

Supporting students to write personal statements



Coming up



The basics

Section 1

- Overview
- Top tips
- Examples

Section 2

- Overview
- Top tips
- Examples

Section 3

- Overview
- Top tips
- Examples

Top tips

Resources

Starter for 5...

1. Universities don't read/use the Personal Statement

True, False, or It Depends? It depends: Different universities and courses may have varying approaches to assessing the personal statement.

2. Reflection is more important than just listing experiences

True or False? True! Universities value quality over quantity. They want to see relevant experiences with reflection, not just a list of activities.

3. Personal Statements should be completely unique and creative

True or False? False! While originality is great, what matters most is clear, well-structured content showing motivation, skills, and suitability for the course.

4. Admissions tutors look for evidence of transferable skills

True or False? True! Skills like critical thinking, communication, and problem-solving are just as important as academic knowledge.

5. The total limit for the Personal Statement is still 4,000 characters

True or False? True! 4,000 is still the overall character limit for the Personal Statement





Personal statements – the basics



The basics – 2026 entry & beyond

The personal statement should:

- Be 4,000 characters
- Portray the applicant's character, knowledge, experience and ambition for the course they're applying to
- Evidence relevant skills
- Link their academic, extra-curricular and other experiences to their chosen area(s) of study



What's changing?

Instead of one longer piece of text, the new structure is split into three sections

Section 1:

Why do you want to study this course or subject?

Section 2:

How have your qualifications and studies helped you to prepare for this course or subject?

Section 3:

What else have you done to prepare outside of education, and why are these experiences useful?

What's staying the same?

The overall character count will remain at 4,000 across all answers, the amount students may write for each question can vary

The new structure still enables students to showcase their passions, interests, knowledge and experiences of their chosen subject area and allows them to demonstrate why it's a good fit for them and their future ambitions



“It is our responsibility - where we can - to remove barriers, both real and perceived, which might prevent those who want to pursue a university education from doing so.” – Dr Jo Saxton, Chief Executive, UCAS

Why the change?

To ensure the highest quality, UCAS partnered with an external research agency to rigorously test the new template, guidance, and wording. Findings below...

Over half the students UCAS spoke to found completing the three questions "very easy" or "easy".

Admissions teams said it made it easier for them to assess applications and more confident that they will receive the information they need to make decisions.

Most advisers preferred the new format and said it would enable students to provide more complete and detailed statements, with the majority of advisers surveyed as part of the research stating they were "very confident" or "extremely confident" that the questions clearly convey what is needed for each answer.

Mixed responses...

Some students feel apprehensive about the change...

Source: Student Room

254 votes – 6/12/2024 – 13/12/2024

I'm in favour of the changes (41)



I don't really mind either way (46)



I don't think they should be changed (68)



I'm unsure how I feel about them (35)



I haven't heard about the changes (59)



Tell us more about your answer in the thread (5)



“This seems like they have to guide every paragraph and spoon feed students with what they need to write rather than allowing personal voice to shine through.”

“All it does is restrict how most people apply for university”

“I've noticed that everything gets dumbed down - what was wrong with writing a long one pager?”

How are they used?

Different universities and courses may have varying approaches to assessing the personal statement.

HEIs use Personal Statements to...

- Understand the person applying
- See how much prep the student has done
- Determine whether the student is likely to succeed on the course
- Differentiate between similarly qualified applicants
- May be used to formulate interview questions

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



Responses from the Russell Group

"Personal statements are exactly that – personal to each student writing them. We recognise that each individual student will have a variety of experiences to draw upon and interests they wish to discuss. We would advise students to ensure that their personal statement overall contains all the different content they want to share and not to worry unduly about which section the information is contained within. At the University of Birmingham, we will continue to review each personal statements as a whole alongside the other information we use to make decisions on a student's application."

- **Nick Hull, Director of Admissions, University of Birmingham...**

We'd generally say that all questions are equal. The whole point of the reform is to ensure students cover all three sections so we would want to see effort being made in each one.

- **Lydia Stride, Student Recruitment Manager, University of Sheffield**

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)

Other key information...

The 3 sections

- Made up of 3 questions
- 4,000 overall character limit
- 350 character minimum per question
 - All questions are equal
- The statement will be reviewed as a whole – students should avoid repeating information across sections
- We advise students to include all the content they want in their personal statement without worrying too much about which section it appears in



“We'd generally say that all questions are equal. The reform is to ensure students cover all three sections so we would want to see effort being made in each one.”

