

HOW TO WRITE YOUR UCAS PERSONAL STATEMENT

BY JONATHAN TINNACHER



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About the author

Jonathan Tinnacher studied Law at the University of Edinburgh, where he was also Vice-President of the Student's Association, which gave him his first insights into the inner workings of student recruitment and university admissions. Over the following 20 years he worked in marketing, student recruitment and admissions at universities across the UK, including Stirling, Leicester, Loughborough and Imperial College London, where he was Director of Student Recruitment and Outreach.

After a period as a consultant, working with universities such as Queen Mary, University of London and St Mary's Twickenham, he started to work with the founders of Unibuddy. Here he worked to build the world's largest on-line student peer-to-peer and community platform, now used by around 700 universities world-wide.

He now lives in Bangkok with his wife, Elke, who is herself a university admissions expert, and currently Head of University Guidance at Harrow International School Bangkok.

Introduction

As I write this, it has just been announced that the UCAS Personal Statement will shortly be consigned to history. After many years of discussion and pressure from experts across the sector, UCAS have announced that they are undertaking a review and consultation that will see the Personal Statement replaced by a series of shorter, more focused questions. Most likely this will happen for students applying for 2025 entry, meaning that 2024 entry will almost certainly be the last hurrah for the Personal Statement as we know it.

The reasons? In essence, it's to level the playing field. Some students have the advantage of experienced advisers and family members able to advise and support them, while some do not. Many schools employ full-time University Guidance Counsellors to guide and support their students, checking and proofing several drafts of a statement before submission. They might have as few as 20 students to work with in each year group. In other schools there will be one overworked Deputy Head of Sixth Form, supporting 200 students through UCAS in two hours a

week. Others, of course, will get no support at all, and simply put, students without access to expert support and guidance are less likely to be able to use their Personal Statement to really stand out.

So why have I written this guide, and why release it now? Well, to be honest I wrote this a year or so ago, as part of a larger, broader book all about university and career choices. That book is taking shape now, but it won't be ready for some time. In the meantime there are around 750,000 students who are about to be the last cohort of applicants to have to write a Personal Statement in its current format. If this is you, then this guide is my attempt to help level the playing field for you; to give you the inside track on how to write the best possible Personal Statement for your application.

This guide will 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 for more than 20 years, at a whole variety of universities. It will also give you a very practical guide as to how to approach the task of actually writing your statement. Being an ebook, it doesn't contain the distractions of the multitude of websites that also contain guidance about writing a personal statement. Go online and you'll soon find yourself heading down a rabbit hole of a thousand blogs, videos, ideas and opinions on what to do and where

to start. With this guide, you can just read, take notes, and then start writing. Simple!

And for what it's worth, the one really useful thing about writing the Personal Statement is the fact that if you approach it properly, it forces you to reflect on your choices, your strengths and your experiences. If you do, you'll not only have a better chance of success with your applications, but you will also have made better and more informed choices about your future. So what's coming up?

In this guide I'm going to help you write your UCAS Personal Statement. We'll look at whether it really matters at all. We'll look at the people who will read it; their likely backgrounds and priorities. We'll look at when they might read it, and how it can impact their 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, way before you consider starting to write the statement itself. 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. I'll finish with some top tips that I've collected over the years from countless colleagues from universities across the sector, who like me, have spent years building their expertise and passing it on to applicants.

I am well aware that it won't just be applicants reading this. I hope that this guide can be useful to parents across the world who are supporting their sons and daughters with their applications, and are looking for insights to help and guide them. I hope that teachers and university advisers will also find it a useful read, particularly if you are new to the job and are looking for ways to help your students. Whatever your reasons for reading, I'm pleased you are here, just forgive me if I focus my attention and my language on the applicants themselves.

A quick guide to UCAS applications

While most of you will be reading this after you have started the UCAS process, and will have had some type of introduction to the process before you get this far, some might be reading this pretty early in the process, and so a short, concise introduction to the application process might be useful for you. So here goes...

UCAS stands for the Universities and Colleges Admissions Service, and they organise the process by which students can apply for undergraduate courses at universities and colleges in the UK. It covers almost all degree-level courses that school leavers might be considering, with the exception of some of the music and drama degrees available at conservatoires. It also covers some foundation courses (but confusingly, not all of them).

To apply, you'll set up an account at www.ucas.com, with all your personal details. 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 the progress of your application through a portal known as UCAS Track.

You'll need to do lots of research to find the right course for you (that's what the broader book I'm writing is all about!), 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. 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.

In one section of the application you will fill in the qualifications that you have already done (probably GCSEs, Standard Grades, IGCSEs or similar). In the next section you will fill in the qualifications that you are currently doing (probably A-levels, IB, Highers, BTEC etc.).

