

#BETTERUNICHOICES



# HOW TO WRITE YOUR UCAS PERSONAL STATEMENT

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# **How to write your UCAS Personal Statement**

**Second Edition**

*By Jonathan Tinnacher*

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# Introduction

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Hi everyone! I'm Jonathan and I've worked in university student recruitment and admissions for well over 25 years.

I've read countless Personal Statements, delivered sessions up and down the UK for students on how to write them, and have even trained teachers and advisers on how to help their students.

I now run a website, newsletter and podcast called Better Uni Choices.

And this short guide is specifically written for you if you are about to embark on UCAS, and in particular on writing your UCAS Personal Statement.

Across ten short chapters, I'll give you information and insight into the admissions process that is not easy to come

by, from someone who has been closely involved in admissions at a whole variety of universities.

I'll also give you a very practical guide to writing your statement. You'll be able to read, take notes, and then start writing.

### **So what's coming up?**

First we'll look at the UCAS process as a whole. Then we'll look at when your Personal Statement might be used, and how it can impact university decisions.

I'll discuss the practical basics of the statement, what's allowed, and what are the limitations. And then we'll look at what goes in it; starting with a series of questions that you can ask yourself, to effectively brainstorm all your ideas.

I'll then give you a really simple, super-clear structure that you can use to start writing, and we'll discuss how to write

reflectively, to make sure that everything you write about is meaningful and matters to the reader.

There is a section on how to write a Personal Statement for two different subjects, and we'll have a quick look at how to use ChatGPT usefully and appropriately.

I'll then share some ideas on getting help and feedback on your statement, and we'll finish with some top tips that I've collected over the years from countless colleagues from different universities.

Each chapter will take between five and 10 minutes to read, and while I hope most of you will find all of them useful, feel free to skip chapters one and seven if you think they aren't necessary for you.

I am well aware that it won't just be applicants reading this. I hope that this guide can be useful to parents who are supporting their sons and daughters with their applications. I hope that teachers and university advisers

will also find it useful, particularly if you are new to the job and are looking for ways to help your students.

This guide is also available as an online course at [betterunichoices.com](https://betterunichoices.com) (along with downloadable summary handouts for each part), or you can watch the videos on my [YouTube channel](#).

Teachers and advisers, please feel free to use the videos and handouts in your university application classes and tutorials, and to share this guide.

In addition, you can find the guide as a short Podcast series on [Spotify](#) or [Apple Podcasts](#).

And finally, a quick reminder that if you are interested in everything to do with choosing courses, choosing universities and making amazing applications, you can sign up for my newsletter at [betterunichoices.com](https://betterunichoices.com) or listen to the full #betterunichoices podcast, also available on Spotify, Apple Podcasts and beyond.

# 1: A quick guide to the UCAS process

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This chapter is just a brief outline of the whole UCAS process, so that you know where the Personal Statement fits in. If you already know exactly how the UCAS process works, feel free to skip straight to chapter 2.

## UCAS

UCAS stands for the Universities and Colleges Admissions Service, and they organise the process by which students can apply for universities in the UK. It covers almost all undergraduate degree courses that you might be considering, with the exception of some of the music and drama courses available at conservatoires.

To apply, you set up an account at [www.ucas.com](http://www.ucas.com). If your school is a UCAS centre, they'll give you a buzzword that you put in to link your application to the school. A different process is available if your school is not a UCAS centre, or if



you have left school already. With this account you'll submit your application and you will be able to return to check your progress through UCAS Track.

## **Choosing five courses**

You'll need to do lots of research to find the right course for you, and you'll find lots of information on the UCAS website about courses, entry requirements and finance. You can check out the university websites themselves, visit universities on open days, and find countless different guides and league tables online.

And you can sign up to my Better Uni Choices newsletter for loads of helpful support and advice.

Ultimately you'll need to come up with five initial course choices. These should all be courses that you want to study, and that you would accept an offer for. They should include some ambitious choices, some realistic choices, and some safe options.

## **Your application**

In one section of the application you will fill in the qualifications that you have already completed. In the next section you will fill in the qualifications that you are currently doing.

You'll then add the Personal Statement, which as we'll find out, is ultimately a statement about why you are applying to the courses you've selected, and why you would be a good student.

You'll then complete a few other boxes about nationality, English language level, additional circumstances, support needs etc. and once you are happy, you'll pay the application fee and press 'send'.

When you press send, the application goes to your school (or other application centre), not to UCAS. They will check the application and add a reference with predicted grades for the courses that you are currently taking. They may

send it back to you if there are issues or mistakes. Once they are happy it is ready, they also press 'send'. A slightly different process is available for those not studying at a UCAS centre.

## **Deadlines**

There are a number of deadlines that UCAS set as to when this needs to happen. Most notably for entry 2025 there is an early deadline of mid-October 2024 for applications to Medicine, Dentistry and Veterinary Science courses or to Oxford and Cambridge universities.

Then there is the main deadline of late January 2025 for all other courses. Applications beyond this time may be considered, but some courses could be unavailable.

Your school will, of course, set earlier deadlines than these, as they need to check and add information to your application before it is sent to UCAS.

## University decisions

Once the application is complete, UCAS then makes it available to the universities, who then have their decisions to make.

They may make a decision purely on the basis of your application, or they may have other processes such as admissions tests, selection events, auditions, portfolio reviews or interviews. Ultimately, once they've considered everything, they will either make an offer to you, or they will reject your application.

- An offer can be *Conditional* on you achieving certain grades or qualifications.
- Or it can be *Unconditional*, meaning you already have the qualifications they want!

