

How to Write an Effective UCAS Personal Statement

“There’s no such thing as a model statement, each one should be different.” This is how one university admissions tutor responded to the question of how to make a UCAS personal statement stand out from the crowd. Whilst it might be useful to use a template to help create the statement, the final draft should ideally avoid being too formulaic. But how?

What tends to impress admissions tutors is a statement that focuses on the specific course or courses applied for and the applicant’s motivation for wanting to study it. In doing this it should address any specific qualities, skills, insights or experiences that might be required and be written with honesty, integrity and enthusiasm. They want students who can demonstrate a well-researched and realistic understanding of what the course, subject or profession involves. Consequently, the best way to engage them is not by being quirky or using gimmicks, but by being objective whilst also conveying something interesting and relevant about the person behind the statement.

Most courses do not interview, in which case the statement will provide the only opportunity for a university to hear the applicant’s ‘voice’. There is a cautionary message for parents here because, as one admissions tutor put it, *“if an adult has helped you write it, we can tell”*. In this sense excessive parental intervention may be detrimental because, by tweaking the vocabulary or rewriting chunks of it, the danger is that the voice the university hears is partially that of the parent and the integrity of the statement is lost. This can quite literally be the difference between acceptance and rejection. Having said that, correct spelling and grammar is crucial, so support in that sense may be important.

For vocational courses like physiotherapy or medicine there will often be specific criteria that must be met. In some cases, the statement may even be marked against those criteria. For non-vocational courses like geography or English a genuine, enthusiastic and personal engagement with the subject will really count, especially how the applicant has engaged with it beyond the syllabus (known as ‘super-curricular’ learning) because this will demonstrate the kind of independent approach that is so vital at uni. Meanwhile, for some courses that may seem vocational, like law or engineering, work experience will be valuable but by no means essential; what matters most is why the applicant wants to study it.

There is plenty of advice out there, like:

- Don’t be bland.
- Be specific from line one.

- Write reflectively about your relevant interests or experience.
- Avoid quotations, lists, clichés, repetition, exaggeration, negativity, stilted vocabulary or plagiarism of any kind.
- Convey your passion without using the word 'passion'.
- Focus on what currently inspires you, not 'when I was six', 'since I was a child' or 'from a young age'.
- Be concise - less is more.
- Seek the right balance between academic and extra-curricular interests.
- Apply the 'so what?' factor, so that everything you include has relevance.
- Tell us what you think, not just what you do.
- If you want to apply for a mixture of different courses, seek advice on the implications this has for your statement.

Researching into what admissions tutors look for in a personal statement will pay dividends and the best places to start are the websites of some of the universities themselves. Going to their open days can be immensely helpful too and comprehensive advice also features on the UCAS website itself and on independent websites like [Which? University](#). Having done that, however, then follow the advice of the head of recruitment at University of Nottingham who said, *"be yourself and make sure your enthusiasm for the course shines through"*.

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