Section 1



Section 1

Why do you want to study this course or subject?

Encourage students to write **in their own voice**. Admissions tutors want to hear **their** story, not what they think universities *want* to hear.

Students should consider:



Their passion
and interest for
the course



Their knowledge
and skills of the
subject area



How the course
links to their
future

This section isn't about proving they're the best; it's about showing why they're genuinely excited to study this subject!

Section 1



Why do you want to study this course or subject?

How can you support your students to prepare a response?

Encourage students to:

- Read the course description and identify key skills
- Reflect on key moments that inspired their interest or why certain experiences influenced their choice
- Think about how and why they have an interest, not just that they have one!
- Be specific in their responses E.g. a specific book, topic, or event
- Consider how they could connect their subject choice to real-life issues e.g. Climate change
- Address their career or academic aspirations e.g. where do they see this subject leading them?

Examples for section 1



Discuss in groups



5 minutes

- How would you support this student to improve their answer?

I want to study psychology because I find it really interesting, especially how the brain works and why people behave in certain ways. Learning about memory in my A-Level course made me think more about how psychology applies to real life. I have read some articles online about mental health, which I found thought-provoking, and I enjoyed discussing different theories in class. I think psychology will be a good subject for me because it is relevant to everyday life, and I hope to work in mental health in the future.“

Too vague – *"I find it really interesting"* and *"made me think more"* don't explain what specifically engages them.

No depth of exploration – Mentions reading articles but doesn't specify which ones or what they learned.

Generic connections – Doesn't clearly link their interest to what they hope to study at university.

How to stand out...



Tips to equip your students to design a strong response

Students should be specific in their response

- "I enjoyed my chemistry lessons."
- "My fascination with organic chemistry grew when I completed an independent research project on pharmaceutical drug development."

Students should show their motivation, without saying it

- "I love biology because..."
- "Witnessing the rapid development of vaccines during the pandemic led me to explore the mechanisms of genetic coding and immune response, sparking my deep interest in molecular biology."

Activities for your students...

These activities aim to equip students to overcome common challenges

Students may neglect to include specific details in their responses

Encourage students to work in pairs.

One student explains why they want to study the subject.

The partner's job is to keep asking "why?" or "how?" until a specific answer is found!

Students can find it challenging to begin writing their response, and sometimes use "clichés"

Give students a time limit of around 2 minutes.

Within that time frame, ask them to jot down as many sentence starters as they can.

This can support students with beginning their responses.

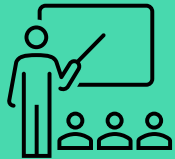
Section 2



Section 2

How have your qualifications and studies helped you to prepare for this course or subject?

Students should consider:



How their studies have prepared them for their course/subject



The skills and knowledge they've developed



Any independent learning or academic achievements

This section is about highlighting evidence to show they are prepared for the challenges of university-level study

Section 2

How have your qualifications and studies helped you to prepare for this course or subject?

How can you support your students to prepare a response?

Encourage students to:

- Demonstrate active engagement with the subject
- Be specific and reflect on their experiences
- Show how they've gained their skills and how this relates to their chosen course
- Include critical reflection

Academic examples...

Students can up-skill or advance their knowledge in their chosen subject area

- MOOCs
- Articles e.g. JSTOR, ScienceDirect, PubMed
- University-led free online courses
- UCAS Springpod tool
- Subject tasters
- Virtual work-experience



How to stand out...



Tips to equip your students to design a strong response

It's important for students to link their academic studies to the course or subject they want to study.

“I did an EPQ about the ethics of animal testing. I enjoyed it a lot because I learnt about science.”

“I did an EPQ about the ethics of animal testing, during this I had to research, condense information and make good notes. This is a skill I know is important to study Philosophy. I also enjoyed learning about ethical dilemmas, and I want to study it in more detail at university.”

Students should show their motivation, without saying it

"I study History at A-Level, which I enjoy. I think it will help me with a Law degree because I like writing essays. I also did a course on Human Rights Law, and I watched a court case, which was interesting.

“Studying A-Level History has strengthened my ability to evaluate sources and construct arguments, skills essential for a law degree. To deepen my understanding, I completed an online course on Human Rights Law and attended a local court case, which gave me insight into legal processes.”

