



CCS Guide to Writing Your Personal Statement

What is a personal statement?

A personal statement is a 4000-character document which supports your university application. Universities offer places based on a combination of factors:

- GCSE grades and A Level predictions
- The school reference
- The personal statement.

Universities receive thousands of applications from students, all with roughly similar GCSE grades and A level predictions, so your personal statement can really make a difference in helping to persuade a university to offer you a place.

The personal statement is your chance to tell the universities about what makes you a suitable applicant; what drives you as an individual and more about you as a person. It is a sales pitch, but it needs to be genuine. University admissions tutors who will read your statement are highly intelligent and experienced academics; they will not be fooled by exaggeration and superlatives. You need to demonstrate your skills and interests rather than simply declare them; and you need to demonstrate humility in recognising you are not yet the finished article and are keen to learn more, develop and explore opportunities.

Cramming everything into 4000 characters can be difficult. It is therefore important to make sure every sentence, if not every word, counts. Simply outlining what topics you study at A level adds nothing to your statement, as admissions tutors know the content of A level specifications. Stating that studying English has developed your written skills is equally redundant as this is implicit in the study of the subject. Stating that you achieved specific grades is waste because this is already included in your list of qualifications. Saying Physics is your favourite subject is unnecessary if you are applying to study it at university; it would be odd if it wasn't!

It is important to realise that universities are most interested in your academic abilities. You are applying to an educational institution to study a degree, so hobbies and extra-curricular interests can be included but should not take up more than 20% of the statement. Work experience is also relevant, especially for courses such as Medicine, where it is essential; however, for most courses focus on work-based competencies such as communication, teamwork, leadership and so on, are less important than your ability to demonstrate academic skills such as critical analysis.

Finally, it will take multiple drafts to perfect your personal statement, so do not be disheartened if you find it challenging. Read the guidance carefully; allow yourself plenty of time to work on drafting it and remember there is plenty of support at hand from teachers, tutors and the sixth form team.

Understanding Pitfalls and Troubleshooting

DON'T	DO
State how brilliant or fascinated you are	Demonstrate how brilliant or fascinated you are
Use clichés	Be genuine
Use pointless quotes	Link to your wider reading by explaining what intrigued you/ what this led you to do next/ how it linked to something else you've read/ done.
Sell the subject	Sell yourself
Simply list everything you have done.	Show how you have learnt from the things you have done, why the things you have done are significant, what skills you have learnt.
Write in bullet points or use poor English	Make sure it is perfectly polished – it should be the most polished thing you've ever written.

Structuring Your Personal Statement

We advise students at CCS to follow the Causeway Education guidance on how to structure your personal statement, as their guidance was developed through extensive research and collaboration with university admissions tutors. This structure can be tweaked and reorganised to suit you and your course; however, all competitive personal statements will include these elements.

Paragraph 1: Your reasons for wanting to study the course

Paragraph 2: Topic of interest

Paragraph 3: Course-related activities

Paragraph 4: Extra-curricular

Ending

Note: the box sizes above provide suggestions for length/ weighting of sections. The information below discusses each of these paragraphs in detail, providing guidance of sentence starters and paragraph structure.

Opening Paragraph: Your Reasons for Wanting to Study the Course

It is important to provide clear reasons for your course choice. Whilst there may be many, research shows that having an academic focus can be an effective way of convincing the reader.

One of the best approaches is to highlight one or two of the subject-related skills within the subject which you enjoy. This shows admissions tutors that you understand what the subject you've applied for involves. This demonstrates your suitability more than personal or emotional reasons such as 'I have a passion for this subject'.

For example: *"I would like to apply to study Business because I enjoyed analysing organisational structures."*

You should then link the subject-related skill to an example of when you have done this. You can link to your A level subjects, though be specific not general and you may want to show links between your subjects here. You can also link to examples of when you have done this that go beyond A level – because if you have enjoyed doing something, you should have been motivated to go on and do something else in this area.