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. Note that you can only write one statement which will cover all of your courses, and be seen by each university, so you are best to have a coherent set of course choices, and you should not indicate any university preferences in your statement.

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

When you press send, the application goes to your school (or other application centre), not to UCAS. The UCAS lead at your school will then work with the teachers in their team to check the application, add a reference and add 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.

There are a number of deadlines that UCAS set as to when this needs to happen. Most notably for entry 2024 these are: 16th October 2023 for applications to Medicine, Dentistry and Veterinary Science courses or to the universities of Oxford and Cambridge, and 31st January 2024 for all other courses.

Once the application is complete, UCAS then makes your application available to the universities, who then have 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, which means that you can have a place provided you achieve certain grades or qualifications. Alternatively, the offer could be unconditional, meaning you already have all the qualifications they wish to see!

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. You can make one Firm choice, which should be your first choice; the course you most want to attend. This may be an offer that is conditional upon higher grades than you expect to achieve, but it should not be totally unattainable.

If your Firm choice is an unconditional offer, that is it, you are done, and the university will let you know what the next steps are to start studying with them. If your Firm choice is a conditional offer, then you will also make one Insurance choice. This should be a course with a conditional offer that is lower than your firm choice, and an offer that you are 100% confident that you will achieve. It's called Insurance for a reason; it's there in case things go wrong.

If you have accepted a Conditional offer, then once the university receives your exam results they will check whether you have met your conditions. If you meet the conditions, you are in. If you don't, the application moves to the insurance offer. If you meet their conditions, then again, you'll be going there instead. In either instance, you

may be accepted even if you narrowly miss the conditions (but there are no guarantees of this!)

If you are not accepted by either choice, then you will need to try to secure yourself a place through Clearing; a process by which unplaced students 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 midway through the process, and intricacies to the timing and choices of a number of university 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. So, let's get back to that statement!

Does my Personal Statement matter?

Before we look at the basics of how to write your statement, it's worth looking at the million dollar question: does the Personal Statement even matter? Every applicant, every year puts metaphorical blood, sweat and tears into their Personal Statement, creating several drafts, getting a whole bunch of opinions, redrafting several more times and losing many nights of sleep before they finally 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, for your course, in the specific year you apply. There are hundreds of universities, and thousands of admissions tutors. Most universities don't have a clearly articulated policy about the exact role of Personal Statements, and so even within the same university, different courses will use the statement differently in their processes. Even where a university does have a policy, these will be interpreted differently by different staff. And of course, what happens

one year may be very different from what happened the previous year.

The good news is that it 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. You need to give it your best shot for the simple reason that whoever reads your statement, and whenever they read it during the admissions process, a good Personal Statement can only enhance your application and give you a better chance of getting the offer. It can never damage your chances. A lazy, ill thought out statement may not disadvantage you (if you are lucky!), but in many circumstances, it will take away from what could otherwise be an excellent application.

To explain more precisely why you need to give it your best shot, I'll start by outlining who might be reading it, when they might read it, and how it could affect their decision, in particular how it can interact with other selection processes.

Who is going to read my statement?

Broadly speaking, there are two types of people who might be reading your personal statement: academics and administrators.

Many courses have admissions that are led by, or at least involve, the academics from the department where you'll be studying. In some cases they will be senior staff, who take the job very seriously, having maybe done the role for years (in some cases decades!). In other cases they will be fresh to the process, perhaps having been given the job of admissions when maybe they didn't really want it.

Either way, it is likely that they will generally be motivated to admit students who they would like to teach, and they will be most keen to see that you are informed about their subject, and motivated to learn. They have devoted their lives to the study of that subject, and while they won't necessarily expect that level of commitment from you quite yet, the last thing they want is someone in their class who isn't really bothered, and who will likely slack off when the going gets tough.

But, don't expect them to spend hours pouring over a small selection of Personal Statements, considering each one deeply; they'll probably have hundreds of statements to read and one thing that academics don't typically have is a load of spare time. They will almost certainly read your statement just once, and they'll read it quickly, making a swift assessment.

Other courses have admissions processes that are led by, or involve, administrators, rather than academics. So who are these people? They may be fairly junior staff, perhaps recent graduates, who are trained to look for specific things in applications. Or they may be highly skilled professionals with years of experience in admissions, trusted by the university or the department to make good judgements on the applications.

Similar to academics, they will read your Personal Statement quickly as they too will likely have hundreds to read. What's their motivation? Well, they may simply be matching your statement to a list of agreed criteria, in which case their motivation is simply to be fair, to ensure they treat all applicants the same, and to make decisions swiftly but without mistakes.

