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Preparing your personal statement for UCAS

The admissions tutors that read your personal statement need to be persuaded that you have chosen the right course for you – that you won't decide you want to change course, you won't find it too difficult and fail or drop out, and you won't have trouble motivating yourself through any rough patches, but will seek to engage with the work and chase the highest grades throughout.

So you need to show them that you know what the course will involve, and that you have good reason, drawn from your own experience to date, to believe that you will enjoy the work and be good at it. Be specific. Give precise details of particular examples of moments of illumination that you have found enjoyable or useful and that you think will be relevant or analogous to the work you expect to be involved with on your course. Use examples from both your A-level studies and your own wider experience or reading. Give a picture of what kind of learner you are, and the way you respond to different aspects of the work.

If you can't be persuasive about why this course is right for you ... is it? Either it isn't (and you need to think again), or it is – probably - but you need more evidence: arrange some suitable work experience or visits or extra reading for the summer. You can then use whatever you have learned to give your personal statement some more credibility (or you can look for a different course).

Check the university websites to see Entry Requirements and if there is an Entry Profile published for your course. Some courses "score" the personal statements (and references) and give a kind of mark scheme on their website – print it out, use it, and show it to your tutor.

Sort this section first, where you write about your understanding of the course and why your experience, skills and preferences have prepared you for it. Anything else of a more general nature (prefectship, team membership, society responsibility, CCF/DofE etc) will go into whatever space is left – not more than 25% of the statement, and sculpted carefully in such a way as to make its relevance obvious. Few admissions tutors are much interested in what sort of person you are (there are exceptions such as Medicine courses) so the relevance is normally to show that you are organised enough to handle a large and varied workload, mature enough to get through rough patches, have sufficient initiative and "people skills" to be able to learn successfully, and so on. Only write this bit when you are on your nth draft of the section about your specific suitability for the course, and pretty sure that it's all but finished.

Show your statement to your form tutor but also to as many people as may help. Think critically about their advice – sometimes it may be inconsistent - and incorporate as many of their suggestions as you want: it's your personal statement and your decision, and it's you who may have to answer questions on it.

You may then have to edit it down to fit it into the space provided on the form.

Note: there is plenty of exemplary material on the internet, but your statement will be scanned very closely to ensure that you didn't include any of it. The number of applicants caught on this each year is staggering.

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