



A Guide to Writing the UCAS Personal Statement 2017

Writing your Personal Statement

By this point, you will have chosen your course and up to 5 universities that you want to apply to. Completing the UCAS application form is quite straightforward – it consists of several sections:

- Personal details
- Choices
- Education
- Employment
- Statement

The most challenging parts are the Choices – your selection of up to 5 courses that you wish to study - and the Statement. The former deserves the time taken in researching courses, looking at institutions, finding out about scholarship and bursary opportunities etc. as you are investing a great deal of your time and your money. Each year over a quarter of applicants (about 175,000) choose a university course without having visited –a worrying statistic.

The second, the personal statement, is your opportunity to convey to the Admissions tutor why you are the right applicant for the course. It's a given that everyone applying has the appropriate grades, so you need to demonstrate your enthusiasm to support your application.

You write one statement covering all choices which must not exceed 4000 characters (including punctuation and spaces) and 47 lines. Anything over this will be automatically cut off from your application. Although the statement is (and must be) entirely yours, there are guidelines to follow as most competitive universities are looking for specific things. It is vital that this is your own work. UCAS uses similarity detection software to detect copying; aside from this, admissions tutors are interested in *you*.

As you would with a good piece of writing it is best to have a beginning, a middle and an end. You must structure your statement well, as for many universities this is as important as the content. 75% -80% of the statement should be focussed on your subject; the rest will cover the skills developed from your extra curricular activities, plans for a gap year and perhaps, career aspirations.

It is possible from the information published on institution websites to ascertain what qualities and skills are being looked for in applicants. Some universities publish specific advice on writing your personal statement and it would be sensible to follow their structure if you particularly want to go to that institution. There is helpful information on the UCAS website and links from the Course Search results to all institutions. Thorough planning is crucial so consider carefully what you want to include. You must, of course, address your reasons for wishing to study your chosen subject. When mentioning extra reading, show that you did actually read it by discussing the content.

Points to identify:

What you want to study at university and why
The reasons that the subject interests you
Personal experiences which led to the decision to take the subject
Aspects of your current studies that you particularly enjoy
Details of extra, wider reading/podcasts/lectures/videos you have done
Projects, competitions, summer schools, taster days or courses
Details of relevant work experience, employment or voluntary work and *what you learned from it*

In addition, most competitive universities are looking for:
Evidence of clear thinking and understanding
Intellectual curiosity
Academic potential
Independent learning
Initiative
Contribution to the community

If you are applying for a more vocationally orientated course such as sports science, healthcare and so on, you will need to write about the practical side in more depth. Work experience is essential for courses such as teaching, physiotherapy, medicine, dentistry and veterinary and valuable for many others.

The other focus of the Statement is what you have achieved outside the classroom and your interests, and it is important not only to mention them but to highlight what you gained from the experience.

Positions of responsibility

Prefect duties

Helping out at school events and open days.

Young Enterprise, World Challenge, Duke of Edinburgh award, Debating societies and what you've gained from these experiences.

Part-time job

Community and charity work

Your interests and skills

Sport and leisure activities

Clubs and societies you are involved in or started

Musical instruments which you play and levels of achievement

Subjects you study which are not examined

Languages which you speak

Prizes you have won or positions achieved

An example of writing about extra curricular activities comes from LSE:

This statement

"I was the captain of the school football team and excelled in most other sports. I have also worked part-time in a sports store to earn money for university."

reads better as

"I was the captain of the school football team, and this has taught me the importance of working together as a team, and allowed me to prioritise my time between my studies and football practice. I feel that this has provided me with the experience to successfully balance my academic and social life, and I plan to continue this balance whilst at university."

As mentioned earlier, it is advisable to outline any plans you have for your career or for a gap year (especially if you are applying for deferred entry).

Your statement must not contain mistakes in spelling, punctuation or grammar. Do not rely on the computer spell checker – it does not always pick up errors such as 'there' and 'their' for example.

In addition, use plain simple English – many students suddenly start using flowery, poetic language to try and impress – it doesn't!

Essentials

Demonstrate that you have done your research

Take your time and structure the statement well

Don't embellish or lie

Be yourself

Check spelling

Help and advice is available in school - both from the Sixth Form Office and the Careers Adviser as required.