Those who have been given more free rein in their decision, and more management responsibility, are likely to have similar motivations, but they may well also have other concerns. They could be working towards specific entry targets, and so need to make exactly the right number of

offers. In addition, they could be particularly concerned with your potential entry grades, as they know that these will impact their league table performance. And of course, they may have responsibility for more than one course, or even more than one department, so they may even be considering whether your application, if not suitable for one course, might be suitable for another.

As someone who has worked in a number of different universities, each with very different admissions office structures, I can say that it is all but impossible for you to know with any great certainty who will read your application, but as a rule of thumb, the more competitive the course is for entry, the more likely it is that your application will be read by an academic admissions tutor. The less competitive the course or university is, the more likely it is that they will have put in place more mechanistic rules and processes for making offers, and it is likely that these will be actioned by administrative staff.

When will they read it and how will it affect their decision?

You might expect that all Personal Statements will be read at the same point in the application process; that each will be looked at by a single admissions tutor at the same time as they look at the rest of your application form. You'd be right in most cases, but of course there are exceptions. More importantly there are several other important occasions when your Personal Statement will come into play. In this section we'll look at the various points that your Personal Statement could be read, and what the impact can be.

At the point of initial decision-making

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 (academic or administrator) will see the whole form, which broadly consists of four important sections: Your grades achieved, the courses you are studying now (with predicted grades from your school), the Personal Statement, and the Reference.

Different selectors may read it in a different order, but most will be looking to determine: Is the student taking the right subjects to enter my degree? Are their achieved grades and their predicted grades in line with what I am looking for? Are there any mitigating circumstances in the reference that I need to take account of? 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.

There may also be cases where the person doing the first pass of the form is an administrator whose job is to filter out weaker applicants, and pass those with potential to a more senior admissions tutor. In this case, they may well not look at the Personal Statement at all, and just look at grades and predicted grades before deciding whether to pass the form on to a selector. In this case they will typically have clear subject criteria to work to, and it won't matter how good your Personal Statement is; if you don't have the grades or the right subjects, your application will go no further. This is often the case for subjects such as Medicine where they have set very clear GCSE or A-level subject requirements. Assuming you do have the necessary subject requirements, your Personal Statement is likely to be read at the next stage, by the more senior admissions

tutor, prior to an offer being made, or before you are invited to an interview, audition or admissions test.

Before or during an interview

If you are applying for a course that requires a traditional interview or audition it is pretty much guaranteed that the interviewer will have a copy of your Personal Statement in front of them at the interview (in fact they will probably have your whole application). The interviewer could well use the Personal Statement for a couple of purposes during the interview.

Firstly, they might ask you about something in the statement that can be used to put you at ease. Contrary to what you might expect, most interviewers actually want you to be comfortable. They know that when you are comfortable and at ease, you are more likely to perform at your best. What better way to put you at ease than to ask you a question about something they know you have interest in and already have knowledge about?

Secondly, they may pick on something you have said in your Personal Statement to test you, to see how you react when challenged or probed about something you have written. Again, this is perfectly fair as you yourself have chosen the subject matter to write about in your statement. 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.

Thirdly, 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. They might see in your Personal Statement that you are interested in starting a small business, and so they tell you about their Dragon's Den unit and their support for start-ups and spin-outs.

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 will be looking fairly 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, and still offer you the place if they have spaces available.

Perhaps the offer you received was A-levels AAA, and you actually achieved AAB. Say the university fills 90 places with students who achieved AAA, and has ten places left. They want to offer these to the next best ten students, but 30 students achieved AAB, and so the only way to differentiate them is by looking at the Personal Statement. This happens a lot on A-level/IB results days, and in my experience admissions selectors are often required to choose between candidates who have the same results, and where the main difference is the Personal Statement.

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 just as if it were the first pass; to assess, alongside your grades and reference, whether you have the motivation, skills and ability to undertake the course. It will be read quickly, and a decision will likely be made quickly. In some cases it will matter. In other cases the decision will be more about the grades than the Personal Statement.

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 will

require a higher quality piece of writing for the statement. And courses with challenging admissions tests, or audition processes are also likely to want to see stronger motivation in the statement in order for you to reach the next stage of admission.

It will be very difficult for you to know definitively who will look at your Personal Statement, when they will look at it, or how it will affect the outcome. However, I hope it is now clear that the Personal Statement really can matter and make a difference, and that it will generally be read by someone who has good motivation to make the right decision. They will not, however, spend a huge amount of time on it, and so you must make it as easy as possible for them to make a good decision!

Personal Statement basics

Before you sit down to start your Personal Statement, you need to know the basics.

Your statement can be no longer than 4,000 characters, which includes punctuation and spaces. That's likely to be around 650 words or so, depending on how many big words you use!

If you are drafting this on MS Word or Google docs with Times New Roman at 12pt and double spaced lines, then this will be about 2 pages long. 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.

I strongly recommend drafting, redrafting and finalising your statement using Word, Google docs etc. 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.

