Step by step guide to writing your personal statement

Everyone’s different. Thankfully.
This guide is to assist you through each step of writing a personal statement; from finding out how to begin, to putting the finishing touches on what will make you stand out.

In this guide you will find all the information you need to help you write your perfect personal statement, as well as our top tips and advice to make sure you are submitting the best piece of work possible.

It’s important to note that the hardest part of this journey is always the beginning. Working with our proposed structure will make it easier and this guide helps you with that.

Follow this guide and complete the activities and you’ll be closer to securing your place at university on the course you want to study.

**What is a personal statement?**

A personal statement is a written essay with the purpose of selling yourself to the reader. It has a character limit so you have to summarise your skills and experience, as well as making sure it is relevant to the course you are applying for.

This is your opportunity to talk about why you’d like to study a particular course or subject, discuss the skills and experiences you have and demonstrate your passion and dedication to your chosen field.

**Why is it important?**

Writing a personal statement is a key part of the UCAS application process. It’s your first opportunity to showcase your academic achievements, extracurricular activities and show your chosen university that you are a suitable applicant for your course.

Remember that every year universities receive thousands of applications from students who are hoping to get a place on their course. Alongside a student’s qualifications, the personal statement is a tool used by universities to decide who will get an offer to study with them.

A well written personal statement can mean the difference of standing out from the crowd and your application being unsuccessful.
What to write about?

You’re probably wondering what you should write about. The easy answer is; you. You are the main topic of this essay.

Remember that you can only write one personal statement – this statement will be the same for each course and university you apply for. With this in mind, you should avoid mentioning any universities or colleges by name.

If the courses you’ve applied for have different titles, try to avoid mentioning a specific one and talk about the subject in a general way. However if the subjects vary, write about your common skills such as problem solving, team work or creativity.

Every word has a purpose

When approaching your personal statement remind yourself this is an essay that doesn’t really have a right or wrong answer. This is your chance to showcase your passion for the course and why they should choose you.

Be mindful of the limit that you have, which is 47 lines or 4,000 characters, inclusive of spaces, which is approximately 500 words (as a rough estimate). Whilst this may sound like a lot to you right now, you’ll find your characters will go pretty quickly once you start writing. Make sure that you:

a) Pay close attention to the structure of your personal statement
b) Avoid repeating yourself
c) Similarly to the point above, do not tell the reader information they would already know about you (i.e. information already contained in your wider application)
d) Try to be direct and keep to the point.

If you follow these rules, you’ll make sure that every character counts and every word has a purpose.

Other things to include:

– Make sure you look at the course descriptions and identify the qualities, skills and experience it requires.
– Tell the reader why you’re applying for this course, make sure you include your ambitions as well as what interests you about the course.
– Think about what makes you a suitable candidate. You can include relevant experience, skills and achievements and bring in examples you have gained through education, work or extracurricular activities.
– Talk about any clubs or societies you belong to – universities like to know what your interests in and out of the classroom.
– Include any relevant employment experience or volunteering you’ve done.
– Mention the development skills you’ve gained through your various activities.
– Always try to bring your points back to why this is relevant or beneficial for the course you’re applying for.
Our top tips

**Do’s**

**Be personal**
There’s a fine line between being personal and oversharing so write with discretion. The statements that stand out the most are the ones who share personal anecdotes and experiences whilst incorporating it into why they are motivated to pursue a higher education degree.

**Think outside the box**
Admissions tutors read thousands of applications that use keywords such as ‘hardworking’, ‘dedicated’ and ‘punctual’. Stay away from the typical descriptive words and see how you can convey yourself in a way that can help you stand out.

**Keep it simple**
Don’t try to be over dramatic or quirky. You can stand out by being yourself and keeping your unique qualities within the way you write. The wow factor comes in your storytelling of your experiences, skills and motivations.

**Proof read and write several drafts**
Make sure you have several read-throughs as you write your personal statement. Spelling mistakes, grammatical and punctuation mistakes can be avoided if you take your time to read through your work. Your personal statement should be carefully crafted and therefore writing several drafts before submitting is advised to allow you to include things you may have forgotten or remove things that doesn’t add anything to your statement.

**Play to your strengths**
Being confident can really shine through in your personal statement. Make sure you’re talking about your achievements and what you’re most proud of is a great way to show the admissions tutor that you are a well-rounded student with interests that go beyond your education.