All university decisions will be made available to you in UCAS Track, and once you have all the decisions, it's your turn to make your choice.

## Your decisions

You can make one Firm choice, which should be your first choice; the course you most want to attend.

- You can also make one *Insurance* choice. This is in case you miss the grades for your Firm choice; and so it should be an offer with lower conditions.
- If your *Firm* choice is an *Unconditional* offer, your place will be confirmed immediately.

If you have accepted *Conditional* offers, you will then wait for results day to see if you meet the conditions and will be placed at your *Firm* or *Insurance* choice.

If you are not accepted by either choice, you will be entered into *Clearing*; a process by which you can access courses with vacancies.

Of course there are a few further complications; varying deadlines for different scenarios, options for students to change their minds, and intricacies to the timing and

choices of admissions tests and English language requirements.

But for an overview, this should give you what you need in order to get started on your Personal Statement, which is after all, why we are here.

In the next chapter, we have a closer look at the Personal Statement itself, and in particular, when and how it is used during the process.

## **2: When and how will your statement be used?**

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### **Does your statement even matter?**

Every applicant, every year puts blood, sweat and tears into their Personal Statement, creating several drafts, getting a whole bunch of opinions, and redrafting several more times before finally they click the ‘send’ button. And yet no-one really seems to know definitively how important it is.

Well, the bad news is it’s almost impossible to say definitively how important the statement will be for you. There are hundreds of universities, and thousands of admissions tutors.

Most universities don’t have a clear policy about the role of Personal Statements, and so even within the same university, different courses will use the statement

differently. Even where a university does have a policy, these will be interpreted differently by different staff.

Some courses have even made it publicly known that they don't use Personal Statements in the selection process. But the chances of that being true of all of your applications are slim to none.

And yet, it actually doesn't really matter that you don't know exactly how important it will be in your specific situation, because bluntly, you need to give it your best shot anyway.

The more important things for you to understand are *when* might your Personal Statement be read, and *how* might it impact on the decision to offer you a place.

So that's what we will look at here.



## **At the first pass**

I would expect most Personal Statements to be read at the first pass; that is, whenever the first person looks at the form. A selector will see the whole form, which includes: your grades achieved, the courses you are studying now (with predicted grades from your school), the Personal Statement, and the Reference.

They will be looking to determine: Is the student taking the right subjects? Are grades and predicted grades OK? Are there any mitigating circumstances that I need to know about? And does their Personal Statement show the right motivation and skills to undertake the course?

If the answer to all of these is yes, they will most likely put the application to the next stage. This could be making an offer, or inviting you for an interview, audition or admissions test.

If the answer is no, then most likely they will reject the application.

But... there are also several other important occasions when your Personal Statement could come into play

### **Before or during an interview**

If your course requires a traditional interview or an audition it is pretty much guaranteed that the interviewer will have a copy of your Personal Statement in front of them at the interview.

They might ask you about something in the statement just to put you at ease. Most interviewers want you to be comfortable because that's when you will perform at your best.

They may pick on something in your Personal Statement to test you, to see how you react when challenged about something you have written. If you are genuinely interested

in the topic, you are certain to have views, opinions and knowledge beyond the short piece of content that made it into the final statement, and they want to hear these.

Or, they could pick up on one of your interests so that they can use this to tell you more about their department or university, thus making you more likely to choose them! Perhaps this sounds cynical, but it's really just human nature.

In each case, you can see how important it is to have things in your Personal Statement that you are happy to talk about!

### **After the interview and all selection tests have been done**

There will come a point in the selection process where the university has all the information it is going to get: grades, predicted grades, references, admissions test results,

portfolios, interview results etc. and is now making a final decision on you.

In a situation where several candidates are very closely balanced, a well written Personal Statement could well be the thing that pushes one candidate through. In this instance, the admissions tutors could be looking very closely at a small number of statements, and comparing them against each other.

### **At Confirmation (after the university receives your final school results)**

If you meet the conditions of your offer, then you are guaranteed your place, and no-one will look again at the Personal Statement. If, however, you miss your conditions by one or two grades, then the university may well look again at your application.

If they have lots of ‘near miss’ students with the same grades, and only a handful of places available, they may

look again at the Personal Statement to decide who gets those final few offers.

## **In Clearing**

If the worst happens, and you are left without a place, your Personal Statement will be made available to any university you apply to during Clearing. It will be read quickly, and a decision will likely be made quickly. In some cases the Personal Statement will matter.

At any of the above stages, there is one constant: the more competitive the course, the more important the Personal Statement will be. So, courses with high entry grades and more competition for entry will generally require a higher quality piece of writing for the statement.

## **In summary...**

It will be very difficult for you to know definitively how important your Personal Statement is, when it will be read, or how it will affect the outcome.

But I hope it is now clear that the Personal Statement really can matter and make a difference, so it is worth putting the effort in to get it right.

Coming up in the next chapter: Personal Statement basics!

### 3: UCAS Personal Statement basics

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In this super-short chapter, we simply cover the basics. So here goes:

Your statement can be no longer than 4,000 characters. A character is basically a letter, but includes punctuation and spaces. That's likely to be around 650 words or so.

There is also a limit of 47 lines of text. You won't be able to check this until you copy and paste the statement into the online form, but if you are within the character limit and don't put in full line breaks, you'll generally be fine.

Any formatting you include in your draft will be removed. You can't use bold, underlining or italics, and you can't use bullet points. You also can't use emojis, which is probably for the best!

