

Personal Statement Workbook

A summer building plan for that crucial first step of your application...



What are Personal Statements?

Vital statistics:

- 4000 characters/ 47 lines long (about two thirds of a page)
- Uploaded to the UCAS website as part of your application to UK universities
- Course, not university, focused because all universities see the same personal statement

But it's *more* than that! Personal Statements are....

- Your chance for you to sell yourself – **for most universities the only chance!!**
- You have to answer some important questions (have a go now):

1. What do I want to study?

2. Why do I want to study it?

3. What have I done and/or read to show that I am *interested* and *committed* to studying that subject?



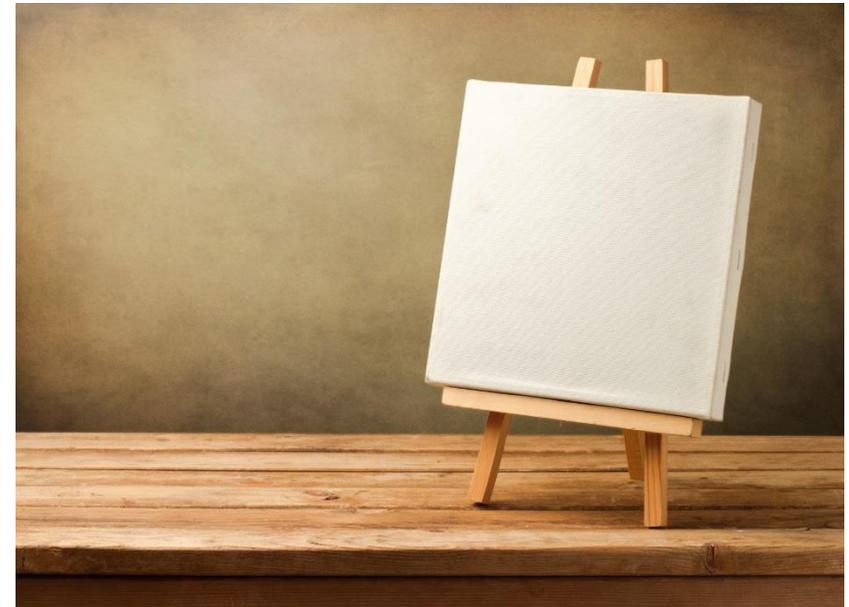
Personal Statements: Structure

So, now you know what you need to put in.....what order should it go into?

- There is no 'perfect' order or structure- you are not a robot!
- There *are*, however, ways that make it read well and make sure you get all the important stuff in.

Simple Checklist:

- **Introduction** – go straight in: why are you excited about studying this course?
- **What specific area(s) of your subject interest you the most and why?**
 - (prove that you've read around the subject/ done some research/learning)
- **What A levels are you taking** and how do they support your course choice?
- **What else have you done/ studied** to further your knowledge of this subject?
 - (Work experience and extra-curricular activities which support your course choice *or* give you some important, relevant skills)
- **Closing lines:** what do you want them to remember about you? Leave a lasting impression.



Top Tip

“Just get 500 words down. Write anything. Even if it sounds awful and embarrassing, no one is going to see the very first thing you write unless you want them to. Editing is far more manageable than facing a blank sheet.”

Example Personal Statements: Section by Section

Please feel free to write all over this page! What do you like about these Personal Statements? What do you dislike? What would you have done differently? Remember, no Personal Statement is perfect, though these were all written by successful applicants.

The Opening:

This is your chance to introduce yourself, explain your motivation for studying the course and demonstrate your understanding of the courses that you are applying for.

- Chris, Engineering at Cambridge

I find the built environment fascinating and perplexing, marvelling how engineers build such towering skyscrapers with complex designs that appear surprisingly simple. In reality it takes a vast amount of effort and skill to achieve the end result. This focused my desire to study engineering. I began to understand that it embraces not just bridges and buildings but water systems, nanotechnology and robotics. I like the idea of being involved in large-scale projects with tangible results and that each project could be different, each with a different set of problems to solve and requiring flexibility. Engineering is innovative and I am fascinated by the idea of developing new mechanisms that have never been attempted before and I am excited by the opportunity to apply the theory of physics and mathematics in a practical way.

First section:

Here you can demonstrate your knowledge and interest of the subject through your reading, research and activities.

- James, Geography at Cambridge

I enjoyed the opportunity to pass on my knowledge of the formation of fold Mountains, U-shaped valleys and how the mountain has been shaped by human influences such as tourism when I went walking with my brother in Wales. I read 'New Internationalist' and 'Geography Review', whose articles on climate change, multiculturalism, and globalisation have since complemented and expanded my academic studies of human Geography. I enjoyed "Development, Bottom Up or Top Down?", as this explored the nature and limitations of different development schemes, and "Climate Change and Crops" which expanded my knowledge of the impact of climate change, and how new crops could lead to further environmental damage.

Notes:

Second section:

This is where you show how what you have studied so far will help you in your further studies. This shouldn't be a long section, and it is one that might not be completely relevant for you. If you don't feel it adds to your personal statement, leave it out!

- Grace, Classics at Oxford

The critical examination of sources within History has augmented my analytical and evaluation skills, whilst the study of English has enhanced my ability to express ideas in a clear, coherent way. My initial love for language was triggered by French lessons and through this I have observed the value of reading literature in its original language and appreciate the subtleties which can so often be lost in translation. As my school does not offer Classical languages I decided to pursue them myself by attending JACT summer schools with the aim that I would be able to one day read the original works in Latin and Greek.