The statement is likely to be read on screen by the admissions selector and all formatting will be removed. You

can't use bold, underlined or italicised text, and you can't use bullet points; they won't show up as you intend. At the time of writing, you 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, which will be attached to all the courses that you are applying for. So, for what I hope are obvious reasons, don't mention any specific universities by name, and unless all your applications are for courses with exactly the same name, don't mention specific courses by name either (though you should of course mention the overall subject you are applying for).

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, and you should do exactly this, to have the strongest statement. 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 may not be strong enough, so you may need to reconsider your choices. There will be some circumstances where you might apply to two distinct areas (e.g. Medicine, with Biomedical Sciences as a fall-back). I shall cover this scenario in more detail later.

UCAS runs all Personal Statements through software that checks for plagiarism, and highlights potential cases of plagiarism directly to universities. So please don't copy ideas or sentences from the internet, or from your friends, as these will get picked up. 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 by the plagiarism software. Plagiarism is basically cheating, and is viewed very seriously by universities, such that significant plagiarism is likely to get you rejected.

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. So you 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 have that are going to make you the right student for their course. I strongly advise that you use as many of the 4,000 characters and 47 lines of text as you can.

So, what actually goes in my Personal Statement?

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. Many 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 the rest of us (that's me and you), preparation is key, and I suggest a clear and structured approach to preparation before you even think about starting to write your statement in full.

My approach is to ask yourself some fairly simple questions. These are questions that every applicant really should be able to answer without too much thought. If you can't answer them, you may need to do a little more research, or do a bit more soul searching, before you continue.

For each of these questions write down some answers honestly in plain language. Use a notebook, use a laptop,

use the notes section on your phone; it really doesn't matter what the format is. 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. It's just to help you organise your thoughts, and get these thoughts out of your head and onto a page or on to a screen.

Q1. Why do you want to do the course?

This will vary massively from person to person, and from course to course, but it is worth taking the time to reflect on this question before you start writing, as it's right at the heart of your statement.

Does your choice 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. Maybe you just love English A-level, and want to take it further? Well, write down what you want to do more of, and why. Maybe you're great at art or design, and want to take it further. So write down the things you enjoy most and the specialisms that you are most looking forward to developing at university.

Perhaps you are applying for something a little different to what you've studied before, but there is still a clear connection with what you have studied before. Maybe it's engineering, and you want to study it because you really enjoyed maths and physics. That's fine too. Write down

which bits of maths and physics you have enjoyed and why you think engineering will help you develop that further.

For some of you, 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, or the profession you want to go into? If so, what is it about that career or profession 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.

In all these cases, you'll want to be sure that the courses are going to fulfil your 'why?', so check out what is in the course, and write down which bits you are most looking forward to.

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, but what do you really know about it?

Do you know which specific subjects will be taught in which years? Do you know if and when you will be able to take options? Do you know how the course will be taught and assessed? What sort of assignments do they set? Will

there be group work or placements? Or is it mainly all about exams? As you will probably be applying to several courses at different universities, do you know whether they will be much the same, or are there large differences between the courses?

Does the course have any professional accreditation attached to it? What does that mean in practice, for your future work and study? If you are looking at a professional course, such as Medicine, Nursing, Social Work, Teaching etc. what do you know about that profession, and are you really prepared for it? Hint: you'll need to know a lot about this for professional courses, so don't overlook this in your preparation.

Many of you reading will already have done plenty of research and homework on this. You'll have checked out the university course pages online, been to Open Days, and watched video clips on YouTube. But what if you are sitting 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.

Have a look at what you will study in each of the different years. Check out when the options arise, and when there is more practical work, like field trips or work placements. Do this for your top two or three universities and after just a few minutes on each course page you'll find you can quickly notice the similarities and differences. You'll find

some things exactly as you expect, and you'll doubtless find some things that surprise you!

Write down your findings, making a note of the things you've found that apply to all the universities, and which only apply to one or two.

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 it. www.prospects.ac.uk is a very good place to start for this.

Q3. What skills does the course or profession require?

Research your courses, and list the skills you think they require. By research the course I simply mean look at the website; specifically the sections on entry requirements and admissions processes. Some will have highly detailed information, telling you very clearly what they are looking for, while some 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 the particular discipline. E.g. courses with lots of hours teaching alongside professional 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 questions 4 to 8. When you come to writing the first draft of your statement you are going to have to choose which examples of your experience you are going to use to support the most important skills you need to demonstrate.

As a starting point, below is a list of ten universal transferable skills as identified by the careers website indeed.com. 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.

Dependability; Leadership and team management; Problem-solving; Data analysis; Communication; Time management; Empathy; Adaptability; Technological literacy; Organisation.