To make it readable you should write in clear paragraphs, each identified with a new line. The most readable statements typically have four to six paragraphs.

You will only be able to submit one Personal Statement. This will be attached to all the courses that you are applying for. So, don't mention any specific universities by name.

If you are applying to a range of courses that are very similar to each other then you will be able to focus strongly on that specific subject.

If you are applying to courses that are quite different, it will be difficult for you to focus on the subject, and so you will need to be more generic in your approach.

But be warned, if you are applying to high demand universities, or high demand subjects, a very generic Personal Statement might not be strong enough, so you may need to reconsider your choices.

I'll cover this in more detail in chapter seven.



UCAS runs all Personal Statements through plagiarism checks, and highlights potential cases directly to universities. Plagiarism means copying, and is basically cheating. It is viewed very seriously by universities.

So don't copy ideas or sentences from the internet, or from your friends, as these will get picked up.

I'll discuss using ChatGPT and AI in more detail in chapter eight.

And whatever you do, don't pay someone else to write your statement for you as they will almost certainly use stock phrases that will be caught.

Finally, the purpose of the Personal Statement is to show the admissions tutor that you have the motivation, the skills, and the attributes to succeed on their course. You only have 4,000 characters to give them a really clear story as to why you want to study their subject, and provide

evidence of the skills and experience that you will bring to your studies, so use as many of those characters as you can.

Coming up next: Preparing your content.

## 4: Preparing your content

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### **Preparation, preparation, preparation**

There are very few people in the world who can sit down at their computer and write 650 words of high quality prose without preparation. Some professional writers, such as journalists and bloggers can, but even they will have been carefully organising their thoughts before they sit down and start writing, and they will almost certainly know how their piece ends before they start.

For most of us, preparation is key, and I suggest a clear and structured approach to this preparation, before you even think about starting to write your statement in full.

### **Eight simple questions**

My approach is to ask yourself eight simple questions. These are questions that every applicant really should be

able to answer without too much thought. And if you can't answer them, you may need to do a little more research before you continue.

For each of these questions write down your answers honestly in plain language. Use a notebook, a laptop, or the notes on your phone; it really doesn't matter.

Take your time, and write as much as you can. Use full sentences or short bullet-point lists; whatever works for you.

Remember that you are not trying to impress anyone, this is just for you, to help you organise your thoughts.

### **Q1. Why do you want to do the course?**

This is right at the heart of your statement.

Your choice may have a direct connection with your current studies? For many applicants, they simply want to do more of the subject that they've most enjoyed before.

Write down what you enjoy about it, what you want to study more of, and why.

For others, you will be applying for something that you haven't studied before, and your motivation is not about continuing, but changing. Can you articulate why? Is it about the career you want to go into? If so, what is it about that career that attracts you? What have you seen or experienced that tells you that this is for you?

Perhaps there is a personal story behind your choice, an experience you have had, something that happened that was the catalyst for your choice. Try writing it down, making the clear connection between what happened and the choice you are now making.

## **Q2. What do you know about the course or the profession?**

You say you want to study this subject for three, four, or even five years, so write down everything you know about the course. For example:

- What does the course structure look like?
- Which topics get covered each year?
- How will the course be taught?
- How will it be assessed?
- Will there be any options to choose from?
- Are there any placements, or study abroad options?
- Is there any professional accreditation included?
- If it's a professional course, what do you know about the profession, and are you really prepared and committed to it? You'll need to know a lot about this, so don't overlook this in your preparation.

- And of course, what are the differences between the different universities you are applying for?

If you are reading this and are thinking “actually, I don’t think I can answer many of those questions”, no problem, now is the time to hit those course pages and look at what the courses involve in a little bit of detail.

Similarly, if you don’t know too much about the profession you are considering entering, then head on-line and do a bit more research about that.

[prospects.ac.uk](http://prospects.ac.uk) is a very good place to start for this.

### **Q3. What skills does the course require?**

Some course pages will have highly detailed information about this, telling you very clearly what they are looking for, while others will be very vague.

Where the information is vague, you'll have to have a deeper look at the course and try to work out for yourself which skills will be useful. For example, courses with lots of hours of teaching and practice might particularly value time management, whereas those with few classes and lots of self-directed study will value drive and self-motivation. Those with lots of essays to write will clearly want great essay writing skills, while those which will involve preparing reports or presentations based on data will want to see sharp analytical and numeracy skills.

Write down these skills, and keep them in mind as you work through the remaining questions.



As a starting point, I'm going to give you nine universal transferable skills you might want to consider. Have a think about how many of these might be important for your course, and whether there are any important skills that are not on this list:

- Analytical thinking
- Creative thinking
- Resilience
- Self-motivation
- Curiosity
- Technological literacy
- Dependability
- Empathy
- Leadership

Which of these might be useful for your course?

#### **Q4. What have you most enjoyed studying at school?**

This should be pretty straightforward; after all, you are studying these subjects right now!

Start with your favourite subject: What has been the best, most interesting bit? Why did you find it interesting? Did it challenge your way of thinking, or help you see things in a different light?

Then consider, is there a connection between your enjoyment of this subject and the choices you are now making? If this is the case, it should support your answer to Question 1 above.

Next consider, are there any specific skills or attributes that you are demonstrating while studying the things you most enjoy? Write down these skills.

Do this with two or three subjects. You will hopefully find several areas that you can write enthusiastically about, and

work out the connections between your current studies and your course choice.

### **Q5. What super-curricular activities have you done?**

Put simply, super-curricular activities are things you do outside of your school studies that relate to the subject that you are applying for. And they are a fantastic way of demonstrating that you've done your research and are motivated to study a subject.

