

Writing a successful personal statement – audio transcript

Slide 1 - Introduction

Hello everyone. I hope you're all keeping safe and healthy in these challenging and unusual times. My name is Nicky Rogers, and I work at UWE Bristol as a careers adviser in the pre-HE careers team. We work with local schools and colleges in the area to support students, like yourself, to explore your options and plan for your next steps after you finish your current course.

Under normal circumstances, we would usually come into your school or college and speak to you personally, face-to-face. However due to the current lockdown we've decided to pre-record some of the workshops we would typically be delivering around this time of year so that you can still get the information and advice you need to help you plan ahead.

Before we start, I want to explain that although the session will be less interactive than if I was meeting you in person, there are still some activities you can try to help reinforce the learning. All you need to do is simply pause the recording, do the activity, then restart the recording afterwards.

At the end of the session, if you have any questions for us, please email us at the UWE Bristol pre-HE team email address that we will give you. We'll try to help wherever we can. Lastly, I wanted to let you know we will be posting other sessions and resources like this on the UWE Bristol website on different topics about planning for your future and applying to university, so please do to check them out as well. We hope you find our sessions useful.

Slide 2 – Today's session

So today I'm going to talk to you about writing a successful personal statement for your university application form. We're going to 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. We'll be considering how to make you stand out and hopefully get you started today.

Slide 3 – What is a personal statement?

So what is personal statement? Well it's basically a short reflective essay, on an average a side of A4 describing your motivation, skills and suitability for higher education. You'll also need to demonstrate these things in applications for jobs, degree apprenticeships and possibly internships so practising writing one is invaluable even if you haven't decided to actually apply for higher education. If you don't want to go to university you will still need to think about how you can convince an employer you are suitable in an application form or CV. So the principles outlined in today's session are still relevant.

Slide 4 – How important is your personal statement?

So how important is it? Well, it's a part of your UCAS application form that is essential to complete. It's particularly vital for courses where there's competitive entry. These days very few university courses hold interviews so the decision to offer you a place is usually based on your UCAS application. The more

competitive the course, the more likely a personal statement could be the deciding factor; especially when it comes down to two candidates with similar or the same academic achievements and work experience. It can make a huge difference at clearing - if you didn't quite get the results that you wanted, then your personal statement will possibly determine whether or not you're still offered a place on the course that you wanted.

Slide 5 – Personal statement basics

A few basics to begin with. We've already mentioned 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 1,000 characters so you can't get away with just saying, you know, 'take me on your course' - it needs to be more reflective than that. We advise 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.

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. Make sure you don't include information that's already elsewhere on the form: subjects, predicted grades etc. You apply online at UCAS.com. The statement forms part of the wider overall UCAS application which includes your personal details, educational and employment history, HE course choices and references from college tutors.

Slide 6 – Who is your audience?

Who are admissions officers and recruiters? They are your audience. They are the people who will read through your application and decide whether to offer you a place or an interview or audition for a place. It's a good idea to think about: How many applications are they looking through in a day? How long with they spend on your application and personal statement? – it's likely to be a relatively brief amount of time. Will they be able to tell what your skills are? What your experience is? Do they understand your qualifications (A-Levels, BTEC, Technical) and how this links to the courses you are applying for? They will have specific criteria they are looking for in your application and they will be assessing how your application matches up to these and therefore your suitability.

Slide 7 – They will ask...

Your job is to convince admissions tutors you are suitable for their course. 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 bring your application to life and 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.

Your statement will demonstrate your unique style, interests and enthusiasm for the course. It's **your** personal statement. Ultimately they want to know: Why you have applied to do the course? Why you

think you will be suitable? This transfers to job applications too, where you may have to answer these questions directly on an application form, or in a covering letter for a CV, and at interview.