Examples for section 2



Discuss in groups

- Which response is better? And why?
- How would you support this student to improve their answer?



5 minutes

My A-Level History course has enhanced my ability to analyse primary and secondary sources, particularly when studying the causes and consequences of the World Wars. In my coursework, I critically examined how different historians interpret the impact of the Treaty of Versailles. Writing essays has helped me develop my argumentation skills, as I learned to structure complex ideas and support them with evidence. Additionally, studying English has improved my ability to read critically, enabling me to engage more deeply with historical texts and debates, which will be crucial for university-level history

Studying History at A-Level has helped me prepare for a degree in History because I've learned a lot about different periods, like the World Wars and Medieval history. I have written essays on various topics and discussed events like the causes of World War I. I also study English, which has helped me with reading and writing, and I feel this will help me with my university work. These subjects have given me a good understanding of how to approach historical topics.

Examples for section 2



The example in blue was stronger, here's some reasons why:

Specific examples – Refers to *the Treaty of Versailles* and *analysing sources*, showing depth of understanding.

Critical thinking and engagement – Demonstrates the ability to critically examine sources and historical interpretations.

Clear connection to future study – Links **skills** like **argumentation** and **critical reading** to what will be needed at university.

Lacks Specificity: Refers to "*different periods, like the World Wars and Medieval history*" but doesn't explain what specific aspects or events they studied

Vague Connection to Skills: - "*I feel this will help me with my university work*" lacks concrete examples of how the student's A-level studies have prepared them for the challenges at university. The response doesn't elaborate on how **those skills** were developed or tested in the context of history.

Misses Critical Engagement: For example, the student doesn't mention any analytical skills used to assess historical sources, evaluate differing viewpoints, or argue a position, all of which are important aspects of a history degree.

Section 3



Section 3

What else have you done to prepare outside of education, and why are these experiences useful?

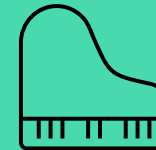
Students should consider:



Work experience,
employment or
volunteering



Personal life
experiences,
responsibilities and
achievements



Hobbies and any
extracurricular or
outreach activities

This section is not just about listing experiences – students should explain why these experiences are useful and how they link to their chosen degree

Section 3

What else have you done to prepare outside of education, and why are these experiences useful?

How can you support your students to prepare a response?

Encourage students to:

- Reflect on the skills they've gained from their experiences
- Show how the experiences link to their chosen degree or university-level study
- Include critical analysis of their experiences
- Focus on the impact of the experience, rather than over-explaining what the experience was

Examples for section 3...

Students can up-skill or advance their knowledge in their chosen subject area

- Young enterprise
- Work-based learning
- Shadowing
- Trips and visits
- Podcasts, TED Talks, documentaries
- Duke of Edinburgh/Duke of York awards



Remind students that even seemingly unrelated experiences can develop key skills for university

Examples for section 3



Discuss in groups

- Which response is better? And why?
- How would you support students to improve their answer(s)?



5 minutes

Outside of my studies, I have done some volunteering at a local charity shop. I have learned how to interact with customers and help with the organisation of donations. I also enjoy reading books in my spare time, which has helped me improve my general knowledge. These experiences will help me at university because they have taught me how to manage my time and communicate with others

Outside of my studies, I have volunteered at a local charity shop, where I have developed strong communication skills by assisting customers and working as part of a team. I have also taken part in a community project that involved organising fundraising events, which improved my leadership and project management abilities. Additionally, I have read extensively on topics related to history, such as the causes of the Industrial Revolution, to deepen my understanding of the subject. These experiences have not only enhanced my teamwork and organisational skills but also prepared me to engage with the interdisciplinary nature of history at university.

Examples for section 3



The example in orange was stronger, here's some reasons why:

Vague description of activities – The response mentions volunteering and reading but doesn't provide details or explain how these activities were meaningful or connected to their subject.

Lack of depth in skill development – It mentions “*how to manage my time*” and “*communicate with others*”, but doesn't give examples of how these skills were demonstrated or developed in a specific context.

No clear link to the degree – The response doesn't explain how these experiences prepare the student for studying their chosen subject at university. It focuses more on the general skills rather than those that are directly relevant to academic study.

