

Writing a successful personal statement

Audio transcript

Slide 1: Welcome slide

Welcome to this session on how to write a successful personal statement, which is one of a variety of resources on the UWE Bristol website on different topics about planning for your future and applying to university, which you can check out as well.

Slide 2: Introduction

My name is Nicky Rogers, and I work at UWE Bristol as a Pre-HE careers adviser in the Widening Access team. We work with local schools and colleges in the area to support students like yourselves to explore all the options and manage your next steps.

Slide 3: Today's Session

So today I'm going to talk to you about writing a successful personal statement for your university application form. I'll explain what a personal statement is and why it's actually really important to think about what admissions tutors want from you. This will help you write the most relevant statement to help you get an offer. There's also a handout you can download from the website, to help get you started.

At the end of the session, I'll give you our UWE Bristol pre-HE team email address so you can contact us if you have any questions. We're always happy to help where we can.

Slide 4: UCAS Basics

A few basics to begin with. The personal statement is like a short essay you write about why you're the perfect candidate for the undergraduate course you're applying for. You need to succinctly write your statement in 47 lines or 4000 characters including spaces; you need to write concisely as there's no space for verbosity, repetition, duplication of information given elsewhere. There is a minimum count of 1000 characters so you can't get away with just saying, 'take me on your course' - it needs to be more reflective than that. We usually say that as close to the maximum character count as possible is the best formula, however it is personal to you so it's up to you, however remember to be enthusiastic about the course that you're applying for. The admissions tutors want to know why they should select you so don't put in anything negative just tell them what you want them to know about you. You also don't need to include information that's already elsewhere on the form: subjects, predicted grades etcetera. The statement forms part of the wider overall UCAS application which does include your personal details, educational and employment history, HE course choices and references from college tutors.

Slide 5: How important is your Personal Statement?

So how important is it? Only a minority of university courses hold interviews, so more often than not the decision to offer you a place will be based purely on your UCAS application. Meaning your personal statement could be a deal breaker...The more competitive the course is, the more likely your personal statement could be the deciding factor, especially when it comes down to two candidates with very similar academic achievements (as is often the case for subjects with high entry requirements). Some courses that lead to professional qualifications go one step further and will score your personal statement against their selection criteria, with that score helping to determine whether you get an offer, interview or rejection. For example, if you apply for courses like medicine, nursing or physiotherapy, you may find that some of your chosen unis will shortlist in this way.

Slide 6: Admissions tutors will ask...

Your statement will demonstrate your unique style, interests and enthusiasm for the course. It's **your** personal statement. Ultimately admissions tutors want to know:

- Why you have applied to do the course?
- Why you think you will be suitable?

You need to stand out as a real person, as opposed to one of the many applicant numbers that will pass before their eyes. Your personal statement is where you can differentiate yourself from these other candidates. It's where you can fill in the picture a tutor has of you in their head, and where you can leave a real impression that makes them want to meet you, or offer you a place.

Slide 7: Check the entry requirements

Now we're going to pick up on a few key points now to help you write your statement, starting with checking the entry requirements for your course. This is important to give you the clues as to what admissions tutors are looking for (as well as checking whether you have the grades/points that the university want). The section will often start with grade/subject entry requirements as shown in this example of a typical children's nursing course. You need to check whether you've met these first of all, if not, your application could be rejected at the first sift.

Slide 8: Entry requirements – Not just academic

It's likely that all applicants will have same required subjects and grades – leading on more importantly to what else they want from you as a potential applicant. However, many universities also provide a section on their course information page on the website to help you complete your statement. You can see from this that they want very specific information (that you'll need to demonstrate in your application), not just

why you want to do this course. Giving them what they want is vital - in this example –they are looking for realistic insight into NHS. Some courses will require you to have done relevant work experience, so if you haven't got this, you need to plan when and how you will get it.

Slide 9: Entry requirements – Professional courses

Here's another example from a professional course. In a way it can be harder for non-vocational courses where there isn't specific guidance on the website. Here you need to look for clues in the detailed course descriptions – look for features that are common to all your choices and tailor your statement to match these.

Slide 10: Demonstrating your passion

Demonstrating enthusiasm or passion can be difficult to do sometimes, but it is necessary. The admissions tutor love their subjects – you need to convey and demonstrate your own love to them. If you show what you're into, they'll want to know why (and be on the same page as you).

This is why it's easier to write if you are applying for same or very similar courses – if you are applying for, say, a joint course you can outline your interests in both subjects, but you couldn't apply for multiple courses, particularly multiple vocational courses, as it's impossible to show passion and enthusiasm at the same level for all of these at once.

Slide 11: Activities to demonstrate your passion

There are lots of ways to evidence your interest and curiosity:

Eg via related work experience or shadowing you've done (which is particularly relevant for certain vocational degrees and can be a pre-requisite).