They could be as simple as reading more about your subject. And it's not just books that count, but journals and newspapers you have read that are relevant to the course you are applying for.

Perhaps you listen to podcasts, or watch TED talks, or the Subject Spotlights that you can find on Springboard? Some of these will be relevant to the course you are applying for, so write them down.

Include any lectures, webinars and taster days you have been to which were put on by the universities themselves. They don't need to have been at the university you want to apply to, they just need to be relevant to your subject, and have genuinely interested you.

Perhaps you've entered maths, coding, poetry or essay competitions. Write them down.

And as you write down this list of activities, jot down what you enjoyed about them. How did they make you feel? What did you find particularly interesting? Was there anything that challenged you, or made you want to find out more? And do they help demonstrate any of the specific skills that you identified under question 3?

If you haven't done anything that you think counts, trust me, now is the time to start. Not just for your Personal Statement, but also to make sure you are really making the right choice of course!

## **Q6. What have your extra-curricular activities and achievements been?**

I expect you are more familiar with the idea of extra-curricular activities than you are with super-curriculars. These are things that you do outside of your school classes, and are generally regarded as being organised activities, whether sporting, creative or community-based. So what have you been involved in?

As importantly as what you have done, is what your participation says about you. What skills have you demonstrated? Almost any organised activity has the potential to show a wide range of skills, some of which will be very relevant to your course. So write each activity down, including what was most challenging and what skills they demonstrate.

Also, what are your most proud achievements? Very often these will come from overcoming a particular challenge. So what was that challenge, and how did you overcome it?

Achievement in the face of adversity can be very powerful indeed, and can be used to demonstrate a wide range of skills.

## **Q7. What work experience have you done?**

Work experience can take many forms. It's not just the one week of formal work experience that you may have done in year 10 or 11. It includes any part-time jobs, such as those in shops and restaurants. Work shadowing, even if unpaid, can be important, while extended voluntary experience can often be the most useful of all.

For some courses work experience is unnecessary and not relevant. For others, in particular in medicine, health, social care and education, work experience will be a critical part of your application. Even if the work experience was not directly relevant to your course, you may be able to draw out relevant learnings and skills from your experience that you can apply to your application.

So for now, regardless of what you are applying for, write down on your list what work experience you have gathered and what you have learned from it.

Include what you learned about the sector or the job you experienced, but also what you learned about yourself and your skills.

### **Q8. What are your hobbies?**

By hobbies I mean all those things you do in your own free time; things that you choose to do, for no other reason than that you enjoy them. They might be things you do on your own, or perhaps with your friends or family. They could include gaming, going to the cinema, or making tik tok videos. They could include charity work, walking or hiking. They might be organised, they might not. The important thing is that you chose to do them, and there is every chance that in doing some of these hobbies, you are building skills, and shaping your future choices.

Most hobbies are probably not going to make the final cut of your Personal Statement, but it's worth writing them all down, and articulating what they say about you. If you are developing particular skills, just compare these with the skills list for your course, and you'll be able to work out whether it might be useful to mention these hobbies in your statement.

So that's it! If you haven't been writing down your answers as we went along, then now is the time to do it.

Don't move on to the next part until you have done this. I promise you, if you do this exercise reasonably thoroughly, you will have literally all the content you need to write your UCAS Personal Statement.

In the next chapter we'll look at how to structure all of this content into the ideal statement, and after that we'll have a look at the power of writing reflectively, so that you say everything in the most persuasive and impactful way.



## 5: A clear, simple structure

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In this chapter I'm going to show you a really clear, simple structure for your Personal Statement.

This requires that you have had a go at answering the eight questions that I suggested in the previous chapter. If you haven't yet done this, go back and do this before proceeding. Trust me, you won't regret it!

If you have done the exercise reasonably well, you now probably have several pages, and perhaps ten or twenty ideas about yourself, your skills, your experiences, and your chosen course.

You will be delighted to know that most of the hard work has now been done. There are still some important decisions ahead, but you have all the raw materials to make it happen!

The next thing to do is to determine your structure.

There is no absolute right and wrong structure for a Personal Statement, but think about this: if you are reading hundreds of statements and want it to be easy to find the bits you are looking for, wouldn't it be best if they just followed a simple easy structure?

Clearly yes, so what does that look like? Well, my recommendation is this:

Firstly, start with a 'trigger'; a paragraph which clearly establishes why you want to do the course.

Secondly, continue with several paragraphs that show what you have done to demonstrate that you'll be a great student. Write about what you did, what it shows about you, and why it is relevant to the course.

Finally, you'll want a killer final paragraph that summarises your strongest selling points.

You want to plan what to include in each section before you start writing. So, go back to your answers to each of the eight questions from chapter 4, and choose the very strongest examples for each section.

Let's look at these three sections in a little more detail.

### **The Trigger**

Start strongly with a sentence that essentially says “because of X, I want to study Y, in order that I can do Z”.

X could be a whole variety of things, and will be very specific and personal to you. It will typically be something that has happened in the past. Y is the course or subject you want to study. Z will be in your future and what you see yourself doing after your studies.

So have a look back at what you wrote down for question one. Do you have enough there to write this introductory paragraph?

If so, have a go right now. If not, don't panic, continue on to the next section and come back to this one at the end.

## **What have you done to demonstrate that you'll be a great student?**

In this second section, you are going to take all those things you've done, in class, through super-curricular and extra-curricular activities, work experience and hobbies, and you are going to relate them to the course you are applying for.