Specific examples of experiences – The response provides concrete examples, such as volunteering in a charity shop and participating in a community project. This makes the response more engaging and insightful.

Clear explanation of skills gained – The student highlights **leadership**, **teamwork**, and **project management skills**, explaining how they were developed through specific activities.

Connection to university study – The response links the **skills** gained to what will be useful at university, such as the ability to engage with interdisciplinary content and work in a team.

Activities for your students

These planning activities aim to equip students to overcome common challenges

Students may need support linking their experience with their chosen course

When planning their response, consider asking your students to answer the following questions:

- **What did you do?** (e.g. Attended a summer school)
- **So, what did you learn** (this can be knowledge, skills or how the experience inspired them)
- **Now what?** (How will this help at university, or on your chosen course?)

Students might find it challenging to identify their own skills

When planning their response, consider asking your student to reflect on their skills by creating a Reflection Grid

- Have students list their experiences in a table in one column
- In the next column, they write which skills they've gained
- In the final column, they explain why these skills are useful or how they link to their degree choice

Examples of evidence – from UCAS

In person work experience	Blogs & vlogs	Positions of responsibility	Projects or essays	Mentoring
Virtual work experience	Documentaries	Awards	Books	Tutoring
Work shadowing	Podcasts	Challenges	Influencers	Online subject courses
Paid employment	TED Talks	Personal life experiences	Hobbies	Trips or visits
Volunteering	Articles	Work based learning / training	Clubs	Competitions

Remember to PEEL

Point

Evidence

Explain

Link



Top tips



Top tips

- 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.
- Don't repeat information across sections



“We want every student with the qualifications, potential and determination to succeed at a Russell Group university to have the opportunity to do so whatever their background.” Dr Piatt, Director General of Russell Group

Using AI for Personal Statements

- **Cheating?**

- Personal statements written by Generative AI will be untruthful and low-quality.
- UCAS will detect when students have used AI, such as ChatGPT, to write “all or a large part” of their personal statement – this is considered cheating by universities and can affect student’s chances of an offer.

- **How to use AI ethically**

- Generating **prompts** to support with writing e.g.,
“What should I include in a UCAS Personal Statement for studying Law at University?”
- Suggesting **areas for improvement** when the student has written a draft personal statement.



You can read more on this topic on the Advancing Access blog – [“Should you be helping your students to use Chat GPT for their UCAS Personal Statements?”](#)

What not to include

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

Resources



Additional resources...



Use this checklist when supporting your students with their Personal Statements.
This checklist is a guide only and may be adapted.

General

- Is the style of writing appropriate for the audience?
- Has the use of clichés, quotes, jokes, and catchy phrases been avoided?
- Does the student provide an analysis of their broader reading or experiences?
- Does the statement reflect the student's own voice, without relying on AI?
- Is the statement free of university names, ensuring suitability for all choices?
- Is the content distinct and free from repetition found elsewhere in the application? e.g. repetition of predicted grades

Section 1: Why do you want to study this course or subject?

- Is there a clear motivation or reason for studying the course?
- Has the student supported their reasons with evidence?

Section 2: How have your qualifications and studies helped you to prepare for this course or subject?

- Have they highlighted the knowledge or skills gained from their qualifications?
- Have they provided meaningful reflections on their academic journey, avoiding simple descriptions of what they have done?

Section 3: What else have you done to prepare outside of education, and why are these experiences useful?

