



# The Personal Statement

## -The Horizons Wales Guide

STUCK ON LINE 1? HERE'S OUR GUIDE TO A PERFECT PERSONAL STATEMENT...



## Structure

The structure of your statement will vary depending on your experiences and what you wish to convey about yourself. Some courses such as joint honours require a markedly altered structure. However, as a general guide you should aim to include the following, though not strictly defined as paragraphs:

- An engaging and original opening paragraph
- A justification of interest and wider-reading of the subject
- Your relevant experiences and the transferable skills gained
- Your wider interests and hobbies
- An effective closing statement

Below is the Horizons Wales guide to help you tick off these boxes as well as highlight the many pitfalls which prospective students often fall into!

The Personal Statement is the 4000 character document which separates your UCAS application from the hundreds of others applying for the same course. For most applicants it is the only opportunity to have **your** say to your prospective universities. This is one of the most important documents you will ever produce so getting it done **right**  and done **early**  will give you the edge over other applicants.

## Opening Paragraph

The opening line and paragraph is the first opportunity the reader has to throw your personal statement in the rejection pile, informally known as the bin, so make sure you abide by these simple rules and don't end up there!

Make sure your opening line doesn't fall into the category of personal statement clichés (see link in appendix). It does not need to be a work of literary brilliance or be so unique it just sounds silly, however it should not be generic and should give the admissions tutor a reason to read on. *Simple right?*

*"I have always wanted to be an economist"*

- Rejected student

*"The recent turmoil in UK politics will have ramifications for financial markets the world over. It is contemplating the many possible outcomes of world-changing events which draws me to a career in economics"*

- Accepted student

*"Don't try and be too clever, just try and convey a sense of what really is motivating you in the subject"* - Dr Fiona Spensley, LMH University of Oxford

### Quotations -

Many superb statements begin with a quote. Whether this is your preferred opening line is a matter of opinion, however if you opt for a quote ensure it is relevant and its importance to you is discussed below. Failure to evaluate on a quote is one of the biggest bugs of admission boards. Finally, remember if you do begin with a quote, incorrectly transcribing the quote will almost guarantee you a rejection, so make sure it's triple checked.

*"Progress is made by trial and failure; the failures are generally a hundred times more numerous than the successes"* - Professor William Ramsay

Followed by:

*My interest in chemistry began with watching Horizon on BBC2. Here I enjoyed listening to the chemists discussing...* - Rejected student

*The manner in which William Ramsay perfectly captured the struggle of trial and error which all scientists must face has resonated with me as I contemplated a career in chemistry.* - Accepted student

### Length –

The opening paragraph need not be huge, perhaps just three or four lines, but ultimately must be interesting and readable. Going straight in with your experience and skills is not advisable as you will quickly lose the interest of the reader. That is unless one experience was particularly defining. Ensure your opening paragraph is concise and ideally expresses the core of why you are interested in studying this particular subject.

### Struggling to be original? –

If you aren't yet decided on the course(s) you will be applying for, or if you are having trouble coming up with an original opening, it can be a good idea to leave the opening paragraph until last. Being stuck at this point is common and it can be helpful to get the easier patches of your statement completed first. Finally, if you are really struggling with being creative, turn on a Ted Talk of your subject area or turn on the news. An understanding of current affairs in your field is the best way to demonstrate that you are truly interested in your subject of choice.



## Justification of Interest

The key trait the admissions board are looking for is a genuine motive to want to study their course. This demonstrates to the reader that you are interested in the subject, you know what the subject entails and therefore are a safe-bet for an offer. Hence the best way to remain in the successful pile is to properly justify your interest in the course. Producing a statement which isn't clearly relevant to the subject area is a sure-fire way to end up in the no-pile.

*"I enjoyed aspects of both chemistry and biology in school. I am applying for Neuroscience as it entails aspects of both subjects in relation to the brain."*

- Rejected student

### How do I express my interest?

The best way in which to show you have a genuine interest in the subject is to demonstrate:

- Wider Reading
- Knowledge of the Course Prospectus

"Wider reading", could entail an online course, a lecture you attended, an article you've read, a story you've seen in the news or an online video or programme. Knowledge of the latest developments in your field is an extremely effective justification of interest. Whatever it is, dig deep into it to the extent you can concisely express what it is, why it interested you and confirms your interest in the subject. – See Right

Knowledge of the course prospectus in lay terms means knowing what you will be studying. This doesn't mean stating all the modules you have read about, but gives hints that you have an idea of what you are going to be learning about for the next three years. – See Below.

