

## What admissions tutors have to say about Personal Statements

By this stage of the application process you'll have already received some pointers on what to include in your UCAS personal statement, possibly from a guidance teacher, a visiting university speaker, through an online resource or perhaps during your LEAPS interview in school.

With a wealth of information available on how to prepare your personal statement we thought it might be useful to help focus your thoughts on the true purpose of the statement, from the perspective of those individuals who'll read what you have to say. We approached admissions staff from a range of universities with the aim of tapping into their combined expertise and first-hand experience of sifting through UCAS forms and advising applicants.

The collected responses make for interesting reading which we hope you'll find useful as a 'check list' for your own statement - once you've completed a first draft you might even want to test it against the criteria below. Here then, in no particular order, is our quick guide to what admissions tutors like to see, and what they don't want to see, in a personal statement...

### ***Explain WHY you want to study the subject***

This may seem obvious, but if you plan to study a degree for three or four years, you'll need to convince the admissions tutor that it is something you are committed to and passionate about. "Within a relatively short space you need to present yourself as the type of person I would want to teach as a student" explains Dr Jon Scott, Senior Lecturer and Admissions Tutor for Biological Sciences at University of Leicester. "Clearly your academic performance is very important but it only tells me about one aspect of you as a person. Why do you want to study my subject at university? What is it that really fires your enthusiasm and means that you won't just go through the motions, but will actually want to learn about the subject for its own sake?" You need to make your reasons for applying to that subject precise and explicit - it isn't enough to simply say 'I want to study this subject because I like it'.

### ***Link your skills or experience directly to the subject you're applying to study***

"It's fantastic to receive an application from a student who has clearly shown why they want to study the subject" explains Ian Sutherland from Heriot-Watt University's Recruitment and Admissions department. "This requires the student to make the connection between what they've been doing in school, work experience, volunteering or their interests more generally, and how this has led them towards their academic choice". For instance, if you want to study teaching don't simply mention that you assist with paired reading in school, explain how this experience has helped you to make a decision about the course and your career. Similarly, don't just mention that you have a part-time job, outline explicitly how the verbal communication skills you display each Saturday are relevant to the subject you wish to study.

### ***Emphasise what you have done outside of school***

Where competition for places is high, admissions tutors will use the personal statement to choose between different applicants. A student who can demonstrate an interest in their subject outside of school will come across as more motivated and committed than a competing applicant whose experience or enthusiasm is limited to the classroom. "The personal statement can be a good place to give examples of activity linked to the subject that the applicant has done beyond the requirements of the school curriculum" explains

Mike Nicholson, Director of Admissions at University of Oxford. "For example, a student who only talks about the books they have been required to read for their English Advanced Higher would be viewed as less prepared than a student who was reading widely." The same applies for courses where work experience is required - if your work experience is limited to that which your school arranged for you in S4, you can expect to be viewed less favourably compared to an applicant who has arranged more recent experience, off their own back and in their own time.

### ***Remember it's a statement, not a novel***

The prospect of writing about yourself can be daunting, although James Seymour, Head of Schools and Colleges Liaison at Aston University in Birmingham offers reassurance and useful pointers in equal measure. "Don't panic! You're not expected to be perfect or to write a novel - it's only 45 lines or around 400 words." Some students wrongly assume that admissions tutors will be impressed by long-winded, elaborate or complex statements whereas the opposite is the reality. "Be clear and concise - the more concentrated the points and facts, the more powerful they will be." It's preferable to write short, punchy sentences as this will be easier for admissions tutors to follow, will bring out your strengths and you'll also be able to write more within the 45 line limit. James also suggests using "short, simple sentences written in plain English, rather than contrived, grandiose or verbose" and recommends thinking about the use of language in your Personal Statement. "Use positive words - achieved, developed, learned, discovered, enthusiasm, commitment, energy, fascination..."

### ***Don't be afraid to sell yourself***

A common weakness of many first attempts at the personal statement is that the student 'undersells' his or her qualities. It seems that there's a pervading sense of not wanting to show off which is laudable in itself, but if there's an occasion where you can justify telling someone how good you are, it's in the personal statement. An admissions tutor won't give you points for being bashful and they certainly can't give you credit for skills, qualities or experience you haven't told them about. If you need any further motivation to explicitly outline why you are worth a place on the course, then bear in mind that many courses are oversubscribed i.e. they have more applicants than places available. In such situations the personal statement can prove the deciding factor between students - if you don't want to emphasise your strengths that's your choice, but can you be certain that fellow applicants won't be shouting from the rooftops about their qualities?