**Keep it relevant**
The biggest question you’re answering in this essay is why you want to study this course. This means whenever you’re making a point, you need to relate it back to how will this:

a) help you in your course  
b) proven your dedication to this course  
c) makes you a great candidate to study this course.

Always circle back to you and the course.
Don’ts

Don’t plagiarise
Your personal statement should be entirely your original work. UCAS uses stringent similarity and plagiarism software on all applications received and universities will be alerted if your application is found to be copying anything from another source. Whilst personal statements are hard to write, it is designed to showcase your individual personality, your achievements and experiences.

Don’t include irrelevant information
You have a limited character count, so don’t waste precious words in talking about irrelevant information that won’t help your application.

Don’t be negative
Speaking negatively about yourself, your experiences or your achievements is not a good way to introduce yourself to the admissions tutor who is reading your statement. Try to avoid talking about why you haven’t done certain things or why you dropped a subject in school. Make sure you focus on your positive experiences and attributes and don’t downplay your achievements.

Don’t lie
Whilst it seems like an obvious thing to say, you’ll be surprised how much we have to emphasise this point. No, white lies are not allowed and if it is not 100% true, do not include it. If the course you’re applying to involves an interview you may find that part of the interview will refer back to your personal statement and you may have to talk in more details about the things you wrote about.

Don’t use quotes or clichés
Many people fall into the pitfall of using quotes or clichés just because they think it is going to help them in their application. Do not use them (unless it is actually relevant and appropriate).

Don’t be too fancy
Avoid using complicated language or words you don’t understand or if they don’t sound natural to how you normally write. People often think that the only personal statements that stand out are the ones that sound like textbook intellectual. This is not the case. Universities want authenticity so use language you are comfortable with.
The best way to get things done is to simply begin

Now that you know what a personal statement is and why it’s so important, it’s time you start putting pen to paper or fingers to keyboard. There are at least five areas (six if you have taken a gap year or have taken some time out of education in the recent years) that your personal statement should cover. There are:

- Introduction followed closely by your subject interest
- Work experience
- Hobbies and interests
- Career goal / future plans along with your conclusion – closing summary
- Skills and achievements
- Gap year / time out of education *only if applicable

This guide will help you put together your personal statement by looking in more detail at each section. On the pages that follow we’ve provided dedicated spaces for you to write notes or full sentences to fill each section. If you follow this guide in order and make the most of the activities that the workbooks set, by the time you finish you will have the content you need to be able to put together your perfect statement.
Section 1 Introduction and subject interest

This is the most important part of your personal statement. You should answer these questions:
– Why are you applying for this course/subject?
– Why does the course/subject interest you?

Other questions to keep in mind:
– What do you specifically like about the area of study?
– Is the course related to the career you would like to have?

It’s really important that you show your understanding of the course you’re applying to and you should explain why you want to study this subject. If you are applying to a vocational course, like nursing, consider what it is about the profession you like and why you think this career path is right for you. Imagine sitting opposite someone who is asking you why you’d like to study this particular course, how would you respond in a persuasive way?

Character count guide: 35%
Section 2 Work experience

This section gives you the opportunity to talk about personal experiences that might support your studies and career path. Think back to what you’ve done that shows that you are engaged with the profession you’re choosing. This is the place where you talk about relevant work experience and/or voluntary work that you’ve done. Use this space to not only talk about your skills, but also how you got them and try to link any experience to skills or qualities related to the course. It’s important to remember that you must try to include specific examples.

Questions to consider:
– What did you learn from the work that you did?
– How did this help you decide that you wanted to study your course?
– What skills have you acquired that are related to the degree?
– What knowledge have you learned that could be of particular interest to the admissions tutor?

Character count guide: 25%
Securing a place at university isn’t only about how well you do academically, it’s also how involved you are in your extracurricular activities. Here’s your chance to really wow the admissions tutor. Whether you’ve been part of the Duke of Edinburgh Award, participated in arts or sports clubs or represented your school in reading, writing, dance etc., it will be interesting for them to read about your experience, what you enjoy about your hobbies and how your interests have developed. Don’t just list the things you like, make sure you try to add substance such as talking about what your interests have taught you. Having said that, despite this sounding like a lot to mention, this section doesn’t need to be lengthy, just make sure you pick the things to discuss that are the most important to you, especially if they are relevant to the course.