*"Having read an article in the New Scientist which examined how different laboratories are all targeting different stages of plaque formation in the development of Alzheimer's disease I realised that there is a real excitement which comes from investigating neurodegenerative diseases. This has ultimately led me to apply to study neuroscience."*

- Accepted student

### Horizons Top Tips

- Watch or read the news.
- Read a relevant magazine article e.g. The Economist
- Watch a Ted Talk
- Read the university department's website
- Read the course prospectus

*"I have been studying business studies at school and have always found it interesting, hence I am applying to study business management at university."*

- Rejected student

*"Having studied business studies for the last two years I have grown increasingly interested in business management. In particular I am looking forward to studying marketing and human resources in much greater depth at university."*

- Accepted student

### Where should I put this?

Depending on the format of your statement, this can be included in an extended first paragraph, in a paragraph linking to school or your experiences, or it can be a short stand-alone paragraph. However, your interest in the subject is something which you must continue to convey through the entire statement when discussing your experiences. **Nonetheless it is crucial there is at least one clearly defined passage which demonstrates you understand what the course entails and how or why it interests you.**

## Experience and Transferable Skills

The key to your experience section is that you express, with examples your experiences and the transferable skills you have gained from them.

Transferable skills are skills which are relevant to almost every career. For example, working with people is as important for a physiotherapist as it is to an English-French translator.

However, some careers do have subtly different key skills. For instance, integrity is of far more importance for a lawyer or a doctor than a material's engineer, so be sure to think about the key skills relevant to your subject area or look it up online.

*"I performed my Gold Duke of Edinburgh award with my schoolmates. We hiked in the Alps for five days. It was an unforgettable experience. We had many problems along the way such as crossing a lake which taught me to work in a team and to be resilient."* (252 characters)

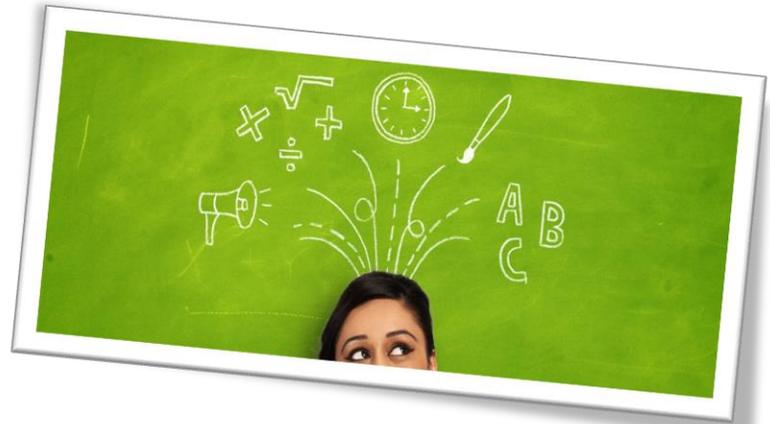
- Rejected student

*"One defining experience was my Gold Duke of Edinburgh award in which I hiked with my team in the Alps for five days (experience 'x'). Here I learnt to work in a team and the resilience required to face new challenges (influence 'y'). These skills will help me to work effectively in a stressful clinical environment (candidate 'z')."* (282 characters)

- Accepted student

### What do I write if I don't have any relevant experiences?

Unless you are applying to health-related careers or other specific courses, relevant experience is not of fundamental importance. The aim here is to discuss your transferable skills which are essential in nearly every career, not simply your field of interest. Working on the till at Clarkes may not cut the mustard for a mathematics degree at Oxford, but being an active member of the team and dealing with customers demonstrates your ability to build a rapport with people of all ages and backgrounds as well as your ability to work in a team. These are skills which are relevant to all people-facing or team-oriented roles.



### How do I write about skills?

Writing about your skills and experiences is something you will have to do throughout your entire career so why not learn to do it effectively now.

The key is to be formulaic. We follow an  $x,y,z$  formula which involves discussing the experience ('x'), describing how it influenced you ('y') and finally why it has made you a better candidate ('z'). - See Left.