Resources:

How to Write a Winning UCAS Personal Statement: Daily Telegraph Guide (Careers library)

- <https://www.ucas.com/ucas/undergraduate/getting-started/when-apply/how-write-ucas-undergraduate-personal-statement>
- <https://university.which.co.uk/advice/personal-statements/how-to-make-your-personal-statement-stand-out-as-told-by-admissions-tutors>
- www.purepotential.org/personal-statements/writing-your-statement/
- <http://www.lse.ac.uk/study-at-lse/Undergraduate/Prospective-Students/How-to-Apply/Completing-the-UCAS-form/Personal-Statement>

Examples:

On a late July evening, pending my GCSE results, I was reading Lane's 'Oxygen' and was captivated by the discovery of a bacterial-run prehistoric fission reactor. This confirmed my fascination with biochemistry and my wish to study it further. It also encouraged me to take geology A level. As a result, I now have a deeper awareness of theories surrounding the origin and development of life: from LUCA to cyanobacteria, to the human brain. Biochemistry is who we are.

'The Greatest Show on Earth' initially made the primordial soup hypothesis seem compelling. However 'How Did LUCA Make a Living' (Nick Lane) expertly argued that, as chemiosmosis is both essential and universal, it must have come first. Alkaline hydrothermal vents provide the perfect proton gradient. Fortunately, this is not the only option for life. The possibility of even self-replicating biological systems elsewhere in the universe is a pressing question. This is aided by SETI's advances beyond the Goldilocks Zone, making extra-terrestrial life an incredibly diverse and intriguing field. The recent discovery of methane plumes on Mars could indicate an underground bacterial colony. 1 billion km further out and methane is still at the centre of science. Titan's methane lakes could act as a solvent for life. Some have even proposed the use of acrylonitrile as an alternative to the phospholipid bilayer.

My EPQ on the biochemical causes of ageing fed my fascination, not least because of the complexity and variety of different metabolic pathways within the body. During my investigation, I discovered the MARS model of ageing. I find it incredible that we can even attempt to simplify something as astonishingly complex as ageing to pure maths; especially when particles capable of wave function collapse are involved. Simultaneously traditional concepts are employed in progressive ways to treat deadly infections: magnetism is employed by Medisieve to filter out red blood cells infected with malaria.

I find mitochondria particularly intriguing. At first sight, they appear to show a clear distinction between complexity and the humble bacteria. This made the article 'Prokaryote or eukaryote? A unique microorganism from the deep sea' all the more remarkable: I am amazed we found a potential missing link for endosymbiosis. It is discoveries such as these that make biochemistry fascinating, while the never ceasing battle against disease and senescence renders it worthwhile.

Overall the discovery that Hydra has both linear mtDNA and an unlimited lifespan captivates me most of all. If the two are related could we one day implant a human embryo with linear mtDNA and prevent ageing? The CRISPR/Cas9 system would already be sufficient to replace nuclear mitochondrial genes; we could then simply destroy the circular DNA.

Since beginning at my school Biology and Chemistry have always been my favourite subjects, especially where they crossover. I achieved a gold in the year 11 Biology Challenge and a silver for the Biology Olympiad in year 12. In year 10 I won a debating competition for schools in the South-West which bolstered my confidence and developed my persuasive powers. I like to keep myself fit through running, cycling and bodyweight training as exercising like this serves to enhance my self-discipline. I thoroughly enjoyed the Tall Ships Race, which entailed 3 weeks in cramped conditions with 13 complete strangers; during this time I developed strong friendships and team building skills. We also experienced engine failure which led to an RNLI rescue. Afterwards, I cycled from John O'Groats to Lands' End in nine days to repay the RNLI by raising money for them.

I would absolutely love to develop my understanding of biochemistry and have aspirations towards research, particularly that of age-related diseases. I want to live in a world where Alzheimer's can be cured, I strongly believe university is the answer.

In my discovery of Literature, I have been struck by its capacity to be intensely personal, while still retaining a universal appeal. The author's ability to draw from experience, and engage a reader with perspectives on the human condition is why I am keen to study English at degree level.