Examples:

"An area of the law I find particularly intriguing is the subjectivity surrounding statutory interpretation. Researching the case of Royal College Nursing v DHSS 1981, which hinged upon the interpretation of the term 'registered medical practitioner', helped me to understand when it might be more appropriate to apply the 'mischief' rule rather than the literal rule."

"I am particularly drawn to studying Economics as I enjoy examining strategic problems. Having encountered labour economics as part of my Economics A level, I sought to develop my understanding of the strategic problems in this field by reading..... which argues that a focus on labour-cost minimisation ultimately leads to low productivity and high staff turnover."

"One of the main reasons I am attracted to the study of law and criminology is that I enjoy critically analysing information and evidence in order to form and defend an argument or point of view. A specific example is when I had to argue the legal view on euthanasia and assisted suicide which under the Suicide Act 1961 is against the law within the UK."

Please refer to the "CCS Skills Bank" document for subject specific guidance.

UCAS have also gathered the following advice on opening paragraphs from Admissions tutors:

- 'Don't waste time trying to think of a catchy opening; it can be a complete turn-off.'
- 'Your interest in the course is the biggest thing. Start with why you chose it.'
- 'The best personal statements get to the point quickly.'
- 'Start with a short sentence capturing the reason why you are interested in studying the area you are applying for and communicating your enthusiasm for it.'
- 'Go straight in. Why are you excited about studying this course?'
- 'The opening is your chance to introduce yourself, to explain your motivation for studying the course and demonstrate your understanding of it.'
- 'It's your enthusiasm for the course we want to know about. Start with that.'
- 'Write what comes naturally.'
- 'What you want to study and why should be in the first two sentences. What excites you about the course and why do you want to learn about it more?'
- 'Be specific from line one.'

- 'Talk about you and your enthusiasm for the subject from the very start.'
- 'In your opening paragraph you need to show that you know what you are applying for. Don't waffle or say you want to study something just because it's interesting. Explain what you find interesting about it.'
- 'It's much better to engage us with something interesting, relevant, specific and current in your opening line, not 'from a young age' or 'I have always wanted to'. Start with what's inspiring you now, not what inspired you when you were six.'

Main Paragraph 2: Analysis of a Topic of Interest

If you have a longest paragraph this should be it as research suggests this is the most important part of your statement. Admissions tutors say they want to see students discussing a small area of their subject in detail. This means finding articles or books about a specific part of your subject and writing about it in depth to show an understanding of a complex piece of research within it. This will demonstrate to admissions tutors that you have what it takes to study the subject at a higher level.

You can use the link below to access the Causeway Education database of wider reading suggestions, as well as the links on the Life After CCS website and suggestions from your subject teachers or university reading lists.

<https://causeway.education/wider-reading>

Make notes on the following questions to help develop your critical analysis:

- What was the article/chapter about?
- Pick out 1-2 key points which particularly interested you.
- Why did the topic interest you?
- Were there any new concepts or terms which you were unfamiliar with? If so, can you research a term on the internet and report it in one or two sentences.
- Did the research have any important potential applications?
- If you have worked on the topic in your current studies, how did the article challenge your views or ideas?
- How did the topic change or alter your view of the subject you are looking to study - were you surprised or intrigued by anything in particular?
- Did the topic open up any new questions which you would like to research in greater detail?

You should critically evaluate one or two books/ articles and explain to the admissions tutors what you've thought about it. For example, why the point was persuasive or how two contrasting articles compared. The point is not to outline what the article was about (the admissions tutors already know this); but to show your critical analysis. Remember, unlike most A level essays you must include "I" and "me" in your personal statement to place yourself, and not the subject, at its centre.

The best sort of paragraph is an academic journey. For example:

- Reading, I was intrigued by
- This led me to consider.....
- This linked to
- Seeking to further my knowledge I...
- This led me to....
- [Link to future] I hope to...
- or [Link back] – link back to something else in your A level studies such as a comparison or connection that you can draw between your wider reading and what you have learned at A level.