But, and this is crucial, you will need to consider carefully what is the best evidence to use to support your application.

### *Academic courses*

If your course is highly academic, you are going to want to rely most heavily on your class studies and your super-curricular activities. The admissions selector is not going to be too concerned with your sporting achievements or scouting badges; they really want to know that you are

genuine in your interest and passion for the subject and are super-motivated to learn more!

For the most super-competitive courses, they also want to see that you clearly understand the subject. So lean on your subject teacher for help and support with your draft. Ask them to check that you are demonstrating subject knowledge at a high enough level, and to make sure that you have any technical information correct.

### *Professional or practical courses*

If your course is a predominantly professional, practical course, then you are going to emphasise your experience, whether it be work experience or something extra-curricular. You'll need to demonstrate specific, practical skills. You'll also emphasise the knowledge you have about that profession from your reading and research, perhaps from specific journals, or from current affairs.

### *Vocational courses*

If your course is more broadly vocational, you'll want to demonstrate your passion for that vocation. So, if applying to Sports Science for example, you can lean on academic studies, super-curricular activities, practical team sports and work experience if you have it.

### *Creative courses*

If your course is creative, you'll want to emphasise what you have actually done and created. But you'll also want to show your knowledge and appreciation for other creative artists. Again, you can discuss academic studies, as well as extra- and super-curricular activities to get across your knowledge and show what you have done.

### *Paragraphs*

I suggest you might have three paragraphs for this main section, and you'll probably have one, or at most two, activities to discuss per paragraph.

For each activity you should write reflectively; considering what you did, what you learned, how it is relevant to the course you are applying for, and what action you have taken as a result.

I'll discuss reflective writing in more detail in chapter six, but at this stage, just be aware that you will need to prioritise only the very most important experiences if you are to be able to reflect on them properly in the space available.

### *Order*

Finally for this section, I generally prefer statements that are written in chronological order; it is just easier to see your story building. Each of your experiences can build on the previous one, and show progression in your choices, your knowledge and your motivation.

A statement that jumps around in time between your sixth form and your early childhood can be confusing to read

and difficult to follow. So after the initial introductory trigger paragraph, I'd suggest starting with your earliest experiences, and build towards your most recent.

## **The killer conclusion**

Hopefully this will be the easy bit.

Some will advise you not to repeat what you've already said (they'll argue that it's a waste of space), but I'd suggest you should always finish with a sentence or two that really sums up your application.

It could be something that links right back to the opening sentence and reminds them of your essential motivation to do the course.

It could be the two or three strongest skills and attributes that you have that will enable you to succeed on their course.



Or it could be a forward looking statement, about your future and how the course will support your plans.

But whichever route you choose, it must be short, punchy and to the point!

And that's it! A clear, simple structure with just three sections:

- The Trigger
- What have you done to demonstrate that you'll be a great student?
- The killer conclusion

So have a go right now at deciding which ideas, amongst all those that you have written down before, are important and relevant enough to make it into your statement. Then put them into the relevant sections, decide the order they go in, and how many paragraphs you expect there to be.

In the next chapter we'll look at the power of writing reflectively, so that you can say everything you have chosen to write about in the most persuasive and impactful way.

## 6: The power of reflective writing

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So, you now have lots of content, and a sensible structure for your statement. You know which content you are going to prioritise, and roughly how long each section is going to be. There is just one more area to focus on before you start writing the statement in full, and that's how to write reflectively.

The trap that many students fall into at this stage is that they simply describe what they have done, and make the assumption that the reader automatically understands why it is important and relevant.

A typical example of this would be the paragraph below, written about some marketing work experience done in year 11:

*“In year 11, I had the opportunity to undertake a work placement in the marketing department of a small tech*

*start-up. During my time with them I helped out with data entry, I worked on an event that they were organising and I put together some email campaigns.”*

It’s OK, but there is no reflection, and no attempt to make it relevant to the application that is being submitted.

Put simply, reflective writing addresses this by giving you a structure which involves you analysing the experience, considering what impact it had on you, and making clear what you plan to do next with what you have learned.

So what might this look like? Well, a super-simple structure you could use is simply known as “What? So what? Now what?” (Rolfe, Freshwater & Jasper, 2001).

- **What?** First you describe the activity, or experience.
- **So what?** Next you link the experience to the course that you are applying to.
- **What next?** Finally, you describe what action you took, or are taking, as a result.

And what might our marketing work experience look like using this model?

*“(What?) In year 11, I had the opportunity to undertake a work placement in the marketing department of a small tech start-up, during which I helped with data entry, events organisation, and putting together email promotional campaigns.*

*(So what?) Through this, I developed my IT skills, my writing skills, and learnt about how CRM systems work.*

*(What next?) My experience made me want to learn more, and so I asked my manager what they would suggest in terms of learning more about marketing. They recommended reading Simon Sinek’s “Start with Why?” which I loved, and which has reinforced my desire to learn more and more about marketing.”*

See the improvement? Already it is so much clearer why the placement was relevant, both to the student’s motivation,

and in demonstrating skills and knowledge that are relevant to the course.

A slightly more complex method can be found in Learning by Doing, by Graham Gibbs (1988).

It is a terrific model for reflection and reflective writing. It goes something like this:

- **Description:** What happened?
- **Feelings:** What were your reactions and feelings?
- **Evaluation:** Was it a good or bad experience?
- **Analysis:** What sense can you make of the situation? What was really going on? (You can bring in ideas from outside of the specific situation to help you).
- **Conclusion:** What can you conclude from the analysis about your situation?
- **Action plan:** What would you do differently next time, or what are you going to do now on the basis of what you have learnt?