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 part of the curriculum so far? What, specifically, was it that you found most interesting? Why did you find it interesting? Did it challenge your way of thinking, or maybe made you see things in a different light? This could be something you have studied very recently, or

it could be something you studied a few years ago, and which made you want to carry on the subject at school.

Then consider whether there is a connection (direct or indirect), between your enjoyment of this subject and the choices you are now making? Is this subject, in fact, directly the reason you are choosing a particular subject at university? Or perhaps there is a less direct connection? Perhaps you have discovered that you are good at a particular subject, and this has given you the confidence to go on and study something related. If this is the case, this will connect straight back to the answer you had for Question 1 above.

Next consider whether there are any specific skills or attributes that you are demonstrating or developing while studying the things you most enjoy? If so, you could have the potential to connect your ‘Why?’ directly with the skills that you need to demonstrate for the course.

For example, you might say that at school you have most enjoyed studying a specific aspect of Geography. You can then describe why you find that aspect most interesting and challenging, while talking about the analytical and practical skills you have developed that will stand you in good stead studying something like Environmental Science at university.

Try to do this with at least two or even three subjects. You will hopefully find several areas that you can write

enthusiastically about, and work out if there are connections with your course choice.

You might also realise that there are connections between your academic studies and other aspects of your experience that we will come on to shortly. So, for example, it might be your enjoyment of a subject in class that led you to undertake some super-curricular activities. Or it might be that your studies led you to find some work experience in a particular area.

By finding these connections, you should be able to start to develop what we call a narrative, or a story, that links your choices with your experiences and skills.

Q5. What super-curricular activities have you done?

Super-curricular activities are a great way of finding out whether you'll really enjoy studying a subject at university. But of course, they are also a fantastic way of demonstrating that you have done your research and are motivated to study a subject. In particular, they can show an admissions tutor that you have made the effort to stretch your knowledge of a subject beyond what you have studied in the classroom.

Put simply, super-curricular activities are things you do outside of your school studies that relate (directly or indirectly) to the subject that you are applying for. They are activities that extend, or stretch your knowledge beyond what you do within the school curriculum. They could be

as simple as reading more about your subject. Have you read more great novels by the authors you've been studying at school? What have you read about quantum physics, about philosophy, about political history (or whatever is the area that you are most interested in)?

It's not just books that count, but journals and newspapers you have read that are related or linked to the course you are studying. Perhaps you listen to podcasts, or watch videos such as TED talks? Some of these will be relevant to the course you are applying for, so write them down.

Doubtless you've been to all sorts of places of interest that might be relevant. In an ideal world, you'd visit Stratford-upon-Avon if you are into Shakespeare, Bletchley Park if you are into computing, The V&A if you are into art and design. But that's not realistic for everyone, and in any case, perhaps your interests lie in places, exhibitions and activities that are unique to where you are, or where you have been?

Next write down 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.

Of course, super-curricular isn't just about reading, watching, looking and listening. It can be about doing too. Perhaps you've entered maths, coding, poetry or essay

competitions. Write them down. Maybe you play in an orchestra or band outside of your school. Perhaps as a creative type you draw, paint, photograph, whatever - write it down! And note that while for an applicant to Engineering, playing in an orchestra is “extra-curricular”, for an applicant to Music, it's definitely “super-curricular”.

As you write down this list of activities, also 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 or attributes that you identified under question 3?

Now, if you have read this section and are thinking ‘Oh dear, I haven’t done any super-curricular activities’, then there are a couple of possibilities.

Firstly, you might not be thinking broadly enough about what you have done. Read this section again, and have a deep think about whether you really haven’t ever done anything related to your subject, but outside of your school curriculum. I have frequently heard the question from students: “Does X count as a super-curricular?”, where X = a book or a webinar or a taster day. The short answer for the purposes of this exercise is, if it’s related to the subject you are applying for, and you didn’t do it in the classroom, it counts!

Secondly, perhaps you really haven’t done much outside of school that is relevant to your subject. This could be a

signal simply that you are happy with what you are learning at school, and you are content to continue your education and learn what you are told to learn. Honestly, this will be fine for some of you, and provided you are diligent, it can be enough to get you into many universities.

However, be aware that it will get you only so far, and it won't get you into the most competitive courses. They are looking for far more motivation and intellectual curiosity than school work alone can demonstrate! Both Oxford and Cambridge universities particularly stress the importance of super-curriculars, but so do a whole host of other highly competitive universities. They want to see students who are exploring the subject further just because they want to; because they are interested and curious to learn more. Perhaps now is the time to act on your curiosity, and if so, see below for how to find some amazing super-curricular recommendations.

