

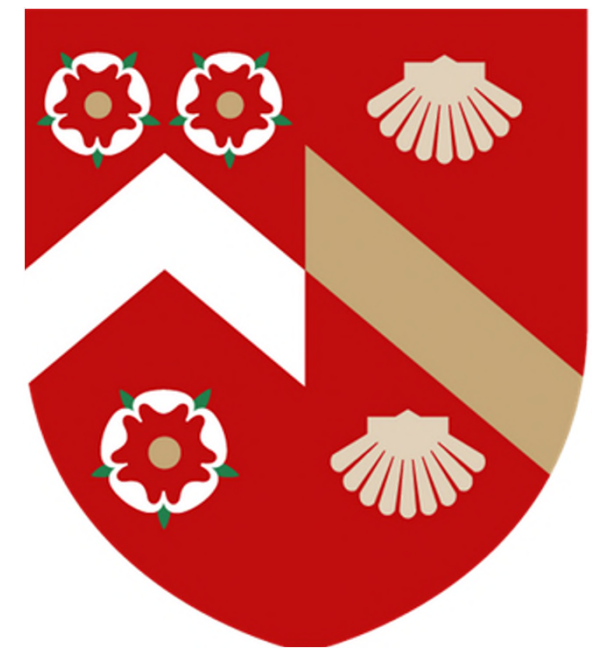


Access to  
Excellence  
WADHAM COLLEGE



# WADHAM COLLEGE

UNIVERSITY OF OXFORD



# Personal Statement Workshop

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# STRUCTURE

- What we're looking for
- Being super-curricular
- How to structure a statement
- Plan your next steps

What are universities looking for  
in a personal statement?

# What are universities looking for in a personal statement?

1. Someone who likes their course

# What are universities looking for in a personal statement?

1. Someone who likes their course

2. Someone who has the skills to do their course

# English Language and Literature

1. Evidence of wide, engaged, and thoughtful reading
2. Analytical skills and writing
3. Enthusiasm for literature
4. Response to new ideas and information
5. Capacity for independent thought



# Which student do you think a university would prefer for English?

## STUDENT A

- School Prefect
- Volunteers
- Enjoys reading
- Plays flute
- Enjoys going to the theatre

## STUDENT B

- Enjoys reading sport biographies
- Enjoys reading dystopian fiction
- Writes for the school newspaper



# Extra- curricular

Activities outside of the core school curriculum  
e.g. sports, student government, volunteering, playing an instrument.

# Super- curricular

Activities that relate to the subjects you are learning in school, but go beyond what is taught in the curriculum and the classroom  
e.g. more depth or breadth

# Being Super-Curricular

How have you developed your knowledge outside the classroom?

What have you done, read, visited, listened to that has inspired you?

If you haven't done anything, what do you plan to do?

programmes / EPQ



practical experience / relevant work experience



reading



podcasts / lectures



## Why do you want to study this course?

- Current studies
- Outside reading
- What has inspired you?

## Super-curricular

- What have you read, watched, visited or listened to that has inspired you?
- Why was it interesting?
- How do these support and compliment the course you are applying for?

## Extra-curricular

- Try and focus on transferrable skills
- Selection criteria for other four universities

**80% Academic**  
including  
super-curricular

**20% Extra-Curricular**

Personal statement openings tend to follow a similar format:

- Why you are excited about your subject?
- What you have done academically to show this?
- Keep it simple. Keep it short.

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(Tip 1: Leave it until last)

(Tip 2: Draft 5 first sentences)



“My first exposure to the concept of genetic disease was whilst doing work experience at a deaf school. I found it incredible that the assortment of four bases could have such a tangible effect on health and development. This sparked my curiosity in the theory of genetic mutation, and was my first introduction to Biochemistry.”

*Biochemistry*

## Opening Paragraph Examples

“My admiration for French extends beyond its beautiful sounds to the richness of its history and culture. For my EPQ, I studied the Charter of Laïcité in French Schools and the history of secularism in France. In order to determine whether I believed it was coherent policy to ban religious symbols in schools, while subscribing to a motto of Liberté, Egalité, Fraternité, I read articles on the subject in both English and French. ”

*French (and Arabic)*

# What looks really impressive is if you can...

...take your super-curricular activity and say what it made you think or link it to things you have done or are learning about  
(critical thinking)



“To find out more about the complexity of the brain, I read “So you want to be a brain surgeon” by Stephan Sanders.

This has given me a great deal of insight into neurosurgery.”

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*Admissions Tutor Comment:  
“While this illustrates that the candidate is reading around the subject, some further significance [should] be given.”*

Effective personal statement paragraphs will use **super-curricular** activities to say...

**WHAT?**

What you  
did

**SO WHAT?**

What you  
learnt

## Critical Thinking

“Before reading *Finding Moonshine* by Marcus du Sautoy, I had only considered symmetries as a property of shapes which appear the same on both sides of a line, but through reading this book I discovered that symmetries are wider reaching than I had expected. These symmetries can even be used to prove things including the inexistence of a formula to solve quintic equations: despite their seeming irrelevance to algebra and polynomials. Reading this book was conveniently timed with further research on Group Theory; this allowed me to understand what du Sautoy described in the later parts of the book, especially the chapter which dramatized the race to find new sporadic groups in the 20th century.”  
*(Maths)*

## Critical Thinking

“After reading John Donne's "The Flea", I was intrigued by his choice to represent love for a woman through the conceit of a parasite, eating away at himself. I saw this as an example of Donne's alleged misogyny furthering the stereotype of women as "cruel and sudden", in contrast to his predecessors who idealized and even worshipped them. However, I think it is equally interesting to consider the view expressed by Ilona Bell that Donne does not present the woman as singularly cruel, but as being capable of independent thought and challenging patriarchal authority, even if Donne himself viewed that in a negative light and considered it a perversion of gender roles.” *English*

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...take your super-curricular activity and say what it made you think or link it to things you have done or are learning about  
(critical thinking)

Or...say what it made you think, and use it as a link to other activities  
(using it as a stepping stone)



Effective personal statement paragraphs will use **super-curricular** activities to say...

