

Writing your personal statement



Hertford College
UNIVERSITY OF OXFORD

It's hard to know where to begin with writing your personal statement – how can you sum up all your interests and achievements in 4,000 characters? Our Outreach Team have put together these top tips to give you some inspiration but there's no formula for a perfect personal statement, it's all about you.

What's the point?

Your personal statement is a chance for you to give the anonymous data on your UCAS form some personality. It's also an opportunity to convey your motivation for studying the subject and show your thinking on paper. If you're applying for a subject you haven't studied in school (like Engineering or Philosophy), it's also a space for you to explain your commitment to that subject, because it might not be obvious from what you've studied at A Level. Finally, at Oxford and Cambridge, your personal statement may be a starting point for questions and discussions in your interview.

Does it actually matter?

Yes, your personal statement does matter! It goes to all of your university choices, and for some it may be the only time they see more than your grades. However, it is just one piece of information among others that we take into consideration.

What should I talk about?

Think about our selection criteria – what are we looking for in potential students?

- Academic ability and potential to be successful on our degree courses;
- Self-motivation and commitment to the subject you're applying for;
- Ability to think critically and independently;
- Any subject-specific selection criteria.



Your personal statement should be focused primarily on your academic activities. This includes any super-curricular activities you're doing (that means things related to your subject but outside your usual schoolwork). If you want to write more about your extra-curricular activities because they're really important to you, then go for it, but try to frame them in terms of how they will make you a better student. What transferable skills have you gained by doing them? Whatever you do, be honest and don't lie about what you've read or done. In an interview you may well be asked directly about something you've written, so if you've not been totally honest, it probably won't give the best impression to your interviewers...

Five top tips

- 1 Show, don't tell.** Saying "I'm really passionate about my subject" is nothing like as convincing as talking about a specific thing you've done and what you think about it.
- 2 Explore your subject beyond the school curriculum.** There's a wealth of things out there about any topic imaginable: it could be books or magazines or articles or documentaries or podcasts or talks or museums... Find something that really sparks your interest and follow it up. Then when you're writing, you'll have specific examples and real evidence that demonstrates your interest and commitment to your subject.
- 3 Discuss, don't list.** Depth of interest is often more impressive than breadth of experience, so don't just reel off a vast list of activities. Be reflective. Think about why it was interesting, or how it will make you a better student, or what other questions it might lead to.
- 4 Steer clear of being corny or clichéd.** A huge number of personal statements open with something along the lines of "From an early age, I have always been fascinated by...", so why not try something else? And it doesn't matter how long you've been interested in the subject for – we want to know why you like the subject and what you've done to prove it.
- 5 Make it personal.** You're applying for this subject because *you* want to do it. What is it that *you* most enjoy about it? What drives *you*? If you're true to yourself, that integrity will show and will mark you out as an individual.



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@hertfordcollege
www.hertford.ox.ac.uk

Where to start?

"Fail to plan, plan to fail." This might sound a bit over-dramatic, but planning your personal statement will give you a chance to see how all your ideas might fit together neatly. Pick out the best ideas, and try to stick to the 80% academic rule. Try to list all the reasons you like the subject and then match them with the evidence you have to prove it. Not all of these needs to make it into the finished article but it might be a good place to start.

Nothing but the truth

UCAS has software that detects plagiarism, so copying something you found online isn't a good idea. And, don't forget, the people reading your statement have access to the internet too!

Signed, sealed, delivered

Check your spelling and grammar. While being able to spell probably doesn't make you a better student for most subjects, you want your messages to be totally clear. Spelling and grammar mistakes are at best distracting, and you want whoever is reading your statement to be focused on what you're trying to say, not on little mistakes. It's so easy for mistakes to creep in during re-writing and for them to go unnoticed in re-reading. The more people that you show your personal statement to, the more likely any mistakes will be picked up. And you can also ask their opinions – does it seem like a good reflection of you? Is it difficult to understand or too clichéd? Is it interesting to read? No piece of writing is perfect, no matter how much time you spend on it, so be prepared to take their comments on board and change your personal statement for the better. Re-draft it as many times as you need to, until you're happy that it's the best it can be. And don't be afraid to make big changes – that might be what you need!

Finding out more

If you're struggling to find super-curricular activities, head over to University College's 'Staircase 12' resources hub, where you can find loads of suggestions for your subject:

tiny.cc/staircase12

Find out more about personal statements, the rest of your UCAS application, and more super-curricular reading suggestions on the Oxford University website:

ox.ac.uk/ucas ox.ac.uk/reading