

How to make the best possible university application

Key points

- Ensure your existing qualifications and your predicted grades match or exceed the university and course entry requirements – check the ‘small print’ e.g. specific GCSE grades
- Ensure you sit the relevant entry test for each university if required (BMAT or UKCAT, MAT, HAT etc.)
- Ensure you have relevant work experience for those courses where it is an entry requirement e.g., medicine or teaching
- Meet every deadline both in school and for UCAS – teachers can’t proof read personal statements which arrive on October 15th for the October 15th deadline and believe it or not, your first draft will need changes...
- Appropriate applications sent during the autumn term are more likely to be successful than those which are left until the January 15th deadline
- Start thinking about your personal statement in Year 12

Personal statement

Even though you may believe that you are the only person applying for a place on a course with a particular set of exam results and predictions, you’ll probably find that there are at least 50 others all with the same set of qualifications, all wanting one of the 15 available places. The poor, overworked Admissions Tutor needs a way to decide between all the applicants and one way is the personal statement.

The personal statement is your opportunity to show an Admissions Tutor that you are an interesting person who is interested in the course they are responsible for. It is your one chance (apart from an interview) to stand out and shine.

How do you do it?

There are lots of great ways to write an excellent personal statement and you don’t have to follow a strict pattern. However, this version seems to flow quite nicely and can be adapted to suit your style. For extra advice, the UCAS website has guidelines for filling in the whole form – you’ll be applying online and the statement format is standardized: roughly 47 lines, size 12 font or a total of 4000 characters including spaces.

Remember: the person reading your statement is an academic who has devoted their life to a subject you claim to have an interest in. Therefore, the main focus of the statement should be your interest in the course and there should be plenty of relevant academic and/or vocational examples you can include to prove your interest.

Opening paragraph

You need to show the Admissions Tutor that you **know what you are applying for**. If you have selected your 5 courses carefully, they should be the same or in similar subject areas but don't have to be called exactly the same thing as many universities have different names for similar courses. Medicine, Dentistry and Veterinary Medicine are the exceptions as you can only choose 4 courses and 1 essential 'back-up' course, usually a related subject like Biochemistry or Zoology which you don't need to mention in the personal statement. It means that you have the possibility of doing your back-up course (for example, Biochemistry followed by a Graduate Medical degree) if you don't receive any offers for Medicine this time.

When applying for a joint honours degree you should ensure your statement shows your commitment to all the subjects you will be studying, for example French and Management, Philosophy with Politics and Economics – even if not all 5 courses contain all subjects. For applications to general Engineering/ Science courses, include a paragraph which explains your interest in a particular subject area if you are required to choose at some universities, such as Natural Sciences at three universities and Physics at the other two.

You may like to start with a quote, a statement or some questions to show that you know what the course entails and that you are enthusiastic about studying it in more depth. If you are using a quote, ensure it is accurate and you explain how it has inspired you.

In all statements make sure you include examples of extracurricular reading and research which could include the internet, relevant project work, lectures or courses you have attended and when appropriate, relevant examples from current affairs or work experience.

Don't waste space by waffling or saying you want to study something just because it is interesting. Full stop. You need to explain what you find interesting about it; perhaps it's a particular topic you know you'll be able to carry on studying at university or something related to it.

What next?

You need to show the Admissions Tutor that you have all the transferable skills and good qualities you might need in order to participate successfully in university life and your course of study. You can use some of the activities you have been involved in to demonstrate your range of skills and qualities – these can be academic, non-academic, in school or out of school. If you get it right, after you leave university you can use your statement to help you with job applications – employers like transferable skills too!

Academic

Don't waste space telling the Tutor which subjects you're studying. They already know, they've read the rest of your application. If you mention them at all, it may be to show what skills you've developed as a result of studying them such as

- skills of evaluation
- the ability to research and analyse data
- essay writing
- presentation skills
- the ability to think logically and solve problems,
- communication skills
- project/team work
- time management and so on.

Your teachers can include achievements you are particularly proud of in the reference – it sounds better if they mention the 100% you achieved in each Maths module or the school History prize you have won every year. They can also outline any issues you have faced which may have had a negative impact on your studies (so you don't have to). You should let your teachers know if there is something you think should be included.

Non-academic

Think about the **other activities** you've done and what skills or qualities (for example motivation, determination, initiative, enthusiasm) they have enabled you to enhance. For leadership skills, try to show examples of your ability to solve problems and to motivate a team when things haven't gone according to plan – that's usually the chance to talk about cheering up your team on the Duke of Edinburgh expedition when you all got hopelessly lost.

Work experience isn't essential for most courses but if it is a course entry requirement, ensure you have some and then show how it confirmed your choice of vocation.

Don't be afraid to use **language** which shows your enthusiasm for the course or life in general. Do avoid swallowing a dictionary and also avoid words like passion or ardent desire. You can mention things you thoroughly enjoy doing but don't be negative; it wastes space and creates a bad impression.

To finish off this paragraph, put in a final couple of lines about what you do for **fun**. Are you a musician, do you enjoy baking cakes or photographing snails, do you collect horror films, do henna tattoos or play rugby, hockey or cricket for your school or county? If you are asked for an interview, you may be asked about your interesting activity and how you could contribute to university life as a whole. Don't go into too much detail; you just don't have the space – remember, the content of the statement should be mainly subject specific whether you are applying for Engineering, Architecture, English or Jewellery Making. We don't want to read three paragraphs about your time as a Brownie Leader...

Summing up

It is a good idea to finish with a really punchy sentence reminding the Admissions Tutor how enthusiastic you are, committed to the course you've applied for and looking forward to participating in university life as a whole.

It is sensible to ask someone who has good spelling and grammar to check your statement once you've finished it. If your school or college has set you a deadline - meet it! Teachers don't have an unlimited amount of free time available to check your statement; you'll keep them happy and ensure they have the time to read it carefully if you can be bothered to meet the deadline.

Remember, UCAS deadlines are final and teachers can't carefully read applications which arrive at the very last minute!

NB - you won't be able to write your statement in one attempt; it will take a few re-writes to get it as good as it can be.

If you think very carefully about your statement, listen to advice and put in every effort when writing it, you've done the best you can possibly do. Don't be afraid to really shout about your interest in the course, your skills and good qualities – be positive. For every one of you who says you don't like to put yourself forward, remember – there are 50 other people out there saying 'me, me, me!' so why aren't you one of them? Good luck with your application!