Examples:

"I especially enjoy reading War poetry as it offers subjective and emotive responses that are rarely found in historical accounts. To pursue this interest, I studied the pastoral idyll outside of the curriculum and explored the impact which the First World War had on ideas of rural land, particularly in Hardy's poem 'In time of the "Breaking of Nations"' (1915) and Edward Thomas's 'As the Team's Head Brass' (1916). ... I feel that the interlinking of the war and the land makes the war seem "nearer" in Thomas' poem, whereas in Hardy's work the presence of war is distanced through the use of everyday imagery such as the "maid and her wight".

"I have developed an interest in human rights law and read up on the recent case of two women who were challenging the new law that immigrants wished to join their spouses had to pass a "pre-entry" English language test. One of the main legal issues centred on whether the new policy breached the appellants' right to a family life. I was struck by the level of uncertainty in the wording of the final judgement. Although the appeal failed, the judges stated that a "significant number" of future cases, for example, those in which immigrants had learning difficulties, would be likely to breach human rights. My research led me to reflect on the fact that the application of specific laws depends on very subtle differences in the circumstances of different cases."

Paragraph 3: Course-Related Activities

Here you should provide specific details of the supra-curricular/course-related activities you have undertaken. This section can include work experience, online courses, lectures, summer schools, and the EPQ.

The key is to provide specific details to demonstrate areas of skill/ knowledge development and insights gained from relevant experiences outside the classroom. Instead of trying to cover everything within an activity, just focus on the most interesting thing about it. Explain why this part of the activity was interest, and how it made you think about your subject. Doing this for one or two activities will help demonstrate you have really learnt from them, instead of just listing them.

Examples:

"In EPQ I researched developments of forensic biochemistry from 1960-2017. I enjoyed learning about the applications of biochemistry, especially how fingerprinting works' by using powder that specifically targets oil deposits on surfaces, we can produce images of an individual's finger. I developed my understanding of this topic by attending a summer school at the University of Kent where I attended a lecture about future developments in biochemical fingerprinting, which entertains the idea of developing a powder that targets chemical residues other than sweat, allowing fingerprints to be lifted from the skin."

"Whilst shadowing in GI surgery, I observed a necrotic pancreatitis patient in severe septic shock who required a pancreatectomy. Communication skills were crucial when conversing with relatives as the doctor had to pitch an explanation of the treatment suitably with regard to the 50% survival prognosis and the implication of diabetes. During the operation, a pseudocyst ruptured excreting 4000ml of pus; effective cooperation was paramount as the surgeon delegated roles to ensure minimal invasive damage was caused. Encountering both clinical and social challenges of the treatment prompted me to research alternatives including autologous pancreatic islet cell transplantation. Although APICCT data boasts 69% of patients gain insulin independence, NICE predominantly recommends the "enforcement of life change programmes", from this I realised the crucial role of primary care services in promoting healthy lifestyles to prevent the onset of disease."

Paragraph 4: Extra-Curricular Activities

This section lets you talk about other activities which aren't related to your subject but have given you useful skills. Most people have some interests outside the subject they want to study, and some of these interests can provide useful skills for your degree; for instance, being in a drama club might have given you confidence when presenting to others. Playing for a football team might have helped you manage your time better.

The best way to complete this section is to write briefly. Elsewhere in the statement detail is useful – but because these activities aren't subject related, we can talk about them quickly and move on. Tell your audience what the activity was and the skill you learnt – and then focus on the next activity.

Remember: this section is the least important part of your statement – it shouldn't exceed 20% of your final version.

Example:

"In completing my Duke of Edinburgh Silver award, I have developed skills in planning tasks and leading a team. I speak two different languages - English and Portuguese - and this has given me a valuable perspective in understanding different cultures. During my A-Levels, I worked in a busy shop and swam for the school team; by balancing these commitments with my studies, my ability in organising and managing my time has improved significantly."