In the contemporary poetry of Bukowski, experiences manifest themselves in his display of internal struggle. As an Art student, I am enticed by the irregular structure of first person syntax, and enjoy how the internal rhythm echoes his disjointed presentation of a flawed man. I was reminded of similar personal reflection in the works of Wordsworth, Coleridge and the wider Romantic Poets, during an episode of Melvyn Bragg's "In Our Time". Here, I found clear associations between the messages of hope in Coleridge's "Frost at Midnight" and Bukowski's "Roll of the Dice". To consolidate this interest, I read Michael Ferber's "Short Introduction" and saw Literature's exposure of the self; to wield man's full range of emotions. For me, poetry's manipulation of language is pervasive, and I relish the anticipation of pursuing the intricacies of Literature, through further study. In July, I was awarded a place at Eton Summer School. Here I was exposed to earlier works than I had studied in depth before, such as the anonymous "Sumer Is Icumen In" written in Middle English. I enjoyed approaching the untranslated text and found the use of recognisably 'modern' techniques furthered my appreciation of the nuances of the English language. I look forward to exploring similar works. Similarly, in the poetry of the Chilean Pablo Neruda, I was struck by the sensual lust evoked by his interpretation of our common natural landscape. As a Chemistry student, Literature provides this symbiosis between an appreciation of the fabric of our world, and the capability for a greater comprehension of ourselves and others through it. Literature also provides an escape from traditional conformity, a theme unambiguous in "Beirut 39", (a collection of Arabian works). Later in the summer, amongst books given to me by my Eton professor, I read Hemingway's "Fiesta". I believed as his journalistic style provokes an articulate interaction from the reader, the novel becomes a reflection of one's own ideas. I found myself enamoured by his complex characters, and holidaying near the featured city of Bayonne only encouraged this. For me, Literature is unique as its enjoyment demands this creative response. In Burgess' "A Clockwork Orange", the novel theorises a dystopian future. It is Kubrick's cinematic interpretation of these themes that remains a testimony to the lack of conformity in an appreciation of Literature, which intrigues me as an artist. This, coupled with its importance as a perspective on current affairs, makes Literature an academic venture that I am eager to pursue. As a photographer, my expression through image is inseparable from an expression through language; and last December, I took pleasure in curating an exhibition of fine art, music and poetry from my school. In this way, approaching my peers' work developed my ability to organise thematically to produce an effect. As the co-founder of my school's Arts Society and 6th Form Book Club, I have cultivated my ability to evidence and defend original concepts. While by establishing a Photography Club, I have committed myself to encouraging this view in the Lower School boys for whom I am responsible. I was awarded a Senior Prefect role, and now manage daily duties for a team of prefects. In my communication with this team, I feel confident as leader. I attribute my academic success to a sincere dedication to my subjects, supported by an ability to manage my time well while maintaining part time work. As a sociable person, I am excited at the prospect of thriving in a close-knit intellectual environment, and hope to further nurture an expanding appreciation as a reader and critic of the many attributes of literature.

The last few years have seen unprecedented political developments. From the Arab Spring to this year's shock victories for Brexit and Trump, people around the world are showing a desire for change that is ushering in a new, exciting era of politics. The first sign of this here in the UK was the 2015 general election, with the rise of UKIP and the rebuff of the polling data. I followed the election with interest, which led me to take A-level Politics to understand what was happening better. Rather than giving clarity, Brexit and the US election the following year raised even more questions which I hope explore further at university. Much of my time outside the classroom has been spent following these events as they happened.

While studying UK politics I read *Cameron at 10* by Seldon and Snowdon, an account of David Cameron's time as Prime Minister in the Coalition government. This details the inner workings of Number 10 better than anything I'd read previously, particularly the relationship between the incoming political advisors and the civil servants who had been there for years. It also gave insights into the government's thinking behind the biggest decisions - from forming the coalition to calling and campaigning in the Scottish referendum. I also read *Race of a Lifetime* by Heilemann and Halperin, about the 2008 US presidential campaign. Comparing the election this book covers to the one playing out in the news proved just how unusual 2016 really was.

While I've been fascinated by the national politics of the USA and the UK, over the year I still maintained an eye on more international events. Hence, as soon as I could, I chose to do an EPQ on Obama's actions and legacy in the Arab Spring, a topic where I could use my knowledge in American politics in a new way. I enjoyed researching it, looking at foreign policy journals, transcripts of speeches, and briefing reports by think tanks. I put my findings into a 6000 word piece where I examined American action and the rise of IS out of the chaos, as well the legacy Obama would leave to the next president. After finishing I read *China in Ten Words* by Yu Hua to fill the gap in my knowledge about China, a country that featured heavily in the US election. Hua explores how the Cultural Revolution and the Tiananmen Square massacre have moulded modern China and created the contradictions that characterise it today.

