

The secret to writing a successful personal statement

Your personal statement is your big opportunity to sell your character. Universities are looking for particular sorts of people; people with certain characters and who have certain values. The following is a list of things to think about when writing your personal statement.

- Be honest at all times
- Be enthusiastic
- Decide what is special about your character and include this in your statement
- Don't be too arrogant or over-confident
- Be concise and to the point
- Say why you have the character to successfully complete your chosen course
- Show that you are looking for a university that you will develop you as a person
- Give examples of why you have the character to complete the course you have chosen
- Don't copy other personal statements that you can find on a website – UCAS will find you out!

Demonstrate that you are a person with virtues

Universities are looking to recruit students who possess certain qualities or virtues; students who have integrity and they can trust to make the most of their university experience. In your personal statement you should demonstrate you possess these virtues. The virtues that universities might be looking for in their students include:

- TOLERANCE** The acceptance of difference
- INTEGRITY** The possession of firm principles
- SENSE OF HUMOUR** The ability to see things that are funny
- COMPASSION** The desire to help others
- HONESTY** The ability to be truthful, sincere and fair
- COURAGE** The ability to face difficulty, uncertainty and fear
- HUMILITY** The ability to be modest and respectful

You might use examples such as the following to demonstrate that you are a virtuous person.

'I have been volunteering at a home for old people for the last two years, which shows I am a caring and compassionate person'
'On a recent Duke of Edinburgh expedition my team got lost, I had to show a great deal of courage to get over my fears and lead my team to safety'
'I was the director of my school play. At times leading up to the performance it was very stressful as there were a lot of different people to manage, I found keeping my sense of humour was the best way to cope'
'Whilst I was volunteering overseas in India, I met many people with different attitudes and beliefs to me. I found that it was very important to be sensitive and tolerant of other cultures.'

What to do before you fill in an application

We hope this guide has given you some idea about what to include in a successful UCAS personal statement. Below is a checklist of what you should do before you start filling in your application:

- Write an honest list about what it is about you that makes you a suitable candidate to study your chosen subject
- Try to describe your character in one sentence. Your final personal statement should reflect this sentence
- Make a list of everything you have done in your life and select the activities that say the most about you
- Research all the universities you are interested in to find out which has the best course and also which will help you to develop the most personally
- Write a practice personal statement and then check that you have included the advice in this guide.

UNIVERSITY AND CHARACTER THE UCAS APPLICATION PROCESS



Learning for Life aims to develop the character of young people in the UK. It believes that an individual's character is just as important as their academic abilities. Through developing resources and conducting research, the organisation hopes to support families, schools, universities and employers build and strengthen the character of the young people in the UK.

Want to find out more?

Please visit the **Learning for Life** website for more resources like this one: www.learningforlife.org.uk
To find out more about Learning for Life please contact Elizabeth Melville on 01227 782851 elizabeth.melville@canterbury.ac.uk

THIS RESOURCE WAS CREATED ALONGSIDE THE STUDENTS AND STAFF AT SCHOOLS IN THE HODGE HILL CONSTITUENCY. LEARNING FOR LIFE WOULD LIKE TO THANK THEM FOR ALL THEIR SUPPORT, SUGGESTIONS AND HELPFUL ADVICE.

JOHN TEMPLETON FOUNDATION



'Having spent the last four years working in the social care field, I have come to realise that my passion lies in helping people who are less advantaged. I was also providing continuous emotional support on a daily basis and during stressful life changes. I learnt how to communicate with clients about sensitive issues in an appropriate manner, understanding and being prepared for their reactions to the information. This job significantly improved my communication skills, my patience, and my initiative. As a result I became more aware of my own values and beliefs whilst showing respect for all persons and their values, beliefs, cultures, goals, needs and preferences.'

SOCIAL WORK

'Most of all, by studying sociology at university I hope to gain a more tolerant attitude to the people around me, and understand better the dynamics of society.'

SOCIOLOGY

'It also made me value the importance and need of compassion and kindness of which I received and did my best to reciprocate.'
India. During my time there I taught English and assisted with the personal care of children ranging from 18 months to 17 years old. The experience put my endurance and patience to the test and had an enormous impact on my outlook on life and understanding of other cultures.'

NURSING

'Directly after completing my degree I undertook a three-month voluntary work placement in a remote rural orphanage for child ex-labourers in India. During my time there I taught English and assisted with the personal care of children ranging from 18 months to 17 years old. The experience put my endurance and patience to the test and had an enormous impact on my outlook on life and understanding of other cultures.'
'Discovering my love for helping and supporting others I chose to broaden my knowledge of the teaching experience by completing two work experience placements within a primary school environment. I am passionate about having this positive input into the lives of young children. It is widely recognised that males are under-represented in the teaching profession as a whole, but in the primary age range in particular and it is my ambition to become a good male role model for the next generation.'