Using this structure, the same experience above could be described in the following way:

*“(Description) In year 11, I had the opportunity to undertake a work placement in the marketing department of a small tech start-up, during which I helped with data entry, events organisation, and putting together email promotional campaigns.*

*(Feelings) I loved my time working there, and*

*(Evaluation) I learnt so many great new skills (IT, writing, time management, and how CRM systems work).*

*(Analysis) The experience really helped me understand my own strengths and gave me insights into marketing that I had never considered before.*

*(Conclusion) I realised that marketing was the career for me, and that I wanted to learn more.*

*(Action Plan) I asked my manager what they would suggest in terms of learning more about marketing. They recommended reading Simon Sinek’s “Start with Why?”*

*which I loved, and which has reinforced my desire to learn more and more about marketing.”*

Now we have a really interesting paragraph about work experience that shows reflection, motivation, skills, learning and action.

You may not necessarily follow exactly this model, or order your thoughts in exactly this way, but it is important that you make a clear attempt to reflect on each and every example you use in your statement.

As the Personal Statement is only 4,000 characters long, you will have to make some difficult choices in order to prioritise the most important examples to use. You will also have to be very concise and tightly edit your work.

In the next chapter we'll look at how to write a Personal Statement if you are applying for two different subjects. If this doesn't apply to you, feel free to skip to chapter eight, all about Chat GPT.



## **7: Writing a statement for two different subjects**

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How to write a statement that covers two different courses might just be the single most asked question in university admissions history, which is why it gets its own chapter! If this isn't relevant to you, feel free to skip straight to the next chapter.

If this does apply to you, then the answer is not entirely straightforward, as there are a number of different reasons why you might want to do this. For each of these scenarios, I would give different advice.

### **Unrelated subjects**

In my first scenario, you are applying for two different unrelated subjects, like Engineering and Economics. I would simply advise against this. You will not be able to

find a way to write an effective Personal Statement for both, and you will compromise your application for each of your chosen subjects.

I'd strongly suggest more research on each course, and more reflection on what you are looking for out of your study. Then choose either one or the other, or find a course that enables you to do both together. You might not be able to find Engineering and Economics, but you might like to explore options such as Engineering and Management, which might have a similar appeal to you.

### **Related subjects and joint combinations**

In this second scenario, you could be applying for closely related subjects, perhaps like Economics and Management. You might be choosing some joint honours degrees and some single honours. In this case I'd argue that you can write a Personal Statement that will cover your interest in both, and indeed you will need to if applying for a joint

degree. Most admissions tutors will be used to seeing mention of interest in two related subjects together, and will understand that you may be applying for subtly different options at different universities.

The exception to this is if you are applying to the most competitive universities of all, by which I mean Oxford, Cambridge, Imperial, UCL, LSE etc. In these cases, a Personal Statement that is too broad may well hinder your application, so instead, choose your top subject at your top choice and focus your statement on that, then make sure all your other choices fit and are broadly aligned with that top choice.

### **Fall back options for competitive courses**

In the third scenario you are applying for a highly competitive course, such as Medicine, Nursing, Physiotherapy, Social Work, Primary Teaching etc.

In these instances, you should generally use a maximum of four choices for your top choice, and use the fifth as a fall back. It is imperative that this fall back choice is a sensible, related subject, but is not also a highly competitive course.

So, for example, if you are applying for Medicine, have Biomedical Sciences as your fall-back. If applying to Primary Teaching, have Psychology as your fall back.

If your fall back is not highly competitive, then the admissions tutors will be OK with the fact that the Personal Statement is written for something else. Biomedical Sciences admissions staff at most universities will be very happy to take an application from someone who is close to being qualified for Medicine.

What you must not do is have another high demand subject as your fall back.

I am aware of a student who recently put Midwifery as their fall back choice for Medicine, and despite the fact that their

predicted grades were way higher than is required for Midwifery, they didn't even get an interview. This seems unfair, given Midwifery would seem to be an excellent fall back choice for a would-be doctor, but you can understand that the course is looking for applicants who are 100% focused on Midwifery.

This also applies to a fall back choice which is at a highly competitive university. They will look for students who are 100% focused on their subject, so your Personal Statement for another course is not likely to cut it with them.

There is a final option, which is that some courses who know that they are regularly a fall-back for high demand subjects may allow you to submit a second Personal Statement to them specifically for their course. You may be able to find this mentioned on their website, or you may need to send them an email to find out.

So there you have it, three scenarios where you might want to write a Personal Statement that covers two different

subjects, but different advice for each. If this is you, I hope this advice is helpful!

In the next chapter, we have a quick look at Chat GPT and whether you should use it in preparing your statement!

## 8: Using Chat GPT

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Last year I wrote an article for my #betterunichoices newsletter all about using Chat GPT. You can find it on the website, but to save you the long read, the summary is this:

If you ask Chat GPT to write your statement for you, it will simply make stuff up; a whole statement full of lies.

If, on the other hand, you really engage with it, get it to ask you a whole load of relevant questions before writing it, it will do a pretty good job of drafting something fairly personal to you, albeit, containing some pretty clichéd language.

Where it really comes into its own, however, is when you ask it for feedback on the statement; it was pretty good at analysing strengths and weaknesses, and suggesting improvements.

So, basically, you *can* get Chat GPT to write your statement for you, but only with clever prompting, and a good amount of effort inputting your personal information. However, it is far from clear that you *should*.