**Things to consider:**
- How do your hobbies and interests demonstrate your personality, skills and abilities?
- Can you link any of them to the skills and experience you mentioned previously that also ties in with what is required for the course?

**Character count guide: 15%**
Section 4

Gap year / time out of education

You only have to complete this section if you plan to do a gap year, if you have already done a gap year or if you are a mature student returning to education after some time out. If any of the above is applicable to you, then this is the part where you can talk about what you did during your time away from education. If you’re still planning your gap year, then substitute that with what you plan to do during the year.

Questions to consider:
- What did you learn / what do you plan to learn?
- What did you achieve / what do you hope to achieve?
- What skills did you learn / what skills do you hope to learn?

Character count guide: 5%

Section 5

Skills and achievements

Your skills and achievements are something to be proud of and if ever you’re to rave about them, now’s the time! Remember that admissions tutors don’t just want to know about them, they want to know how you got them. Give examples, recite anecdotes and back your skills and achievements up with evidence. They don’t have to be out of this world (but it is great if they are); just make sure you’re including important ones that are as relevant to your course as possible. If you’re proud of an achievement then it will be clear in your writing, so if you’ve raised money for charity, volunteered for a worthwhile cause or achieved your goal grade in music, let them know.

Questions to consider:
- What did you learn / what do you plan to learn?
- What did you achieve / what do you hope to achieve?
- What skills did you learn / what skills do you hope to learn?

Character count guide: 5%

Section 6

Career goals, future plans and closing summary / conclusion

Use this section to tell the admissions tutor what you hope to do in the future, whether this be a career path or going on to postgraduate study. Explain how you would like to use the course(s) you have applied for to help you reach your goal. Talk about your ambitions and what you hope to gain from your university experience and your course.

Questions to consider:
- Is this degree a direct path to the career you want?
- How do you think your course will help you in the future?
- Where do you plan to go in life?
- Why do you want to go there?

Character count guide: 10%
So far you’ve been writing and putting together your notes. We know right now it’s probably just bunches of topics with some key words sprinkled in, hardly an award winning essay right?

Don’t worry, that’s exactly what you want at this point in time. Think of it like a recipe, individually it might not make much sense, but put it altogether and it will make a masterpiece.

You have your structure and your key words and discussion points. Now what we need is a handy list of words and phrases that will help your sentences flow. Opposite we have provided you with some words and phrases that will help you do just that.

Whilst we advise you to seriously consider using these phrases or words to help your sentences flow, we want to remind you that you cannot just use them whenever or wherever, they are not ‘hedging words’ (which are often used to lengthen a sentence, or hedge between sentences). So choose wisely what you use and where.

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**Transitional phrases**

**Emphasis**

*Especially*

“I always put my best foot forward, especially when it’s with something I am incredibly dedicated to.”

**Addition**

*As well as*

“As well as my involvement in team games, I am also keen in participating in individual competitive sport.”

**Contrast**

*Nonetheless*

“There was still a long way to go, nonetheless, I made some progress.”

**Order**

*Subsequently*

“My interest in automotives subsequently led me to undertaking work experience in my local garage.”

**Result**

*For this reason*

“I excelled in mathematical activities and have a strong interest in the banking industry and for this reason, I decided to study economics.”

**Illustration**

*To demonstrate*

“To demonstrate my talent for music, I joined the school band.”

**Comparison**

*Similar to*

“I’ve been able to use situations similar to this to teach me how to be better prepared for next time.”

**Summary**

*Altogether*

“The valuable skills I learned during our assessment has now instilled the ability to work within a team and be a valuable team player.”
With this in mind
“After failing my tae-kwon-do grading, I took into consideration what I hadn’t done well on. With this in mind, I focused on improving those skills to ultimately pass the next time round.”

If
“If I hadn’t dedicated my time to studying, I would not have achieved the grades I did.”

In spite of
“In spite of the hardships I endured during my A levels, I managed to excel in my courses, for that of which I am incredibly proud of my achievement.

Overall
“Overall, the experience of working in a real life work environment strengthened my confidence in my abilities.

“I was able to achieve a grade 5 in Piano through my keen interest in music and hard work.”

“My involvement in the school production of ‘Grease’ has reinforced my decision to study a degree in Drama and Performing Arts.”

“Working in a care environment, particularly with the elderly has strengthened my decision to study Adult Nursing.”