I also believe that to really understand a country you have to appreciate the cultural identity through the literature it produces. In A-level English, I've studied gothic literature from the last 200 years, from early works like *Melmoth the Wanderer* to 20th Century interpretations like *The Bloody Chamber*. Studying the evolution of this genre is, in many ways, studying the evolution of the public consciousness. Within the texts are the hopes and fears of ordinary people over a period of time that saw massive social and scientific changes. I have gone on to read authors who offer a criticism of the world as they saw it, like Dostoevsky and Chekhov, who infuse their works with their experiences in Russian society, and Kafka, who through his surrealism showed the absurdity in our world.

Over the last seven years, I've also been an active member of the school community. Through the school Politics Society I've heard local and national political figures give their takes on developments of the day and as a member of organising committee I've worked to engage more students through assemblies and publicising the talks. I've also played rugby throughout my life at a high level which taught me how to work as part of a group both as a leader and a team player - skills I've used over the last year in employment as a qualified lifeguard. I've also served as a writer for the school magazine and have participated in organised debates.

For me, Chemical Engineering puts Chemistry into perspective. It takes what Chemistry has taught me and turns it into something more practical in the real world. When I started to see the relevance of Chemical Engineering, I was hooked and began investigating different aspects of the subject.

This interest led me to arrange work experience at Porton Biopharma Ltd. I was shown, and took an active role in, different aspects of their work. I spent time working with liquid chromatography to purify Erwinase (used in leukaemia treatment), as well as experiencing some of the hurdles they encounter, such as having poor asymmetry when equilibrating the column. With one of the company's Chemical Engineers, I gained practical experience of troubleshooting equipment after a failure, and saw how engineers use technical information such as Process and Instrumentation Diagrams to support problem solving. The other major aspect I followed was the company's attempts to modernise their processes in order to improve efficiency and product quality. One such example was the use of High Performance Liquid Chromatography machines to analyse samples being tested for potential improvements.

Reading articles in 'The Chemical Engineer' and listening to podcasts has also fuelled my interest. Muggeridge demonstrated the fine line between yield and economics when she outlined a number of improved oil extraction methods using 'Water Alternating Gas'; adding a polymer to the water to increase its viscosity or by plugging up the main flow of water. This lecture showed that, contrary to popular belief, there is plenty of oil left; the problem is that it is currently too difficult, or not economically viable to obtain with today's technology and oil extraction methods. Something that excites me about Chemical Engineering is the ability to overcome these dilemmas and provide solutions to important issues. One article that caught my attention described how Mezzenga had created gold aerogel, with very promising potential applications as a catalyst. Catalysis is an area of the course that I am looking forward to, as I am intrigued by the way that compounds, seemingly unrelated to the process taking place, can speed up the rate by offering alternative reaction pathways.

A visit to a local gin distillery enabled me to see a different aspect of Chemical Engineering. I learnt how infusion is now used to add flavour to alcohol by refluxing the alcohol mixture underneath layers of ingredients. The increased surface area for infusion allowed for a more intense flavour compared to previous methods. I found the whole process fascinating.

Throughout my school career Maths and Chemistry have been subjects I have enjoyed and thrived in. Achieving gold in the Chemistry Challenge demonstrated this. I have also been entrusted with a number of roles, including being made a Prefect and a Maths and Chemistry mentor for younger boys. This has helped me develop my leadership skills and ability to explain things.

Last year I was offered the chance to visit Auschwitz, as part of a Holocaust Educational Trust programme. I found this an extremely powerful and moving experience which motivated me to organise a visit from a Holocaust survivor, Uri Winterstein, to my school. He gave a fascinating talk to my sixth form; an encounter which I felt was invaluable for all of us.

In my spare time I like to play snooker, squash and practise with my band, in which I am lead guitarist. Music has always been a major part of my life. Last year, I performed with my band in the school's House Music Festival, which really boosted my confidence when performing in front of large groups of people.

I am looking forward to going to university; the exciting opportunities that accompany it, and the level of independence it involves. I feel Chemical Engineering is well suited to my natural abilities and interests, and thoroughly believe I will make the most of all the opportunities it offers.