I have seen reports that plagiarism in Personal Statements is up this year. We don't know if that is connected to use of ChatGPT, but clearly caution is needed, and using ChatGPT to draft all (or even large parts) of your Personal Statement is not acceptable.

What is clear is that it can be a really great assistant, and a pretty decent adviser.

I've since tried out numerous different types of prompts, approaching ChatGPT as if it were my counsellor, and asking it to do no more than I would ask an actual human adviser to do.



This, I would argue, is unquestionably legitimate and ethical. After all, students get help with their statements from humans literally all the time.

## **Two super-useful prompt ideas**

What I'm going to suggest for you is a couple of really useful prompts that you can take and adapt to your own situation.

### *Getting introductory advice and ideas*

You could ask something like this:

*“You are advising me on applying to university. I would like to apply for law at university, and I need help with starting my UCAS Personal Statement. Can you tell me what sort of things I should include? And also, can you give me an example of a UCAS Personal Statement for law?”*

To this prompt I received back a ten part structure of things to include in my statement, from the introduction and ‘why

law?’ section, through academic achievements, relevant skills, work experience, legal super-curriculars, career aspirations, and a conclusion.

And it gave me a half-decent example, with a warning to use it as a guide and inspiration only.

### *Getting feedback on a draft*

Once you’ve drafted a statement you could ask it something like this:

*“I’ve now drafted a UCAS Personal Statement, which I will copy into the next message. Can you tell me how I can make it better? I am particularly interested in the content and the writing style. So that I can learn, can you give me at least five things about it that are good, and at least five areas where I can improve it.”*

To this prompt, I got a clear and actionable response with five strengths and five areas for improvement, all of which

were legitimate and helpful. Overall, the quality of the advice was not bad; not bad at all.

So... if you are planning to use Chat GPT to help you, I'd suggest:

### **Use specific, detailed prompts**

Firstly, don't just ask short questions. Give it really clear and precise instructions. Tell it what role you want it to take (e.g. an advisor), and then be specific about what you want to get out of the discussion. Give it the background to your questions, so it knows who you are, and why you are asking for help.

The more it knows about you, the scenario, and the requirements, the better advice and support it will give.

### **Look at the responses critically**

Secondly, don't blindly follow its advice and suggestions. Look at the response it gives you with a critical eye, just as

you would if it was a friend giving you advice. Is the response helpful? Is it actionable? Is it reliable, when compared to more formal sources such as UCAS? And how could you change the prompt to get a better response?

### **Don't copy ChatGPT's terrible clichés**

Thirdly, be aware that ChatGPT doesn't actually know what makes a statement good. It only knows what a Personal Statement looks like. And because so many of the statements it has read on the internet are full of clichés, it has a habit of suggesting these to you.

So, please ignore it if it suggests that you use phrases like: *“from an early age...”*, *“fuelled my desire to explore...”*, *“I did a deep dive...”*, or *“my voracious reading...”*.

These are just horrible phrases that have been so over-used they have almost become meaningless. And nowadays they are a tell-tale sign to any admissions tutor that you have used ChatGPT in the wrong way.

I hope, maybe with this sort of approach, you'll gain some useful skills for using AI more effectively, and you'll have a little bit of a head start on your UCAS Personal Statement!

In the next chapter we have a look at how to get some actual human help once you have written your first draft.

## 9: Getting help and support

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You are clearly going to want to get some help and support with your Personal Statement, and the great news is that there are almost certainly people around to help you. As you might expect, I have a few thoughts on how to make the very most of the feedback you can receive, by getting the feedback in a planned manner.

First up I'd suggest you get feedback from no more than three (or possibly four) different people. Why? Because any more than that and you will get so much conflicting feedback that you won't know who to listen to and what to change.

Secondly, think carefully about the order that you seek feedback so that you get the final set of feedback from the most expert person you know.

Thirdly, don't ask for feedback from anyone at any point unless you have checked the spelling and grammar in the statement and are confident they are perfect. Otherwise your trusted supporter will simply correct the spelling and grammar and you will have missed the opportunity for proper feedback about the content.

So, in a little more detail, this is what I would do if I was looking for feedback and support on my Personal Statement.

### **Friends or Family**

Firstly, once I have what I think is a strong first draft, with spelling and grammar checked, I'd find a trusted friend or family member and ask them for their comments. They should help you with readability and iron out any sections that don't make obvious sense. They may suggest you have too much in one section and not enough in another. They may also point out things that they know about you that

you have missed, and suggest better examples that could be more relevant. Take their suggestions and consider them carefully, but make up your own mind about what is most important. Then redraft and check your grammar and spelling again.

### **Subject expert**

Next I would show it to a subject teacher at school; someone who is an expert in the subject you are applying to. They can comment on the academic aspects and check whether you have demonstrated your understanding, motivation and knowledge of the course effectively. You may be allocated a teacher for this purpose and they are likely to have helped students with this before.

I cannot stress enough how important this feedback is for those of you who are applying to high demand, academic courses at the most competitive universities. Once you have



their feedback, draft the statement again, and once more check the grammar and spelling.

### **University counsellor**

Finally, you will almost certainly have access (at school or college) to a university counsellor (or a Careers Adviser, or even Head/Deputy Head of 6th) who will help. They will have supported countless students in perfecting their statements, and while they won't necessarily understand everything you have written about the subjects and courses, they will have a very good idea about how to get the right balance in a statement; what to say more about, and what to say less about. They will give pointers on content, style and clarity.

Take their feedback, redraft, check and show it to them one again to make sure you have addressed their feedback fully.