“Being able to contribute to the Children In Need initiative at work, and seeing the great work that is done by all those involved, has influenced me to pursue a career in Social Work.”

“The opportunity to study another language enabled me to gain a better appreciation for other cultures.”

“My work experience provided me with the invaluable opportunity to work with a wide range of people.”

“Having had the opportunity to undertake work experience allowed me to develop key transferable skills in relationship management.”

“I demonstrated my leadership skills by taking on the role of school captain.”

“Going on work experience in an art gallery broadened my understanding and interest in art.”

“I took a pro-active approach to preparing myself for University.”

“Having an interest in aeroplanes meant that I was able to identify my drive to pursue a degree in engineering, specifically Aircraft Engineering.”

“The step from studying at GSC levels to A levels allowed me to develop an adaptable learning style.”
Whilst your personal statement is all about you, starting sentence after sentence with “I” is most likely going to turn the reader off.

Yet, it is one of the most common mistakes people fall into when writing about themselves, but believe it or not there are so many ways to start sentences off. When it comes to writing your personal statement try to be creative and use a variety of sentence starters see how much more interesting and engaging a sentence is when you don’t use the word “I”.

“I”... don’t want to read this:
– I was part of...
– I learned these skills...
– I like...
– I have enjoyed...
– I plan to...

You can say the same thing but make it more interesting with these:
– Having participated in...
– The skills that I’ve been able to develop are...
– Having enjoyed...
– My interests include...
– My future plans involve...

Don’t forget
Plagiarism is a big no-no. Whilst we’re providing you examples that will help you write your personal statement, it is also important to remember that you shouldn’t copy them word for word. Your personal statement is meant to be personal to you and it needs to be your own work with your own experiences. Remember, anything you write may have to be discussed and backed up in an interview.

Putting pen to paper
We’ve finally reached the stage where you’re ready to start pulling together your notes into a first draft. You’ve got your lists, ideas and a structure. You also know how to make your sentences flow and to limit your use of “I” whilst maintaining the “me” topic. This first draft does not need to be perfect. The first step is to start.

Take a moment to read through what you’ve already put together. It doesn’t matter if it’s looking like words put into groups, as long as you have the basis for your personal statement, you’re in a good place to begin.
Finished your first draft?

Well done - you did it! Now you can relax for a little bit knowing that one of the hardest parts is complete.

Now let’s take a look at a few examples of personal statement paragraphs – the original text, the amended text and then comments from an admissions advisor. Reading this should give you an idea of how you can improve your first draft.
Below are some ‘before’ and ‘after’ examples of personal statements written by various students.

Provided below are their first draft, followed by a second (and in one case a third) draft, as well as comments from Rob Oliver and Helen Martin, who between them have over twenty years’ experience as workshop leaders in primary and secondary education, as well as in professional training and international organisations. They founded the blog: www.personalstatement.blogspot.com, where this content came from.

Example one

Draft one
Being in an international school and part of the debate team has shown me the importance of other cultures and made me more tolerant as a person.

Draft two
Being in an international school has shown me how differences between cultures can be turned into strengths through debate. My experience as part of the school debating team working with other students from many countries helped me to see this.

Rob's comments: This is a typical example of a cliché - a set of ready-made phrases taken off the shelf and telling us nothing about the individual person. They are rather common in personal statements. The second version shows the person reflecting on her experience in a way which is more individual. She connects two aspects of her life - the international student and the debater. More additions could perhaps be made. Could, for example, this focus on debate and cultures now be related to the student’s subject choice?

Example two

Draft one
I am very committed to environmental issues and campaigns. I feel strongly that we should take more care of our local environment.

Draft two
I am an active member of Greenpeace and have taken part in local environmental projects. My involvement with this group has shown me the value of people working together to bring about change. In 2003 I took part in a local action to drain and restore a disused canal.

Rob's comments: This is about a student’s environmental interests. The first version is full of enthusiasm (‘very committed’, ‘feel strongly’) but short on detail. The changes add detail and make the student come across as more active and reflective. Rather than the vague ‘we’, the statement is now about ‘people working together’ and gives a specific example of change through local action. Note how the pronoun ‘I’ is replaced by ‘My involvement’ in the second sentence of version two. It is worth finding ways to make sure that not every sentence of your personal statement begins with ‘I’!

Example three

Draft one
I speak English and Russian. I think being bilingual has helped me a lot.