Third section:

Now you mention more practical work experience or, if work experience isn't really relevant for your course, to mention any independent research projects or competitions. Your extracurricular activities and achievements may fit in well here too.

- Louise, Law at Oxford

Undertaking work experience at Lincoln House Chambers allowed me to engage with a case and witness criminal proceedings at Manchester Magistrates' Court. A placement at the South Manchester Law Centre, where I actively assisted with an immigration case and attended tribunals, raised my awareness of the necessity of legal funding and pro bono work to attempt to make the law accessible for everyone. My appreciation for politics and international relations can also be seen through my involvement with Model United Nations, where I consistently received awards for debating and practised forming and justifying arguments, a skill which I believe stems from a history of dramatic arts with my local theatre company and LAMDA examinations.

The Ending:

You need to leave the admissions tutor with a good final impression of you. Without repeating yourself, make sure you round off your statement with an idea – whether it's how sure you are that this is for you or what you are particularly looking forward to studying in more detail.

- May, Medicine at Cambridge

Although aware of its negative aspects and limitations, I still believe medicine is the ideal career for me. Becoming a doctor would allow me to help others in a job combining my strong interest in science, enjoyment of communicating with others and working within a team as well as diverse future opportunities such as teaching and research. As a keen, diligent and determined individual capable of working well under pressure, I feel I will be prepared for the demands of the course and the career.

How is the statement used at interview?

Here are statements from some of the students that we have worked with, telling us how (and if) their personal statement was used in their Oxbridge interview. Are you surprised by the results? How would you prepare for each of these scenarios?

- **Engineering** “I was only asked one question relating to my personal statement about some work experience I had done”
- **PPE** “I was asked about an idea on my personal statement. What ideas would you use as a basis for your moral theory? (I said equality) Where do you derive the idea of equality from? Moral? Theological? Is equality an intrinsic or extrinsic good? (I answered, with reference to Plato’s Republic, both)”
- **Modern & Medieval Languages** “A lot of discussion on cultural things I had mentioned in my statement”
- **History** “Some broad and some specific questions about my personal statement... I wrote about gender history for example, and was asked very broadly, ‘tell me about gender history’.”
- **Medicine** “We discussed action potentials, haemoglobin, cardiac output, respiratory systems, hormones, the liver, mental health...bear in mind nothing was asked out of the blue – it all led on from what I had said in my personal statement or stemmed from a graph”
- **English** “The tutor primarily asked questions relating to my personal statement... for example, as I had noted that I had set various Blake poems to music, she asked how I thought poetry and song lyrics were similar or different from each other”
- **Geography** “I see you’ve written that you enjoy plate tectonics in your personal statement... talk to me about it”
- **E&M** “Why do you question the basis of economics – rationality and the behaviour of firms – in your personal statement?”
- **PPE** “I didn’t get asked at all about the books I had put on my personal statement”

Top Tips:

- **Never** write about a book that you have not read or include something that you are not happy to talk about in an interview in your personal statement – it could be pretty awkward if your tutor asks you to comment on it!
- **Do not only read what you have included in your personal statement**, be aware of the wider issues that your reading flags up because you may be asked about broad themes (e.g. ‘Feminist literature’ for English, ‘Global Warming’ for Geographers, ‘NHS reforms’ for Medics etc.). Why was what you read important?

Notes:

Extra Reading: What and How?

- There is more out there than what is in your text books! Remember, reading around your subject should be fun, not a chore.
- SOURCES: Books/Magazines/Newspapers/TV Programmes/Podcasts/ TED Talks

Tell me about something you have come across and why it makes you excited to study your subject:

Questions to ask yourself: ***How has what you've read/seen/experienced.....***

1. ...helped you to understand your course better?
2. ...given you insight and/or skills that will help you to excel at university?
3. ... inspired you/surprised you/worried you and why?
4. ... made you question what you have been told at school about your subject? Did you agree or disagree with the author/s that you came across?
5. ...made you want to learn more about a certain part of your subject? What area exactly?

Top tips

1. **Research the courses** that you are applying for thoroughly to show informed enthusiasm for the subject. Think: If you like helping people, why not be a fireman, rather than a doctor? If you like reading, why do you want to *analyse* what you've read? If we can't use history to learn from our mistakes, why do we study it?
2. **Be specific. Show, don't tell.** (Don't say 'I am X. Honest!'. Instead, try 'The fact that I did Y, shows that I am X because....')
3. **Be honest;** only include what you know and are confident about discussing. Tutors do *not* expect you to know everything.
4. **Don't overdo it, gush or be arrogant.** (Don't start with: "*I've wanted to be an X since before I was born!*")
5. **Don't be negative;** try to see any failures as 'learning experiences'. Don't dwell on substandard grades or make excuses. Don't be afraid of being wrong.
6. **Re-read and watch out.** Pick up on: repetition, repetition, spelling, apostrophe's & grammer (mistakes are irritating and don't reflect well on you!)
7. **Don't misuse words** in an attempt to look clever: your personal statement should sound like you are having a well-thought out but natural conversation.

*Do Make Sure To Download The Personal Statement Brainstorm Sheet The Goes With This Resource...

Any questions? Go to: www.oxbridgeapplication.com for LOADS of free advice, downloads and fun stuff to try.