## **How to ask for feedback**

In each case, when seeking feedback, be clear what feedback you are looking for. The simplest way I know of asking for feedback is simply to ask “*How can I make this better?*”. This makes it clear to them that you are interested in improving your statement, and that you are not just looking for their approval.

It’s a great way of encouraging people to give you positive suggestions, rather than have them just tell you what is good about it, and what is not so good.

You should also agree how you are going to receive this feedback. If they are giving you verbal feedback, take notes there and then, and if you don’t understand the feedback, ask them to clarify. If the feedback is written, and something is not clear, then go back to them and ask for clarification.

Also, don't expect three or four rounds of feedback from your teacher or your counsellor. In most cases you should expect one round of feedback, then you make the relevant changes, and they look at it once more to check that you've made the right improvements.

You may get one more round if the statement is particularly far off the mark to start with, and you effectively need to re-write it.

And finally, once you have had the sign-off and approval from your counsellor, don't show it to friends and family and change it all over again, unless you genuinely think your friends and family have greater experience, knowledge and expertise than the counsellor.

In the next, and final chapter, we have a look at my top ten Personal Statement tips.

# 10: Top Personal Statement tips

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Just in case you want a few final tips before you start your first draft, here are some thoughts that I have picked up from a whole bunch of admissions selectors and other experts over the years. In no particular order...

## **#1 Draft your statement in Word or Google docs first**

If you do, it will be easier to share with others and you can make use of spelling and grammar checks. And of course, you'll have a handy copy of it kept safe to use later.

## **#2 Avoid using quotes**

Loads of students try to use quotes in their statement. Whether it's a ubiquitous quote from a famous sportsperson, a classic quote from a well respected author, or an obscure comment from an indie singer, the advice of

most experts is just don't. It will most likely sound clichéd, unoriginal, or if the quote is seriously obscure, just weird.

If you really must use a quote, run it past a friend or teacher and watch their face as they read it.

You'll know straight away whether it is a good idea!

### **#3 Don't even think about using jokes or humour**

Humour is just about the most difficult thing for anyone to get into any piece of writing, simply because humour varies so wildly across people, backgrounds, ages and cultures. The chances of you writing something that will be received as funny by each of the admissions selectors is slim to none.

### **#4 Be honest, straightforward and truthful**

I know, this sounds basic, but just be truthful about your inspirations, your achievements and your aspirations. Most admissions selectors know fine when they read BS, and they don't like it.

This doesn't mean that you write about all your weaknesses, your uncertainties or the confidences you keep; this should be a positive, uplifting piece of writing about your strengths, your achievements, your learnings and your aspirations.

But it should not be made up, and it should not exaggerate; you and your real story are plenty to write about.

### **#5 Use simple, easy-to-read language**

The most common problem I have when reading Personal Statements is that so many contain convoluted sentences and complex words that are clearly not normal vocabulary. Don't do this. Just write in plain, easy-to-read English.

Sure, you may use some large words if they are part of the technical or academic language of the subject you're discussing, but otherwise just keep it simple.

## **#6 However, do use language that inspires!**

My old English teacher wanted the words “*nice*” and “*good*” banned from the English language because they are so boring. I can guarantee that you know so many words that are more inspiring and interesting than these, so go ahead and use them.

Just don’t go so far that it’s not your voice any more!

## **#7 Ask the question “So what?”**

For each example you write, ask yourself “*So what?*”. Have you told the reader exactly why this example is relevant to your application for their course? If it’s not clear why the example is relevant, then make it clear, or cut it out.

Or to put it another way, demonstrate reflective thinking in everything you write.

## **#8 Don't copy or use an essay mill**

Don't copy anything that your friends have written, or that you found on the internet, and definitely don't pay someone off some dodgy website to write your statement for you.

You are likely to be caught out by the plagiarism software, and even if you aren't it is likely that the statement you have copied or paid for will not be as good as your own.

## **#9 Read it out loud**

Once you think your statement is finished, try reading it out loud, perhaps to a friend or family member. When you read it, does it sound right? Does it sound like your voice, telling your story?

If so, you are almost certainly on the right track.

If not, you and your friend will immediately know. And if it doesn't sound like you, it's a sign that you are not being



authentic, but are trying to be something you're not. So go back, rewrite the sections that don't sound right, and make sure the statement is authentically you!

## **#10 Remember, it's YOUR Personal Statement**

Finally the most important tip of all: Remember that it's *your* Personal Statement.

Make it personal and own it.

This means that ultimately it's your decision what to put in, and what to leave out. It's your motivation you are demonstrating. And it's your skill and experience that you are showing off.

No one else can do this for you.

So own the process, from start to finish. Use every resource that is available. Take responsibility for how you approach the writing process, what you write, how you get feedback, and when you do the work.

You'll have to take the consequences of the outcome, so take ownership of the task.

So... that's it. That, in a nutshell, is pretty much everything I know about How to Write your Personal Statement.

## Before you go...

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Everything I have covered in this short guide is also available as an online course at [www.betterunichoices.com](http://www.betterunichoices.com), where you can also sign up for my weekly newsletter.

Alternatively, you can watch the videos on my [YouTube channel](#).

You'll also find it as a short Podcast series on [Spotify](#) or [Apple Podcasts](#).

I hope you have found this helpful, but I'd love to hear your feedback so that I can keep improving my work.

Just send an email to [jonathan@betterunichoices.com](mailto:jonathan@betterunichoices.com), and let me know, quite simply, how can I make this better!

And of course, if you've found this series helpful, tell your friends, family members, teachers and advisers all about it!