Slide 8 – Save yourself a lot of time

It is very hard to write a good personal statement until you have made your choices. This is because so much of what you write is linked to the course you want to do. You can't write about it unless you know what 'it' is. So self-reflection here is critical. Talking to friends, family and teachers can help you learn more about your strengths and experiences related to the course you want.

Reading around course descriptions on UCAS or What Uni and job descriptions on the Prospects.ac.uk website can help get you clear on why you want to choose this course above all the others out there. Have you read related journals, industry standards? Are you following news articles related to the subject of your choice? All of this will help give you the breadth of understanding of what the course needs and how you match up to this.

Also remember that you will not be writing to impress just one university so you need to think broadly about the subject you would like to take further. Having said all that, if you aren't decided, you can still get down on paper some basic things you will want to include, so you are ready to write your statement when you have finalised your choice.

Slide 9 – Things to consider: Entry requirement clues

Checking the entry requirements is important to give you the clues as to what the admission tutors are looking for (as well as checking whether you have the grades or UCAS points the university want). The section will often start with grade and subject entry requirements before specifying other desirable attributes or essential experience. Many universities also provide a section or page on their course information page on the website to help you complete your statement, particularly for vocational or professional courses.

You can see from this they want very specific information (that you'll need to demonstrate in your statement), not just about why you want to do the course. Giving them what they want is vital, especially if they are scoring you against suitability criteria. Consider the key messages in this example – they are looking to see if you have a realistic insight into the NHS, perhaps gained from work experience?

Slide 10 – Entry requirements: Not just academic

Vocational courses will specify the skills, qualities and work experience they require. Also professional and creative courses will give clues to what they want to see in the personal statement. Open days are a really helpful way of finding out what to include. At the moment, universities are offering virtual open days and online contact so do look at opportunities to get some top tips from department staff themselves as well as Admissions (particularly if it is a competitive course e.g. nursing and midwifery) so you can give them what they want. It will also help to check whether you're choosing this area of study for the right reasons and that your expectations match the course.

Slide 11 – Same for job applications

Also, just to mention, it's the same process of checking entry requirements and looking for clues as to what the employer wants when applying for jobs. You'll either find this information in the job advert or in the person and job specification.

Slide 12 – What to include in your statement

Let's look at some of content in your personal statement. You need to explain: Why have you chosen this course? What motivates you and interests you? And talk about how your interest developed. What have you done that demonstrates your passion and shown you've pursued it? Reflect and analyse. What have you done in the classroom and importantly, outside of the classroom to show this? How can you link this to what is going on in the world around you? How are your academic subjects relevant? How have you drawn inspiration from your current studies? What skills have you developed during your Level 3 study (e.g. research, independent thinking, critical analysis). Can you demonstrate any other specialist skills or knowledge that show your aptitude for the course?

If you want to get something specific out of the course, provided it's reasonable, say so. You can also include things you're looking forward to at uni such as taking part in sports, work or study placements etc. Think about the balance of what you are writing. Yes, what you do outside of school/college is important but make sure you link it to the area of study/vocation you are applying for.

Slide 13 – Personal statements: to include or not?

Given what we've looked at so far, it's now over to you to decide which five of these topics on the slide could be included in your personal statement, and which five shouldn't be. Pause now to decide, before I reveal the answers.

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. Even if you only intend to apply for one course at one institution you may change your mind, or circumstances may change so give yourself the chance to add other options later. Unis don't expect to be mentioned by name. 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?

The key message here is to link your content to the subject and weigh up the value of the experience and whether it's worth including it in your statement within the character limit you have.

Slide 14 – Demonstrating your 'drive'

Demonstrating enthusiasm or passion can be difficult to do sometimes, but it is necessary. The admissions tutor love their subjects – you need to show them your passion too. 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 15 – Ways to show your ‘drive’

There are lots of ways to evidence your interest and curiosity: Via related work experience or shadowing you’ve done (which is particularly relevant for certain vocational degrees and can be essential) Wider reading, research and an interest in current affairs will demonstrate your 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, Massive Online Open Courses, or MOOCs are freely available on sites such as Future Learn and Coursera. Also projects e.g. through BTEC or an EPQ (extended project qualification), part-time jobs or voluntary work, being a course student rep or running a club are great. Or you could show off your creative skills by blogging or entering some 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. There is more content than ever available through the internet during lockdown.