Wider reading, research and curiosity about current affairs will demonstrate knowledge of current issues and topics within the field. A good example here is reading academic or industry related journals or even doing an online course: there are lots of short courses on all sorts of topics provided freely by universities across the world, available on sites such as Future Learn and Coursera.

Also projects you've completed through a BTEC or EPQ, part-time jobs or voluntary work, being a course/student council representative or running a club are also useful. You can show your creative skills through blogging or entering competitions.

So think about what you could do to fill any gaps. Now is a good time to look for virtual and online opportunities to engage with your subject. And make use of open days like this to ask what will impress department admissions advisers.

Slide 12: ABC guide

When talking about an activity, ABC is a useful acronym to draw upon. You need to go beyond just describing activities to identify the skills you have gained and how these actually relate to your course.

You could also add D for drive if you can also relate your experience to a relevant career goal.

Slide 13: Be Specific

When it comes to explaining your motivation in writing, try to be specific and grab the reader's attention. Tailor it to your subject, showing your understanding and interest so far (and even what you want to learn more about).

Here are 2 examples for Computer Science degree applicants. The first is bland and fails to grab attention. The second is better in that it is a bit richer in detail and shows some evidence of wider reading yet is still a bit lacking.

Compare it with...

Slide 19: ABC example

This example is much better because it draws you in and you want to find out more. It does this by elaborating, showing evidence of current affairs, wider knowledge and reading, and demonstrating curiosity in the subject.

In the second paragraph, there is content on how they intend to apply the knowledge from what they hope to learn on the degree, which is great.

Don't forget that the audience is an admissions tutor who is passionate about their subject, so this example would certainly be in line with their interest.

Slide 15: Ideas for structure

Although it is your personal statement which you can structure as you wish, many students struggle initially with organising their statement. Here are a couple of suggestions. Basically, start with how you came to making the decision to study this course (your journey), then reflect on your academic, practical, work and other experiences and relate this to your career goals if you have them, concluding if you have space. The first example might be more relevant for an A level student, the second (on the right) for a vocational student who has done more relevant work experience as part of the course.

Remember at each stage ask so what question and show enthusiasm and insight into the subject.

Slide 16: What to include in your statement

So what should go in and what should you leave out? Remember not to repeat information elsewhere on the form, your qualifications will be in the education section and your teachers will enter your predicted grades when they complete the reference. Always have a purpose for what you are including – the hours aren't important, the ability to time-manage/organise/show commitment etc. is important.

Even if you only have one course at one institution you intend to apply for, you may change your mind, or circumstances may change so give your chance to add other options later: unis don't expect to be mentioned by name. With quotations -if it's a cool quotation, chances are other applicants could also be using it, which detracts from your unique personal statement – what is really saying about you? If you have a career goal, do mention it, but avoid clichés such as I've always wanted to be a...The key message is to link to the subject and use evidence & weigh up the value of the experience/statement in the 4000 characters with spaces you have.

Slide 17: Choose your words carefully

Avoid repetition and using words such as 'do/did'. The example words on the screen are more 'active' verbs which are much more engaging when you are describing your examples. A greater degree of eloquence makes for a better, smoother read. However, avoid overdoing it and using flowery language and things you wouldn't naturally say (you don't have the words to waste). Remember to be positive – avoid highlighting any areas of weakness, lack confidence, personal struggles or issues, unless you are showing the benefit to you of overcoming difficulties like resilience, perseverance and empathy.

There is a handout you can download to help with this at the end of the session.

Slide 18: Getting started

Start getting some things down on paper - depending on your thinking style, you may prefer to mind map or make a list, but it helps to get some notes down to start with before constructing sentences.

Using prompts will help you consider what you might include, you don't have to come up with answers for all the questions. There are some interactive versions of these.

It should take some time - you'll likely go through a few drafts before you get the polished final version that you submit as part of your UCAS application. It's useful to save each edit as a new draft, so you don't lose anything you might want to go back to later.

Don't leave your statement to the last minute; give yourself time to draft and re-draft, plus share it with others for feedback. It takes time to do it right, but it is definitely time well spent

Slide 19: Available resources

Using relevant resources is key. Download the handout for good sources of help. Which uni even has a personal statement builder, available until the end of June, to get you started.

Just do beware of looking at too many personal statements online. UCAS use similarity detection software to identify copied work, which could potentially jeopardise your place.

Slide 20: Good luck

Now it's over to you to get started. Once you've got a few words, phrases, ideas down it becomes much easier. And remember that writing your statement can help to work out whether you have made the right choice, and should make writing future applications that much easier.

I hope you found this session useful. Many thanks for listening.