### ***View the Personal Statement as an opportunity***

If despite the previous point you remain unconvinced about making the most of your experience or qualities, it's worth bearing in mind that for the vast majority of courses, this will be your only opportunity to make your case for a place on your chosen course. "When students are writing the statement they should bear in mind that many institutions don't interview applicants, so this is their only opportunity to let us know about themselves and their achievements" says Jenny Thacker, Undergraduate Admissions Officer in the College of Humanities and Social Sciences at Edinburgh University. "They won't get another chance to prove to us that we should offer them a place." What's more, those students who are invited for interview are often only selected on the basis that they came across as a strong candidate within the personal statement. So rather than viewing the personal statement as a chore, view it as an opportunity and seize the moment.

### ***What can you offer the department in return for a place on the course?***

It's worth remembering that the admissions tutor who reads your personal statement will probably work in the department where you hope to study. In fact it's conceivable that he or she might spend three or four years teaching you, therefore it's in your interest to show that you're attitude and interests (academic and social) would make you a positive addition to the department. "I want you to tell me about you as a real, three-dimensional person" explains Dr Jon Scott (University of Leicester). "If you are the queen of salsa or play in the local rugby team, tell me about it and how you motivate yourself to do things.

But above all else, be an enthusiast, both for what you are doing now and also for where you see your future taking you." Enthusiasm, after all, is infectious.

### ***Don't make things up!***

Having said earlier that you need to 'sell yourself' this doesn't mean trying to take credit for things you haven't actually done. If you make outlandish claims within a personal Statement there are three ways that you might be detected. Firstly, admissions tutors will look at your school reference alongside your own statement - if you have claimed to be a prefect or winner of a school prize but your school hasn't mentioned it, suspicions will be aroused. Secondly, admissions tutors read hundreds of applications every year so they have a reasonable idea of what to expect - this makes it relatively straightforward to detect an applicant who is being economic with the truth, or as Ian Sutherland (Heriot-Watt) puts it: "Nobody's going to believe you're a trained astronaut who's travelled to the Moon at least three times!" Third and finally, many courses invite applicants for interview. If you've claimed in your Personal Statement to have a passion for French existentialist literature you'd better be prepared to talk at about Camus and Sartre at interview.

### ***Think about who you are writing for***

Individual admissions tutors may vary or have their own personal preferences, but they are united by some common characteristics. First off, they all know their subject and the types of qualities and skills that are necessary for students in the field. Second, they are busy people and, alongside your application, they'll have many others to consider. It's particularly important to consider that latter point when preparing your Personal Statement. "Be organised in what you're saying" recommends Ian Sutherland (Heriot-Watt University). "Use headings as it makes it so much easier to get your points noticed by the person who is wading through hundreds of forms." James Seymour (Aston University) agrees: "Consider dividing your statement into perhaps five paragraphs, maybe with headings." Admissions tutors will often have many years of looking through applications and will have many different approaches to the personal statement. A word of warning therefore from James Seymour (Aston University) to those students who are tempted to 'stand out from the pack' by including humour or other devices: "Don't use gimmicks - or quotations - unless they are very relevant and you deal with them in a way that shows your qualities." What's more, humour is a very personal thing - if you're planning a career on the comedy circuit your personal statement is not the place to begin as the admissions tutor for your chosen university might not share your sense of humour.

### ***The student as customer***

"In today's marketplace you should be viewing yourself as a customer, so approach institutions for advice and ask in writing or by e-mail for guidance on your application" suggests Alan Mclachlan, Student Recruitment and Liaison Manager at Queen Margaret University. As an applicant you are perfectly within your rights to press admissions or schools liaison staff for the qualities they wish to see in an applicant, or as Alan puts it "Make us work for our money!"

**Finally**, Mike Nicholson from Oxford University offers this useful footnote: "Remember that we will probably contact you by e-mail, so think about the impression you may create if a tutor has to send an e-mail to *fluffybunniesrule@hotmail* or *redhotlover@tiscali*..."

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