Slide 16 – Personal statement ABCD guide

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

Slide 17 – Use ABCD to demonstrate your drive

I want you to think about how you would explain an activity you have done using this technique. Either pause and do this activity now, or come back to it after watching the whole session. If you haven’t yet decided what to study, you can still reflect on the activities and what you’ve learned from them, then choose which best link to your course and goals later on.

Slide 18 – Be specific

When it comes to explaining what motivates you in your statement, try to be specific and grab the reader’s attention. Tailor it to your subject, showing your understanding and interest so far (and even mention what you’re keen to learn more about). Here are two examples for Computer Science degree applicants. The first is bland and fails to grab attention. The second is better in that it’s a bit more detailed and shows some evidence of wider reading, but it still could be better. Compare it with...

Slide 19 – Even better...

This example is much better because it draws you in making 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 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 pique their interest.

Slide 20 – Formatting your statement

A few words now on the layout and formatting. Admissions tutors may read up to 30-40 statements a day, so it's important to make your statement presentable. Looking at this example, how difficult is it to read what this student has written? How would the reader feel? Are they going to read to the end? Can they EASILY pick out the relevant parts of the personal statement? There might be some great content in there which gets missed.

Slide 21 – Why use paragraphs?

Remember your audience before you fill every bit of space you can.

Slide 22 – 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 e.g. resilience, perseverance, empathy etc. There is a handout you can download to help with this at the end of the session.

Slide 23 – Some suggestions on structure

Although it is your personal statement and you can structure it as you wish, many students struggle initially with organising their statement. Here are a couple of suggestions. Basically, start with how you decided 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 for a vocational student who has done more relevant work experience as part of the course. Remember at each stage ask the 'so what' question and use this to show your enthusiasm and insight into the subject.

Slide 24 – Getting you 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 to include, you don't have to come up with answers for every question. There are some interactive versions of these – you'll find the links in the downloadable handout.

Be prepared to spend some time on it - you'll likely write a few drafts before you get the polished final version that you submit as part of your UCAS application. So don't expect to thrash it out in a weekend. 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 plenty of time to draft and re-draft, plus share it with others for feedback. It takes time to get it right, but it is definitely time well spent.

Slide 25 – Use the available resources but...make it unique to you

Using relevant resources is key. Download the handout for some excellent sources of help. The Which Uni website even has a personal statement builder, available until the end of June, to get you started. Be careful though of looking at too many personal statements online. UCAS use similarity detection software to identify copied work, which could potentially jeopardise your place.

Slide 26 – Quick quiz

Let's check your understanding, take a moment to decide if the following statements are true or false:

1. False: it's 47 lines or 4,000 characters.
2. False: You and lots of other people will have used it. Think about using quotes that are subject specific if you really want to use a quote.
3. is True: think about your style. Reading your statement out loud can sometimes help to identify what 'sounds right'.
- Finally 4. Is True: be prepared for several drafts but by using the resources available and getting feedback from your tutors as this will really help.

Slide 27 – In summary

Now 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 you work out if you've made the right choice, and should make writing any future applications that much easier.

Slide 28 – And finally

If you have any questions about the topics I've covered or indeed any other aspects of exploring and applying to university, please email us at the address on the slide – prehecareersadviser@uwe.ac.uk We'll be happy to help where we can. It's really important that you email us from your school or college email account, rather than a personal account, otherwise we won't be able to reply due to data protection. We look forward to hearing from you.

And finally, we'd really appreciate your feedback on this session by completing a very short, anonymous online survey which will appear on the next slide. This will help us to improve our service.

Many thanks for listening.