particular aspects of this subject that you enjoy more than others?**

\_\_\_\_\_

\_\_\_\_\_

\_\_\_\_\_

**What have you learned about the subject that has inspired you to take it to university level?**

\_\_\_\_\_

\_\_\_\_\_

\_\_\_\_\_

**What course modules particularly interest you, and why?**

\_\_\_\_\_

\_\_\_\_\_

\_\_\_\_\_

**Write down something interesting about the subject that may have been in the news or you have read about.**

\_\_\_\_\_

\_\_\_\_\_

\_\_\_\_\_

**What are your future career plans?**

\_\_\_\_\_

\_\_\_\_\_

\_\_\_\_\_

**What skills do you have that will help you in this subject?**

\_\_\_\_\_

\_\_\_\_\_

\_\_\_\_\_

**Are there any aspects of your current studies that relate to the subject you have chosen?**

\_\_\_\_\_

\_\_\_\_\_

\_\_\_\_\_

## Personal Statement

47 lines or 4,000 characters

- A chance for the student to reflect on their chosen course – why they want to study it and why they would be good at it
- A statement giving evidence of interests, skills and experiences
- The chance to 'sell themselves' to universities as a potential student of the subject

1,779: 'From a young age I have always been...'

148: Number of applicants who used a Nelson Mandela quote



"Education is the most powerful weapon which you can use to change the world"

[www.advancingaccess.ac.uk](http://www.advancingaccess.ac.uk)

## Top Tips

- No Lists
- Do not mention university names unless the student is applying for one university
- Lying or over exaggerating, as you may be questioned in an interview

'I play football, rugby, tennis and the piano...'

'The prospect of studying at King's College London is one that greatly excites me...'

'I have an intricate knowledge of Thomas Piketty's Capital...'

## > How to write it

- > **S** Identify the SITUATION or problem they solved or encountered
- T** What was the specific TASK or target? (who, what, where, when)
- A** Detail your specific ACTION What did they do? How did they do it?
- R** Explain the RESULTS Quantify it (accomplishments, savings, recognition, etc.)

# Overused opening lines



For as long as I can remember I have...	[1,451]
I have always been interested in...	[927]
Reflecting on my educational experiences...	[257]
Nursing is a very challenging and demanding [career/profession/course]...	[211]
Throughout my life I have always enjoyed...	[310]
I am applying for this course because...	[1,370]
I have always wanted to pursue a career in...	[160]
I have always been passionate about...	[160]
From a young age I have (always) been [interested in/fascinated by]...	[1,779]
Education is the most powerful weapon which you can use to change the world...	[148]

## Top tips

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- Ensure that the personal statement gives an insight into the student's **motivations and interests**
- Check **spelling and grammar**
- Ensure that everything in the personal statement is **relevant** to the application
- Encourage your students to express themselves, **avoiding clichés and quotes** from other people
- Make sure that all the information your students include is **supported by evidence**.



## Top tips

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- Students should reflect on their **experience and skills** within the statement
- Make sure the personal statement is **unique to the student**. Admissions staff want to hear about the individual student
- Make sure your students **avoid jokes**
- Make sure the student is **telling the truth**. This is their formal application and will form part of their contract with the university
- Ensure your students are **positive**.
- Students must not copy other people's personal statements – **UCAS use plagiarism software** to detect this



# What **not** to include

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- Specific universities - apart from when referring to outreach activities/ summer schools
- Over-exaggeration
- Repetition and waffling
- Lists of skills and work experiences
- A definition of the subject
- Jokes, puns or wordplay
- Long quotes
- Generalisations and clichés
- Starting every sentence with 'I'
- Passive comments
- Unnecessary language.





# Questions?

enquiries@advancingaccess.ac.uk



@AdvancingAccess



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