Thirdly, perhaps you really haven't done anything about your subject outside of school, but the reason is more worrying. It could be a signal that you aren't actually as motivated and interested in the subject as you think. Worse still, maybe you are applying for a subject that you are not really interested in at all. Every year huge numbers of students go off to study subjects that they aren't really interested in, often simply because they think it's what is expected of them. It's a mistake, and it rarely ends well. If you think this might be you, then please have a

conversation with your parents, teachers, university advisors and others who care about your choices. They can help you understand whether you are doing just fine with your choices, or whether you need a re-think.

If you want suggestions as to what super-curricular activities you can do that will help you find out whether you are applying for the right course, and demonstrate your motivation to admissions tutors, just google ‘University of Cambridge super-curricular activities’. You’ll find a huge list of potential books, journals, websites, podcasts, videos and competitions related to every subject that they teach.

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 academic classes, and are generally regarded as being organised activities, such as sporting, creative or community-based activities. So what extracurricular activities have you been involved in?

As importantly as what you have done, is what your participation in these activities says about you. What skills and attributes have you demonstrated? Sports can obviously demonstrate team-work skills, commitment and resilience, but might also show time-management and

planning ability, depending on their role in your life. Music or performance activities can clearly show commitment and resilience too, but also communication skills. Almost any organised activity you have been involved in will have the potential to show a wide range of skills, and as you know from your answers to question 3, some of these will be very relevant to your particular course, while others might be less so. So write each activity down, and just as you did with the super-curriculars, add what you enjoy about them, what was most challenging and what skills they demonstrate.

Secondly, what are your most proud achievements? Very often our proudest achievements have been the most difficult, and come out of overcoming a particular challenge. So what was that challenge, and how did you overcome it? Achievement in, and of itself, can be very useful, but achievement in the face of adversity can be very powerful indeed, and you can use these achievements to demonstrate wide-ranging skills and attributes.

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 many students have organised for them in their year 10 or 11. That may be important and relevant, but so too can the part-time jobs that many of you will have had in shops and restaurants. Work shadowing, even if unpaid, can be important, while

extended voluntary experience, such as that which many students do in the care sector, can often be the most useful of all.

For some courses work experience is unnecessary and not relevant, and you can rely pretty much entirely on your academic studies, super-curricular and extra-curricular activities. For other areas, in particular in medicine, health, social care and education, work experience will be a critical part of why you want to do the course, and why you should be considered. Even if the work experience was not directly relevant to your course, you may well be able to draw out some relevant learnings and skills from your work 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. Did you find that you had skills that you were unaware of, or did you use and develop existing skills? Did the experience stretch or challenge you? How did you respond to this challenge? And of course while you are writing these things down, you can see how it might connect to the course you are applying for, and the knowledge and skills that they want to see.

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, and whether you are developing useful skills as you do them. Compare these skills with the list of skills needed for the course, and you'll be able to work out whether it might be useful to mention these hobbies in your statement.

A really simple, easy structure

If you have done the above exercise properly, you now probably have several pages, ten or twenty ideas, and (if you've been writing sentences) at least 1,000 words written down 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, and soon you'll be ready to start to pull it all together into your first draft. 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 so you can just say 'yes' and move on, wouldn't it be easiest if they all followed a similar logic? Clearly yes, it would, and so it is in your interest to make sure the admissions selector can find everything they are looking for really easily. So what does a simple, easy structure look like?

My recommendation is this: Firstly, start with some sort of trigger, a paragraph which quickly and 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 (learning, skills, motivation etc.), and why it is relevant to the course. Finally, you'll want a killer final paragraph that summarises your strongest selling points.

As with any piece of writing, I suggest you list out what you plan to include in each section before you start writing. So, go back to your answers to each of the questions we discussed, 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/learn about Y, in order that I can do Z". X could be a whole variety of things, and as we discussed above under question 1, this will be very specific and personal to you. As to where the course will take you, this will be intrinsically linked both to the course, and to your reasons for studying it.

It may simply be that you want the course to help you explore and understand everything you can about the subject you love. Maybe you've loved English Literature

since you first read Charles Dickens and this course will help you to become an expert on the great classic literature of the 18th Century.

Alternatively, you may have a specific career in mind after your studies, in which case you can mention how you think the course will help you. Perhaps you've wanted to set up your own business since you first saw the Uber app and realised what's possible with technology, and the course in Entrepreneurship and Software Engineering is the ideal combination to help you realise that dream.

Or maybe the degree is a specific professional course that is all about entering a profession, in which case the connection between course and career is a given, and you simply need to connect your experience with your career ambition. Perhaps you've had multiple family members who have been supported through difficult health challenges by amazing nurses who have inspired you to follow the same course and enter the nursing profession.

What you have done to demonstrate that you'll be a great student (and why it matters)

In this 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 it to the course you are applying for. But, and this is crucial, you will need to consider carefully what

is the right evidence to use to support your application, in your specific scenario.