5. Ending

To avoid finishing on extra-curricular content you should have a final link back to your subject. One technique that can be effective is the 'necklace approach'. This is when you make a link between your opening sentence and closing paragraph, reinforcing and adding an extra dimension at the end to what you said at the start.

For example, if you started with an interesting line about what is currently motivating to study your chosen degree course, you could link back to it in your closing paragraph, perhaps with something about why you would love to study this further at university.

It is also useful to mention any plans you might have when you graduate. Is there an area you are interested in as a potential career path? This helps in convincing the reader that you have a longer-term goal related to the course you are applying for.

Examples:

"I believe my dedicated approach to study will allow me to excel in a fast-paced environment such as fashion. I am looking forward to new experiences and gaining more independence in my studies and hope to one day work as a marketing manager for a big brand company."

"I hope to be given the opportunity to study psychology further as the importance of psychology is growing as a means of improving people's lives. I hope to be part of the ever-expanding understanding of the human mind and behaviour."

"I am looking forward to applying myself to a Sports Science degree as I believe I have the skills to be successful and awareness to apply the course to improve my own performance and that of other athletes in the future."

Troubleshooting Examples

1. *"I have always wanted to be an astrophysicist since a young age."*

Avoid "I have always" clichés. Avoid sentences which state rather than show – you need to demonstrate your passion rather than state it.

Suggested improvement:

"Reading Hawking's "Universe in a Nutshell" confirmed my fascination in astrophysics because..."

2. *"I come from a family of doctors and so Medicine is in my blood."*

You can link to your family but be very careful. No one is entitled to gain a place on course based on their family background and having a family background in your chosen field is not evidence of your suitability.

A better way of including the same point could be:

"Seeing the heartache my mother experienced after losing her first patient, made me acutely aware that being a doctor is not an easy path. Reading "Title/Author" developed my awareness of this further; I was particularly struck by the poignant way in which he describes the impact of his first ill-fated operation and the grieving process that he underwent."

3. *"Money makes the world go round, and this is what attracts me to studying Business at university."*

Avoid pointless quotes, clichés and sweeping statements that say nothing. Don't look up quotes to drop in – it won't work! Avoid starting with a quote as it just confuses the reader.

Note: We have no solution for this sentence except to delete it!

4. *"Law is the bedrock of society which allows us to maintain order and therefore it has a big impact on everyone's lives; it directs us, controls us and protects us."*

Remember who your audience is – admissions tutors know about the subject, but they want to know about you. Sell yourself not your subject

Improvement placing you at the centre of the statement:

*"Completing an online course in consumer law enabled **me** to further understand one of the many ways in which law impacts our everyday life. Scrutinising the Consumer Rights Act 2015 **I** realised that..."*

5. *"I have completed an online course in Chemistry which I found very interesting. I have also volunteered in Chemistry key stage three lessons once a week for a year and I help run an after-school Chemistry club. I have a subscription to "The Chemist" and read it every month."*

All content with great potential but none of it is developed. It is just a list.

The middle sentence could be developed, for example:

"Volunteering in Chemistry lessons allowed me to develop my ability to communicate scientific knowledge with greater clarity. I was able to further hone this skill by delivering a workshop in an afterschool Chemistry club on....."

6. *"I believe I am very well suited to soliciting..." / "I enjoy collaborating horizontally with teachers..."*

These are real examples from other schools!! Make sure you understand the implications of what you are writing!

Don't use the Thesaurus function as this will encourage you to use language which may not suit what you are trying to say.

Don't become overly wordy.

Adopt a formal/professional writing style and don't make jokes.

Further Guidance

<https://www.ucas.com/undergraduate/applying-university/how-write-ucas-undergraduate-personal-statement>

<https://causeway.education/wider-reading>