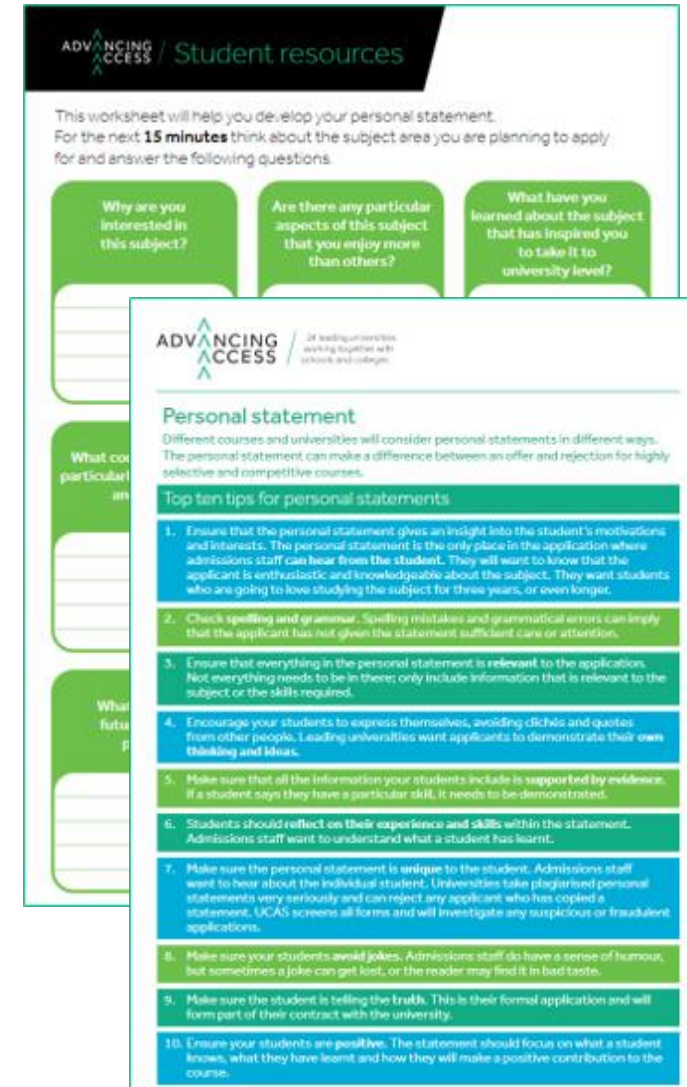
- Are experiences linked to their chosen course to show their relevance?
- Have they identified specific skills (e.g., communication, problem-solving, creativity) gained through these experiences and explained their relevance?

Download our Personal Statement Marking Checklist [here](#)

Additional resources...

Advancing Access resources...

- “Supporting personal statement writing – top tips” resource
- Activity sheets to help students to write their personal statement
- Webinars on personal statements
- Read our blog posts:
 - “What can we learn about personal statements from academic research?”
 - Should you be helping your students to use Chat GPT for their UCAS Personal Statements?



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.

- 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?

ADVANCING ACCESS / All our qualifications working together with schools and colleges

Personal statement

Different courses and universities will consider personal statements in different ways. The personal statement can make a difference between an offer and rejection for highly selective and competitive courses.

Top ten tips for personal statements

1. Ensure that the personal statement gives an insight into the student's motivations and interests. The personal statement is the only place in the application where admissions staff can hear from the student. They will want to know that the applicant is enthusiastic and knowledgeable about the subject. They want students who are going to love studying the subject for three years, or even longer.
2. Check spelling and grammar. Spelling mistakes and grammatical errors can imply that the applicant has not given the statement sufficient care or attention.
3. Ensure that everything in the personal statement is relevant to the application. Not everything needs to be in there; only include information that is relevant to the subject or the skills required.
4. Encourage your students to express themselves, avoiding clichés and quotes from other people. Leading universities want applicants to demonstrate their own thinking and ideas.
5. Make sure that all the information your students include is supported by evidence. If a student says they have a particular skill, it needs to be demonstrated.
6. Students should reflect on their experience and skills within the statement. Admissions staff want to understand what a student has learnt.
7. Make sure the personal statement is unique to the student. Admissions staff want to hear about the individual student. Universities take plagiarised personal statements very seriously and can reject any applicant who has copied a statement. UCAS screens all forms and will investigate any suspicious or fraudulent applications.
8. Make sure your students avoid jokes. Admissions staff do have a sense of humour, but sometimes a joke can get lost, or the reader may find it in bad taste.
9. Make sure the student is telling the truth. This is their formal application and will form part of their contract with the university.
10. Ensure your students are positive. The statement should focus on what a student knows, what they have learnt and how they will make a positive contribution to the course.

Additional resources...



UCAS resources...

- **Personal Statement for 2026: Classroom resources**

<https://www.ucas.com/advisers/help-and-training/guides-resources-and-training/pre-application-support/personal-statements-2026-entry-onwards/personal-statement-2026-entry-classroom-resources>

- **Additional UCAS advice:**

<https://www.ucas.com/applying/applying-university/writing-your-personal-statement/new-personal-statement-2026-entry>

Questions?



 jennifer.barton@durham.ac.uk