TEACHING

'For as long as I can remember, I have always felt a particular satisfaction when it comes to helping people. During work experience the importance of good communication was reinforced and taught me to value listening carefully and asking effective questions. It also helped me to improve my caring skills. From my academic studies and experiences, I have learned the importance of patience and keeping a sense of humor.'

MEDICINE

'Here are some examples taken from personal statements where the candidates are demonstrating that they believe they have the right character to make a success of their chosen subject.'

'The UCAS application guidelines state that you should 'explain why you want to study the course you are applying for'. You have probably chosen a course that you are interested in, but hopefully also a course that you feel you have the character to make a success of. For example, if you are a caring and compassionate person you may have chosen to study medicine or teaching. It is therefore really important that you state what it is about your character that makes you right for the course you have chosen.'

Link the subject you want to study to who you are

'Your personal statement is an advert about yourself; it has to make the universities you are applying to want you but just as importantly it has to make them like you. It is therefore very important that you 'sell' yourself in the right way. Being boastful about your achievements might send the wrong message, but showing you have humility could be a real positive.'

Get the right balance: It's about selling yourself... but also about having humility

What the experts say...

Admissions tutors will be reading your personal statements and choosing who they want to study at their universities. They have to read thousands of applications every year and sometimes make quick decisions. It is in your interest to make it as easy as possible for these admissions tutors to choose you.

Admissions tutors will be asking two main questions:

1. *Do we want this student on this course?*
2. *Do we want this student at this university?*

We asked an admissions tutor and a 6th form tutor to say more specifically what they think makes a great personal statement:

MR BRADSHAW, 6TH FORM TUTOR, THOMAS TALLIS SCHOOL

So what makes an excellent personal statement?

Sounds easy enough, doesn't it? A good personal statement makes you stand out from the crowd as someone whose academic achievements, interests and potential combined with their personal characteristics make them the perfect fit for a place.

Easier said than done, of course. A thousand words isn't a huge amount of space in which to sell yourself. So, how to go about it? The admissions staff who look at your statement already have a reference from your teaching staff and your grades, predicted and actual. But these are only two tiny facets of your character: a reference can't tell the whole story, and exam results reveal only achievement, not potential.

In short, being clever enough to do well at school is one thing – but to do well at university you need to be clever and have the right character too.

What qualities of character are needed, then?

The best university students are those who are independent and organised as learners, are resilient in the face of challenge and are persistent in the pursuit of their goals. It's totally fine to be unusual, different, quirky, though – there's no such thing as a single kind of model student, although all really successful students have the characteristics in bold, above.

That's what you have to make clear in your personal statement. Hence: what have you done, in or out of school, that shows these qualities? Have you gone beyond the syllabus in your reading or thinking? Have you a relevant academic interest that you expect to pursue? What organisational skills has your life made you develop? What does your coursework show about your capacity to set your own direction? What challenges, academic, personal, physical, have you overcome? What evidence can you offer that you've achieved challenging goals on your own? What drives you? What makes you tick? What's unusual or different about you?

Exactly why are you the sort of person a lecturer will look forward to seeing at 9 a.m. on a wet Tuesday in February for the fourth lecture in a series on Aromatic Hydrocarbons?

The evidence of these personal characteristics could come from extra-curricular stuff you've been up to. For instance, completing the Pennine Way shows resilience and persistence; so does finishing A2 exams after an accident that left you needing 85 stitches. Helping your parents complete their VAT return on time makes you well-organised. Reading every novel Jane Austen ever wrote makes you goal-oriented. Talking about your interest in the Modern Synthesis and what you made of a visit to Down House makes you seem focused on evolutionary theory. Talking about reaching the UK Warhammer 40000 Semi-Finals in Birmingham makes you sound quirky, for sure...

In fact, many different kinds of evidence can show that you have the necessary 'fire in the belly' to be a superb undergraduate. Remember: being clever is not enough – you must have drive.

OLIVIA RAMSBOTTOM, ADMISSIONS MANAGER, UNIVERSITY OF DERBY

An applicant needs to tell us as much about themselves as possible, this would include what their qualifications are of course, but we can see a list of qualifications in other areas of an application, so we're more interested in what interests them about the particular qualifications they are taking, and how this links to their chosen course at University.

Also, we make a holistic assessment of an applicant, so it's not just about school or college.

