

How to write an Effective UCAS Personal Statement

'There is no such thing as a model personal statement, each one should be different.' This reflects the view of many university admissions tutors. So, using a standard formula or template will not make it stand out from the crowd.

What does matter is that the statement focuses on the specific course or courses applied for and is written with integrity and honesty. Tutors want students who can demonstrate commitment and enthusiasm and who have a well-researched and realistic understanding of what the course, subject or profession involves. So the best way to engage them is not by being quirky or using gimmicks, or by being pretentious, patronising or off-the-wall, but by being objective, interesting and relevant.

Around nine out of ten courses select students purely on the basis of the UCAS application. Only about one in ten will hold interviews. So for most applicants the statement provides their only opportunity to convey a sense of their personality – their voice. Meanwhile, those who are interviewed will need to live up to their statement at the interview itself and what they write also provides an opportunity to set part of the interview agenda.

This concept of 'the student's own voice' is where a parent or guardian can be especially helpful – or not. As one admissions tutor put it, 'if an adult has helped you write it, we can tell'. By encouraging your son or daughter to research their personal statement, you will be helping. But excessive intervention may be detrimental. It can be tempting to stamp your influence on the statement, tweak the vocabulary or rewrite chunks of it. If you do, the danger is that the voice the university hears is partially yours 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 valuable.

For vocational courses like Nursing or Medicine there will often be specific criteria that must be met through the statement and in some cases it will be marked against those criteria. For non-vocational courses like Geography or English, a genuine, enthusiastic and personal engagement with the subject, especially in terms of how the student has engaged with it beyond the syllabus, really counts. Also, for some courses that may seem vocational, like Law or Psychology, experience may be helpful but by no means essential – engagement with the subject from an academic perspective matters most.

There is plenty of advice out there for your son or daughter, such as:

- Don't be bland
- Be specific from line one
- Write *reflectively* about relevant interests or experience
- Avoid quotations, lists, clichés, repetition, exaggeration, negativity, stilted vocabulary or plagiarism of any kind
- Convey passion without using the word 'passion'

- Focus on what currently inspires them, 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 included has relevance
- For joint or combined courses, write about each subject
- If they want to apply for a mixture of different courses, they should seek advice on the implications this has for the statement
- They should speak to their referee about anything they feel needs to be included or emphasised in the academic reference

The best places to go for generic or specific guidance are the websites of some of the universities themselves. Going to their open days can also be immensely helpful.

Comprehensive guidance also features on the UCAS website www.ucas.com in books and on independent websites like Which? University <http://university.which.co.uk>

The key is to strike a good balance between meeting the criteria and doing so in an interesting and individual way. As the head of recruitment at Nottingham advised applicants, ‘be yourself and make sure your enthusiasm for the course shines through’.

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