

How to write a great personal statement

The personal statement is a really important part of your UCAS application. It's a piece of individual writing, totalling 4000 characters including punctuation and spaces, which needs to persuade the admissions tutors that they should pick you over other candidates. It is the only chance you get to show these tutors who you really are, beyond your academic track record, and why you want to study your chosen subject. Ignore any rumours you may hear that the personal statement is not read. It is. Especially in a competitive field, in borderline cases or if you have to go through clearing.

The personal statement is not an essay, nor is it a list of your achievements and interests. So how are you going to convince a university to give you an offer?

Instant impact

You need to capture the reader's interest immediately, so that they want to read on. You can do this by providing a snapshot of what first got you interested in the subject and why. This could be a personal circumstance, a visit to a particular place, a particular conversation, reading a book, an experiment you did, some work experience. It should be something 'personal' that no-one else is likely to write about in the same way. The 'why' is very important: don't simply state that you visited somewhere and found it interesting. Say what aspects of your visit inspired you and how, and then what you did next to explore the place/topic further.

For example, a recent applicant was travelling on a local boat down a river in India. A man suddenly collapsed and she soon realised that, even though she was 17, she was the only one on the boat with any medical knowledge at all and this was only what she had learned through A Level study. The boat could not stop for at least another hour so she did all the things she could think of to steady the man and keep him calm and conscious. When the boat reached the next village, he was taken off the boat and transferred to hospital. The girl provided an outline description of this experience and what she had learnt about herself from the way she responded. This is an individual experience that makes the reader want to learn more about her (and also wonder what happened to the man!). The girl applied, successfully, for medicine.

Don't ever use the cliché 'I have always been interested in...'. This is unlikely to be true and admissions tutors find it extremely repetitive and boring. Had this girl simply said 'I have always wanted to be a doctor', she would not have stood out from the crowd.

Provide evidence of your interest in the subject

Once you have provided a hook that will grab the reader's attention, you need to provide evidence of why you are interested in the subject for which you are applying. To do this, it helps to ask yourself some questions:

What did I learn?

What did I conclude and why? (For example, if you read two opposing theories, outline the conclusion you personally reached and why.)

Did I change my mind and why? (Maybe by reading something or attending a lecture.)

How did my knowledge/viewpoint/practice of the subject develop?

Aim to show that you are interested in a way that demonstrates your independence, ability beyond A Level, motivation and also humility - universities are looking for potential, not applicants who “know it all”.

The big picture – and the specifics

Having illustrated, using one or two examples, why you are interested in the subject and why you would be good at studying it (mention your relevant skills/aptitude/knowledge and experience to date and so on), you could demonstrate your interest in and knowledge of the bigger picture. In the example of the girl on the boat, she discussed how knowledge sharing could improve global healthcare and how she wanted to play an active role in this. She then talked specifically about wanting to be an eye surgeon and why. So ask yourself why your chosen subject is important. Is it significant to the progress of society? Will it lead to a better future for generations to come? Does it somehow shape the world we live in? What is going on right now in the world that relates to your subject? This could be anything from advancements in technology, cutting-edge scientific research, grey areas in morality or justice, the state of the world’s economy, urbanisation or challenges in climate change and the environment, how language helps us integrate, or how looking at the world’s ancient civilisations or different cultures can help us understand today’s society. It may be tempting to list a load of topics and/or current events you find interesting; instead what you need to do is focus on one or two issues and show why you want to be part of the academic community learning about or researching them further. Illustrating how ‘deeply’ you have read about a subject is a good way to show your hunger to learn more about it.

Using quotes

Most admissions tutors prefer you not to use quotes. It is hard to find something that no-one else will use and you really need to make it relevant to what you are saying. If you do want to use a quote, you need to make sure that it is directly related to your course, show that you understand the concept of the quote and use it either to enhance your own words or as a springboard to argue for or against it.

Career plans

If you do have an idea of where you would like your career to take you, then say so. This is important if you are applying for a vocational course, such as medicine, law or dentistry. If, like most people, you have no idea, it doesn’t matter. You aren’t applying for a job, but more study, so your career plans aren’t that important at this stage.