

## GUIDELINES ON WRITING OXBRIDGE PERSONAL STATEMENTS

### Key considerations

Oxbridge tutors are looking for the best students. This doesn't necessarily mean students who know 'everything' or who have always been the best at everything they have done. It can mean students who can prove, in the way that they write about their chosen subject, that they are genuinely interested in learning more about it and have the potential to perform well throughout their studies.

Potential is a key word. Oxbridge tutors are not looking for fully formed experts, but students who want to engage with others, to learn by listening to, debating, collaborating with and learning from their peers as well as from academic staff. They want students who can approach problems and challenges in new and innovative ways and who are prepared to put in extra work to gain deeper and broader knowledge of the subject. Try and give examples of how you have done this in your personal statement and whenever possible, explain how you followed this up, what this encouraged you to next in your studies or learning.

You must be able to expand on any aspect of what you have written about in your personal statement. At interview you may be questioned about or enter into a discussion about any of the content.

It is often tempting to cram in everything that you feel is relevant. You have probably got lots of things to talk about: books you have read, essays you have written, competitions you have entered, experiments you enjoyed, research you have done. But you cannot possibly talk about it all. Consider highlighting one or two particular examples and illustrating in more depth how they made you feel inspired, or how they encouraged you to think differently, or explore further.

It can look impressive if you have done a lot of super-curricular stuff but don't worry if you feel as though you haven't done enough. The list doesn't need to be exhaustive. It is as much about your attitude and approach to learning as it is about what you have done. Blott-Matthews, Olympiads, Kangaroos, essay competitions are all fantastic, but so is additional reading.

Don't be tempted to write in unnatural language in order to impress the Oxbridge tutors. It won't. They can usually tell when a personal statement has been 'souped up'. They far prefer to read a personal statement which is clearly written in your own natural language.

While the vast majority of the statement should focus on the academic subject and degree course for which you are applying, once you are at university, Oxford and Cambridge will want you to participate in uni life in as valuable and positive way as possible. Inter-college rivalry is important and they will be keen to know of any skills and talents that you could contribute. Also remember that you are likely to be applying to up to four more universities who will also be interested in what you have done and will do outside of the classroom. So leave some room in the final paragraph to mention some of your non-academic interests and successes.

### Tips from the universities

#### **Oxford – where to start**

Think about talking to your friends about what you want to study at university: what would you tell them? What have you read or watched or seen that has inspired you? (This might have been at school, at home, in a museum, on TV, in a book, on YouTube or a podcast or anywhere else. You can also take a look at our [suggested reading and resources](#).) Why was it interesting? What do you want to find out next? What did you do?

If you find this difficult, it might be time to think about whether or not you've really chosen the right course. If you can't think of anything that has inspired you, this lack of enthusiasm will probably come across in your personal statement, or it will become clear at interview, and you're unlikely to gain a place at Oxford. If you find it easy to answer these questions, you will have a long list of ideas to help you write your personal statement.

When you start to write, remember not just to list your achievements but show how they have affected you, how you have benefited, and what you'd like to learn next. Be honest about yourself and what has inspired you, whether that's been text books, museums and literature, or websites, podcasts and blogs. Be sure to tell the truth, as tutors might check later, so don't exaggerate and certainly don't make any false claims. Don't hold back either – this is no time for modesty.

When you've written a first draft, have a look back at the [selection criteria](#) for your course and think about the evidence you've given for each of the criteria. Have you covered everything?

### **Cambridge (Pembroke College) – dos and don'ts**

What are admissions tutors and interviewers MOST interested in? Well, we want to see proof of your academic ability, your commitment and your potential.

For Cambridge applications, the most important part of your personal statement is the subject-focused content. Top university tutors agree you should use at least two-thirds of the space to demonstrate interest in your chosen subject.

Tell us how you've explored this interest – within your school/college studies and beyond, particularly in wider academic reading beyond the school syllabus.

The most important thing to do is... be yourself!

**DO** show your enthusiasm by explaining why you're so committed to your chosen course.

**DO** give examples of what you enjoy and what interests you, and explain why. It's a good idea to go into detail about a couple of examples, displaying your insight and personal interest, rather than providing a long list.

**DO** write about things you like talking about. When it comes to interview, the material from your personal statement sometimes serves as a springboard for discussion.

**DON'T** mention things already included elsewhere on your UCAS form. Space is limited, so don't waste any.

**DON'T** be too vague, talking about what you 'might' do before or after your course.

**DON'T** use words you wouldn't normally use. We want to hear you being YOU.

### **Oxford – dos and don'ts**

- DO apply for a course you really want to study.
- DO be yourself: tell the truth about your interests.

- DO sell yourself: this is not the time for modesty.
- DO re-read your personal statement before an interview – the tutors may ask you to talk about things you've mentioned
- DO read the [UCAS guidance on personal statements](#).
  
- DON'T be tempted to make anything up, as you might be asked about it at interview.
- DON'T copy anyone else's personal statement. UCAS uses plagiarism detection software.
- DON'T list qualifications like your GCSE grades or anything else that's covered elsewhere on the application.
- DON'T just list your other achievements: you need to evaluate them.
- DON'T feel the need to be dramatic in order to be memorable.

### **Oxford – standing out**

Students sometimes feel that they need to say something dramatic to stand out from the crowd and be really memorable in their personal statement but this is not true. Applying to Oxford is not like a talent show where you may only have a few seconds to make an impression. Tutors consider each application carefully on its individual merits, looking for evidence of your commitment and ability. If you use your personal statement to demonstrate your academic abilities and your engagement with your subject or subjects, then your application will be memorable for all the right reasons.

### **Cambridge – a pretty good guide to writing your personal statement**

This is actually a really helpful insight into what you should include in your personal statement and why. It is a very recent document, written in March 2019, by a Cambridge student and is published by the Cambridge University Student Union.

<https://www.cusu.co.uk/wp-content/uploads/Guide-to-Personal-Statements.pdf>