We're looking for information about other experiences, for example about part-time jobs, community and charity work, any committees they are on, and what they might do to help out at home. It is often the personal things that applicants don't think are important, but the fact that an applicant helps out on the family farm, or is a carer, or looks after their siblings, says a lot about their sense of responsibility and maturity.

Applicants should flesh out the picture we are able to build of them as much as possible, with information on spare time and sports and leisure activities, they should tell us whether they play musical instruments or speak languages, but we don't like to read lists, and an applicant needs to remember that we read thousands of personal statements a year, so they need to talk about their experiences as relevant to the course they are applying for and/or the University/Higher Education.

Applicants need to remember that we are making sure that the applicant is right for the course, but also that the course matches the applicant's intentions and aspirations. A list of qualifications and past-times will not tell us about what the applicant has taken from their experiences to form their plans for the future, so the personal statement needs to be a well thought through piece of work that reflects on what an applicant has done so far, where they are headed, and why. An applicant should lead us through their personal statement, making the links for us so we don't have to read in between the lines to understand why a student wants to do what they want to do.

UNIVERSITY AND CHARACTER THE UCAS APPLICATION PROCESS

If you are applying to study at any university in the UK you must complete a UCAS application form, which includes writing a personal statement about yourself. This personal statement is very important; it might be the one opportunity you get to tell universities why you are the person they are looking for. Your statement therefore has to be good. In fact it has to be really good as it is the best opportunity you have to 'sell' yourself. Some universities do not interview candidates for some of their courses, so the personal statement is your big opportunity to tell them what makes you special and different. It is your chance to tell them what it is about your character that makes you right for the course you hope to study.

This guide is essential reading if you want to get into a university as it will help you write a 'winning' personal statement. It will show you how to make your personal statement stand out from the crowd.

TELL THEM WHAT MAKES YOU... YOU...

A successful personal statement will be full of evidence of things you have taken part in and successfully achieved. These things say a lot about you and your character. You should make a list of all the things you have done in your life, in school and out of school, and then choose the ones that say the most about you to include in your personal statement.

These may include:

- Any bands you are a member of
- Being a sports captain or member of a sports team
- Being a buddy, reading partner or peer mentor
- Being a prefect, school captain or on the school council
- Being a scout or guide
- Any fundraising activities you have undertaken
- Any presentations you have made
- Any plays you have performed in
- Any clubs you are a member of
- Doing the Duke of Edinburgh Award
- Any volunteering you have done
- Any trips in the UK or overseas you have made – particularly on your own
- Any projects you have managed
- Being a member of a Debating societies
- Taking part in fundraising activities

Remember that your personal statement will be the basis for any interview you might have with a university. You should therefore only tell the truth in your personal statement and only include things you are comfortable talking about.

Talking about the things you have taken part in and your achievements is the best way to sell yourself. Therefore you really want to make the most of them. So for example rather than just mentioning that you have 'completed the Duke of Edinburgh Gold award', you should say 'I have completed the Duke of Edinburgh Gold award, and this shows I am a person with a good character as to gain the award I had to volunteer for 12 months in a children's home'.

Show you are looking for a university that will help you develop as a person

Universities will be impressed by applicants who are not just hoping to get a good degree but also looking to develop themselves in other ways. They will be looking for people who will turn up for their lectures, revise hard and do well in exams, but also people who will join their sports teams, take part in charitable and voluntary activities and play a full part in university life.

Here are a few things you could do at university that will help you develop personally.

- Join RAG and undertake fundraising events for charities
- Volunteer: Most universities have volunteering officers who can arrange opportunities for you in the local area.
- Join a sports team; universities usually cater for most sports and for people of all abilities
- Join a music team; from classical to rock – most universities have an eclectic mix of music groups
- Join a drama group
- Join a society or group; there is bound to be a society or group for almost anything you are interested in. Some universities have over 100 societies or groups!
- Join the student union; help to run the university for students. Roles include entertainment, welfare etc.
- Work on the student newspaper, radio or television or help develop the university website
- Get involved in any competitions, awards or special projects that are especially for students
- Attend special presentations, speeches, training events that are run for all students
- Join a religious group – universities have student groups for people of most religions

Your Character is important

On your UCAS application form you will have to write your GCSE and AS grades as well as your predicted A-level grades. These grades are an easy way for universities to judge how academic you are, but your grades don't say much more than that.

Universities are looking to recruit people who have good grades but they are also looking for people who have the character to be successful students. Many students drop out of university before completing their courses, which is not good for anyone. Therefore universities are looking for people who have the character to complete their course. They want people who have the courage and determination to stick at it even when things are tough.

In your personal statement you need to demonstrate that you are this type of person; that you will make a success of any place you are offered at university.