If your course is highly academic, and highly competitive (say English at UCL or Cambridge), you are going to want to lean most heavily on your class studies and your super-curricular activities. The admissions selector is, I'm afraid, 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 English and are super-motivated to learn more! For the most super-competitive courses, they are not just interested in your motivation and how much you enjoy the subject. That's important, but they also want to see students who demonstrably understand the subject. So lean on your subject teacher for this when you come to getting 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.

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 the specific, practical skills you have, and the understanding that you have of the course and the profession you are entering. You'll also emphasise the depth of knowledge you have about that profession from your reading and research,

perhaps from specific journals, but also from current affairs.

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

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 artists or musicians! 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.

I suggest you might have three paragraphs for this section, and you'll probably have one, or at most two, activities to discuss per paragraph. For each activity you will want to write reflectively; considering what you did/read/studied, what you learned, how it is relevant to the course you are applying for, and what action you have taken (or will take) as a result. The next chapter will discuss reflective writing in more detail, but at this stage, just be mindful that you will need to prioritise just the very most important experiences if you are to be able to reflect on them properly in the space available.

Also, I find it easiest to read statements that read broadly in chronological order, as it is more straightforward to see a narrative 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!

Reflective writing

So, you now have lots of content, and a sensible structure. 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 critically analysing the

experience, considering what impact it had on you, and making clear what you plan to do next with what you have learned. You won't just need this skill for your Personal Statement; it will be massively useful for all sorts of future writing, such as academic essays, job applications, blogs and more!

What might this structure 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.

So, 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). Written as a guide to debriefing after a learning experience, it forms 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 learning about 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 was particularly inspired by how focussed they were on always ensuring their brand was reflected in everything they do, 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.”

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.

Finally, there is a short guide in the Cambridge Library Guides Reflective Practice Toolkit online that has a few phrases that are really helpful when writing reflectively. I've listed some of these below, and would encourage you to try to use some of them as you write your first draft.

- The most important thing was...
- At the time I felt...
- After thinking about it...
- I learned that...
- I need to know more about...
- Later I realised...
- This was because...
- I'm still unsure about...
- My next steps are...

Writing a Personal Statement for two different courses

How to write a statement that covers two different courses might just be the single most asked question in university admissions history. 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.

In this case 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 the second scenario, you are 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 aligned with that.

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, Pharmacy, 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 not highly competitive, and is in a sensible, related subject. 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. Trust me, 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.

Top tips

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...

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've been inspired by something you read, there is a short quote that sums it up, and you can show specifically how that has inspired you to take action, and do something, then maybe, just maybe it might work (see section below about honesty!). But it probably won't. 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!

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.

Be honest, straightforward and truthful

I know, this sounds basic, but just be honest and straightforward in your statement. 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. So write about what you have done and what you do know and you will be just fine!

Use simple, easy-to-understand language

The most common problem I have had when reading or reviewing Personal Statements is that students all of a sudden develop a desire to write the most convoluted sentences and use words that are simply not normally

present in their vocabulary (or indeed in mine!). Please 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 are discussing, but otherwise just keep it simple.

But, 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!

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.

Don't copy or use an essay mill

As mentioned above (and it's worth repeating!), just 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.

Please don't fall for the idea that just because you have paid for something must mean it has value. A paid-for Personal Statement is cheating, plain and simple. And let's face it, dishonesty is not a great way to start out your adult life.

Read it out loud

Once you think it's 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. Go back, rewrite the sections that don't sound right, and make sure the statement is authentically you!

Getting help and support

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. However, I have a few thoughts as to how to maximise and 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, and will be pulled in so many different directions, 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.

This is what I would do if I was looking for feedback and support on my Personal Statement.

Friends or Family

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 will 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. Lean on these teachers to help you make sure that your discussion of the subject you are applying for (and about which they are an expert!), is at a suitable level of academic sophistication for a university application, and that you have communicated your ideas concisely and accurately. 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 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.

If they are experienced, they'll be looking to make sure your statement is of a quality that is consistent with your academic achievements and your choices. Take their feedback, redraft, check and show it to them again to make

sure you have addressed their feedback fully. And repeat, once.

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 clear to them that you are interested in improving it, 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 please, 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.

A handy summary

So there you have it! You now have everything you need to start writing the first draft of your Personal Statement. You have an understanding of who will read your statement, and when it might be relevant to their decision. If you've answered the eight questions as you were reading, you have loads of ideas, and lots of evidence of your activities and skills. You just need to decide which are most relevant to your chosen course; which are the best five or six to include in the main body of your statement. If you haven't written down your answers yet, then at least you know what the questions are and how to start the process!

You also know how to write reflectively about your experiences, to bring them alive and make them relevant to the reader. And you know the importance of the opening paragraph (the trigger) and the final paragraph (the killer conclusion).