Draft two
Being fluent in two languages helps me to see the world through different perspectives. Teaching a friend my native language, Russian, helped me to see the value of this.

Rob's comments: Being bilingual is definitely something to put in your personal statement, but you need to make something out of it. The reader may be automatically impressed. But they may also think ‘so what? What have you learned from that?’ In this example the experience is made more reflective. The student shows how being bilingual has helped him as a learner and an international student. He also draws in another experience - teaching - which gives the bilingual identity another dimension. Note again how the pronoun ‘I’ can be changed - he uses ‘Being fluent in two languages’ instead of ‘I speak’. Further additions could be made. This whole experience could perhaps echo the student’s academic motivation, expressed earlier in the statement.
Example four

Draft one
I have always been fascinated by the physical sciences. My interest has developed in the last few years. When I was 10, I was the proud owner of a chemistry set that transformed a room into my own laboratory. At the age of 12, I had won top place in [name of country’s] Universities School Science tests. By age 15 I was reading one of Stephen Hawkings’s research papers. Now I’m taking a challenging course of IB Higher Level Physics and Chemistry and realising how far I am from truly understanding such papers.

Draft two
My fascination with the physical sciences has grown and solidified in the last few years, but it is not new. Even at the age of 10 I was the proud owner of a chemistry set that transformed a small room into my very own laboratory; at age 12 I had won top place in [name of country’s] Universities School Science tests; by age 15 I was struggling to understand one of Stephen Hawkings’s research papers, which at the time I worked out was a discourse on ‘where black holes go’. Now I’m taking a challenging course of IB Higher Level Physics and Chemistry and realising how far I am from truly understanding such papers. One year from now I hope I’ll be on track to discovering these answers.

Helen’s comments: This student succeeds in demonstrating both achievement and modesty. He shows a consistent interest in the sciences and has a clear sense of what he wants from university. The frequent use of “I” in the first draft has decreased as the student uses alternative phrasing (e.g. “My fascination with...”). The first sentence of the second draft introduces and sums up the paragraph. The focus moves from narration of a series of events to skills and attitudes, partly achieved through using semi colons rather than simple sentences. The last sentence takes both writer and reader forward – it is important to show that you have considered what university study involves. The student’s upward learning curve is clear and his ironic touch (the comment about black holes) suggests a sense of humour.

Please note: All examples and comments written by Rob Oliver and Helen Martin were written for their personal statement blog post ‘Drafting the Personal Statement’ and can be found at www.personalstatement.blogspot.com.

Remember that your personal statement needs to be carefully put together and curated to represent you. It might take three or 30 drafts, however the most important thing is that it ends up being a piece of work that not only are you proud of but also that will give you the best chance to getting into the university you hope to go to.

Now you’ve had a chance to look at other examples of parts of personal statements, it’s your turn to add a little more polish to your first draft.

Make sure that you keep writing drafts until you’re 100% happy to send off what you have written. There’s no right amount of times to write your personal statement, so share it with teachers, friends, parents, carers or supporters. Get their feedback, make some changes and really pay attention to the finer details. A quick reminder to you that the character count is limited, so every word is precious. Make sure what you’re saying is important to your narrative and make every character count. If you need some more support, just give this workbook another read over.
Pre-application information

– Choose your universities
  March – September 2019
– UCAS Events
  March – June 2019
– Visit our Open Days*
  Saturday 22 June 2019
  Wednesday 10 July 2019
  Saturday 28 September 2019
  Saturday 26 October 2019
  Wednesday 13 November 2019
– Campus Tours
  run throughout the year
– UCAS Opens
  September 2019
– UCAS Deadline
  Wednesday 15 January 2020

* Our Open Days run throughout the year, for more details or to book your place, please visit: kingston.ac.uk/opendays

Post-application information

– Applicant Experience Days –
  by invitation only
  Wednesday 19 February 2020
  Saturday 14 March 2020).
  Your invitation is sent after you have applied to your course. Not all courses are included.
– UCAS Extra Opens
  February 2020
– Make your Final Choice
  Firm and Insurance
– Choose your accommodation
  March 2020
– Apply for Student Finance
  March – April 2020
– Clearing Opens
  Monday 1 July 2020
– A Level Results Day
  Thursday 13 August 2020
– Clearing Open Day
  Saturday 15 August 2020
Need any more help?

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