A Guide to Personal Statements

Wadham College, University of Oxford

What are universities looking for in a personal statement?

- People with the skills and attributes tailored to the course.
- People ready for university style learning.
- People who genuinely enjoy the subject that they are applying for.
- Your personal statement should demonstrate these.

What are universities looking for?

Some do's:

- Communicate clearly
- Use evidence
- Use detail
- Be positive
- Be truthful
- Specific to the course

Some don'ts:

- Cliché (from a young age…)
- Cliché ('passion')
- Negativity
- Too abstract
- Bad grammar

Skills for Course Example

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

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

Opening Paragraph

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.

(Tip 1: Leave it until last)
(Tip 2: Draft 5 first sentences)

Opening Paragraph Examples

"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

"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."
French (and Arabic)

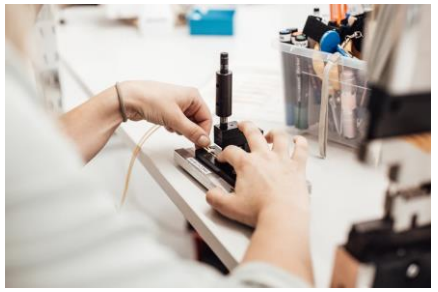
Being Super-Curricular

How have you developed your knowledge outside the classroom?

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

summer school / EPQ

practical experience / work experience



reading

podcasts / lectures

WHERE ARE YOU AT?

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

“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.”

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

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 are 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)

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*

While reading A Very Short Introduction to Molecular Biology, 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. This led me to a Nature article about Riboswitches: RNA molecules that can bind to a ligand and change their physical conformation. This happens in the expression region of the riboswitch, and determines whether the RNA is transcribed or not, i.e. by forming hairpin loops, or cleaving itself. In this way, RNA can control itself using a system that is both simple and immediate. Taking biochemistry at degree level would allow me to learn more about cell function and control, but would also let me explore the full breadth of the subject, by using chemistry to explain biological processes. (*Biochemistry)*

Critical Thinking & Stepping Stones

Example: Stepping Stone Scaffold

1. Select something that you have done.
2. What were you struck by? What questions did it raise?
3. 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: Stepping Stone Scaffold

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

Try and draft a paragraph

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

Top Tips

#1 Avoid Clichés

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

The ten most frequently-used opening statements.

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."

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)*

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

Editing tips

- Proofread. Aim for precision and economy in language.

- Make your language active

In the summer I was delighted to take the opportunity of attending a summer school at the University of Oxford…

↓

Attending UNIQ, I learnt…

- Avoid generalisations

I like law because I like right and wrong → *Fascinated by property law, I…*

- Read aloud. Your ear will pick up what your eye has missed.

Next Steps

01

Research criteria for your courses at your universities

02

Identify super-curriculars to talk about on your statement

03

Start drafting!

UNDERSTANDING YOU IN CONTEXT

ox.ac.uk/context
cam.ac.uk/applying/contextual-data

We want to understand your achievements in the context of your individual background. To do this, we look at a range of publicly available data.

Contextual Info at Oxford	Contextual Info at Cambridge
School data -School performance at GCSE level -School performance at A-level or equivalent -Percentage of students eligible for free school meals **Neighbourhood Data** -ACORN - a measure of socio-economic disadvantage in a given area. -POLAR4 - a measure of participation in higher education in a given area. **Individual Data** An applicant's experience in the care system, extenuating circumstances -Free School Meal eligibility	**School Data** -School performance at GCSE level -School performance at A-level or equivalent -Regularity of successful applications to Cambridge or Oxford. **Neighbourhood Data** -IMD- A measure of relative deprivation OAC2011- A classification based on the 2011 census identifying socioeconomic characteristics and/or progression to Cambridge. -POLAR4 - a measure of participation in higher education in a given area. **Individual Data** An applicant's eligibility for FSM, extenuating circumstances, experience in the care system

This information helps us to understand more about each candidate's particular circumstances and to compare them fairly with all other applicants.