Finally, you know the importance of spelling and grammar, and you know how to get great feedback on your statement and how to act on it in a sensible, planned way.

So let's get started! And so you don't need to go right back to the start of the guide to remind yourself what you are doing, here is a handy summary of everything we've discussed!

- Consider your audience. Think about who the reader will be, when they will be looking at your Personal Statement, and how it might impact their decision.
- Remember the limitations; 4,000 characters, 47 lines. This will be around 650 words, or two pages of A4 when using Times New Roman point 12, double spaced.
- Set up your draft in Google docs or MS Word, so you can spell check, grammar check and share it easily.
- Remember you only have one Personal Statement, so consider what you will focus on if you are applying for different subjects.
- Start by writing down short answers to these 8 questions:
 - Why do you want to do the course?
 - What do you know about the course or the profession?
 - What skills does the course of profession require?
 - What have you most enjoyed studying at school?
 - What super-curricular activities have you done?
 - What have your extra-curricular activities and achievements been?
 - What work experience have you done?

- What are your hobbies?
- Prioritise your content. Which are the most important examples of your motivation, knowledge, skills and experience that you will use to show that you will be a great student?
- Order your content. Which examples will come in the trigger, and in what order will you discuss the examples in the main body of your statement. Do you have an idea for a strong conclusion?
- Write your trigger; a clear statement as to why you are applying. Remember, “because of X, I want to study/learn about Y, in order that I can do Z”.
- Write the main body of text, but write reflectively; not just what you did, but how it felt, and whether it was a good or bad experience. Try to analyse and make sense of the experience; what did you learn, and what you would do differently? Did you take specific action as a result?
- Write the killer conclusion. Sum up the strongest two or three aspects of your statement, or finish with a clear statement of intent for your future.
- Check your statement. Proof-read it, spell check it, grammar check it and read it out loud.
- Once you are sure it’s looking great, ask for feedback from three trusted advisers, in this order: Friends or family; Subject teacher; University Counsellor. Ask each one how you can make your statement better,

and act on the feedback before you go to the next adviser.

Final thoughts

Firstly, I really hope that you have found this guide helpful. I hope it has given you some useful insight into what is expected of your Personal Statement, and a helpful way to approach the task. If you've got this far in your first read, please don't just put down the guide and forget about it. Go back to the eight questions that I posed and start noting down some answers and responses. You could attempt to do it all in one go, but the reality is that the human brain will take time to absorb ideas and reflect on them, so the sooner you start getting your ideas down, the longer you'll have to reflect, improve and add to your ideas. This will make the actual writing of the statement much, much easier.

Secondly, and more importantly, I hope that as you develop your ideas and work on your statement, it helps you work out whether you really do want to study the subjects that you have chosen, and that you can then genuinely convey this motivation in your statement. If you find at any point that you are questioning your choices, or questioning your motivation to do a particular subject,

don't despair. Take yourself back to that first occasion, that first trigger that got you interested in the first place, and reflect on what you've done since, and what has kept you interested in studying more. Have a look back at the section on super-curriculars, and do something from that list. You'll probably find your interest comes back pretty quickly. If it really doesn't, and the subject really isn't of interest to you, then it is a sign that you might be about to apply for the wrong subject, so be thankful you discovered that now, when you have the opportunity to change direction!

Finally, for a lot of school leavers in your position, getting their place at their first choice of university is their number one target, something that has to be achieved in order for them to be successful. Getting that university place is a destination, and an end-point in itself.

In truth, you'll be relieved to know that this simply isn't the case. Your university course isn't the be all and end all of your chances of success. It is simply one part of a much greater and more interesting journey. I know plenty of people who went off to their first choice university, had a great time, and achieved what they wanted to; building their careers and lives from there. But I also know a whole bunch of other people who, for whatever reason, never made it to their first choice, and most of them found an alternative way, and went on to do just fine too!

So by all means pursue your dreams, aim for your top university choices, and do your level best with your application. But be assured that there is an amazing journey ahead of you, and you'll find your way regardless of whether you get that first choice this time around!

Before you go

If you have enjoyed this guide, and found it useful, please do pass it on straight away to others. I'd love to help as many people as possible.

I'd also be grateful if you have any feedback for me, and so I'll ask you exactly the same question as I have suggested you ask your supporters and advisers, which is simply "How can I make it better?".

If you have any ideas on how I can make this guide better, please let me know via my website (www.betterunichoices.com), or find me on LinkedIn. I'm very keen to know how I can improve what I do, and make it better and more useful for future readers!

Finally, I'd like to say a big thank you to Elke, Lucy and David who were good enough to read an earlier draft. Each of them has shown me how to make it better, and has helped create the version you have been reading today!