**WHAT?**  
What you did

**SO WHAT?**  
What you learnt

**NOW WHAT?**  
What you did next

## Example: Paragraph Scaffold

1. WHAT?: Select something that you have done.
2. SO WHAT?: What were you struck by? What questions did it raise?
3. NOW WHAT?: What did you do to find out more?
4. What struck you about this?

*“Reading *A Very Short Introduction to Molecular Biology* (1), I was struck by a segment on regulatory RNA molecules. I was particularly fascinated by the concept of RNA used in the regulation of gene expression (2). This led me to a Nature article about Riboswitches: RNA molecules that can bind to a ligand and change their physical conformation (3). This happens in the expression region of the riboswitch, and determines whether the RNA is transcribed or not... Taking biochemistry at degree level would allow me to learn more about cell function and control... (4)”*

*Biochemistry*

# Example: Paragraph Scaffold

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3. **NOW WHAT?:** What did you do to find out more?
4. What struck you about this?

1. **WHAT?** *Reading/ Attending/ Listening/ Work Experience in/ Participating in/ Visiting*
2. **SO WHAT?** *I was struck by/ I was particularly interested in/*
3. **NOW WHAT?** *This led me to/ To further my understanding/ In response, I/ Fascinated, I/ Extending my knowledge, I*

# WHERE ARE YOU AT?

- What are your super-curriculars?
- Have you got any lined up?

# Effective Personal Statements

Some things to avoid...

# Top Tips

**“I got my first computer when I was X years old.”**

The ten most frequently-used opening statements.

## #1 Avoid Clichés

1. “I am currently studying a BTEC National Diploma in ...”
2. “From a young age I have always been interested in ... “
3. “From an early age I have always been interested in ... “
4. “Nursing is a very challenging and demanding career ... “
5. “For as long as I can remember I have been fascinated with ...”
6. “Fashion is not something that exists in dresses only” ... “
7. “Nursing is a profession I have always looked upon with ... “
8. “For as long as I can remember I have been interested in ... “
9. “I am an International Academy student and have been studying since ...”
10. “Academically, I have always been a very determined and ... “

# Top Tips

## #1 Avoid Clichés

## #2 Don't Copy (or Lie)

### Don't Copy

“Ever since I accidentally burnt holes in my pyjamas after experimenting with a chemistry set on my eighth birthday, I have always had a passion for science.”

### Don't Lie

Saying things you haven't done

Saying you've read something you haven't



# Top Tips

#1 Avoid  
Clichés

#2 Don't  
Copy  
(or Lie)

#3  
Don't be  
quirky

“My interest in Biology began when my pet cat Snuggles died and I performed an autopsy.”

"On the 20th of April a great figure in history was born...It was me, who will go on to make great changes in history as we know it"

# Top Tips

#4

## Don't List

- What did you learn?
- What do you think?
- What questions do you have?
- What do you agree/disagree with?

Work  
Experience:  
Link to  
Course

“My work experience at Salisbury Hospital's Speech Therapy department also increased my appreciation of the invaluable asset of language.” *French and Arabic*

“My first exposure to the concept of genetic disease was whilst doing work experience at a deaf school. I found it incredible that the assortment of four bases could have such a tangible effect on health and development. This sparked my curiosity in the theory of genetic mutation, and was my first introduction to Biochemistry.” *Biochemistry*

## Work Experience: Vocational Course

“Shadowing a barrister encouraged me to go to court and watch trials, allowing me to understand the role of a barrister, and especially how it contrasted with the work of a solicitor, to which I was exposed during a placement at Clifford Chance. During my time in a clerk's office, I enjoyed reading skeleton arguments, allowing me to understand the preparation needed to construct an argument, which I used in a debate they arranged on prisoners right to vote...” *(Law)*

“Work experience shadowing doctors at my local hospital allowed me to appreciate the workload and challenges of the field. I witnessed coronary angioplasties, helped to carry out ultrasounds, went on ward rounds and even sutured a banana. The teamwork between staff demonstrated how patience and a readiness to undertake responsibilities are indispensable. When a doctor had to persuade an elderly dementia patient that she needed root canal surgery it was clear how important compassion and communication are, particularly with the rise of neurological illnesses.” *(Medicine)*

## Why do you want to study this course?

- Current studies
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## Super-curricular

- What have you read, watched, visited or listened to that has inspired you?
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## Extra-curricular

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## Extra-curriculars

Link them to skills useful for university:

“Balancing my work in school as a language and student council prefect, as well as working part-time, has greatly improved my organisational skills, as well as teaching me how to properly arrange my time.”

*Classics*

“...represent my school in hockey and netball, for which teamwork and commitment are crucial.”

*Human Sciences*

## Extra-curriculars

Or keep it short and simple:

“To relax I play hockey and was captain of the team at school. I enjoy Music and Dance; achieving Grade 8 in Dance, Grade 7 in Piano and Singing, and competing at a national level in Dance.”

*Medicine*

“Outside academia, I enjoy reading, playing hockey, and taking part in drama productions, both on and off stage.”

*Biochemistry*



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## Next Steps

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01

**Reflect** on things you've done which you could write about

02

**Draft** a paragraph based on one of your super-curricular activities

03

**Build up** a complete draft ready for teacher feedback and editing