This simple tool can give your sentences structure. However, try not to be repetitive or boring so be sure to evaluate on your best experiences.

### If you haven't got it, get it!

If you don't have the essential experience but you think it is absolutely necessary then go out and get it, it's not too late. Besides, care homes, charities and sports teams always need more volunteers!

If this sounds like you, you may want to mention this. This is fine, however you should definitely not lie about your experience, and you cannot mention any skills you took from the role. Instead this should be a short sentence about what you hope to glean from the experience. On a side note- If your experience later falls through (this does understandably happen) be proactive in getting some similar experience which you can use to help explain the misnomer. If you're a budding journalist and your arrangement to work at a local newspaper falls through, start a school newspaper!

## Wider Interests

Your wider interests are an opportunity to demonstrate some individuality. Oxford and Cambridge expressly state that they are quite uninterested in your hobbies, but most universities want to know if you will fit into the university culture.

Most hobbies have great transferable skills related to them. For instance, running a yoga-class demonstrates commitment and team-leadership qualities which are essential skills for most careers. Hence you can use this section with a hint of the 'x,y,z' formula described earlier as a means of demonstrating some bonus qualities you possess. – See Right

Remember, this is your last attempt to express what kind of person you are and is probably the most honest section of your personal statement. After all, what young-people really live for probably isn't the prospect of solving a physics equation, but more-likely the prospect of scoring in the cup final. So make sure to make a totally shameless song and dance about the very best things you've achieved outside of the classroom and are genuinely passionate about. Proud of the bronze you won at national knot-tying championships in year 11? Write about the experience!

*"I am a sociable person and in my spare time I enjoy playing sports, music, hanging out with my friends and socialising."*

- Rejected student

*"I enjoy live music and have played the saxophone for ten years which has required strong commitment. I am looking forward to meeting fellow musicians and joining the university jazz society."*

- Accepted student

### How long should this be?

Being the least essential section this should not take up more than three to six lines, this is also a good place to cut words from if you're well over.

### Horizons Top Tips

- Write openly about your genuine interests
- Make solo hobbies seem a bit more group or team-oriented
- Mention how you would like to get further involved at university



## Closing Statement

The best statements don't simply end because they reach the word limit. Instead it is a good idea to round off with one or two sentences which may be about how much you're looking forward to getting going with the subject or how you hope your application reflects your interest for and suitability for the subject. Try not to write something generic, but do try and have a definitive end-point. – See Right

*“My time at Guides was thoroughly enjoyable and I learnt great leadership skills during the experience. - The end”*

- Rejected student

*“I hope that my application reflects my interest in the earth sciences and demonstrates that I have the capability to learn the skills needed for a successful career in geochemistry.”*

- Accepted student

## A Word on Flow...

One major difference between a high mark and a low mark essay at university is narrative. This is the story you are trying to impart. When reading a book, if each paragraph doesn't adequately flow into the next, the narrative begins to dissipate. Having said this, it is bad practice to directly reference a matter from the previous paragraph when commencing a new paragraph. There are however some simple tricks which can help create a flow to your statement.

- Become familiar with linking your sentences and especially paragraphs with phrases such as:
  - “Beyond my time at...”
  - “Further to my experience at X, I commenced Y...”
  - “Despite a keen interest in X at school, I have also been involved in X at...”
  - “To further my knowledge of...”
  - “In addition to...”
- Read your paragraphs as a whole, this ensures they aren't seen as just a series of individual sentences. If your sentences don't link, think of a better order for them or use an appropriate linking phrase from above.
- If a sentence doesn't convey any new information, cut it.

*“This experience has driven me to apply to study pharmacy.*

*I also volunteered at a care home where I...”*

- Rejected student

*“This experience has driven me to apply to study pharmacy.*

*Further to my experiences in clinical settings, I have volunteered at a care home where I...”*

- Accepted student

***“When your story is ready for rewrite, cut it to the bone. Get rid of every ounce of excess fat. This is going to hurt; revising a story down to the bare essentials is always a little like murdering children, but it must be done.” - Stephen King***

# When you're done, run it through our do's and don'ts checklist.

- ☑ **DO** remember there is a smart academic reading your statement looking for any easy excuse to say no, so don't give them an excuse.
- ☑ **DO** discuss new developments in your field. This means you need to watch the news for relevant developments or read relevant literature such as the New Scientist or Economist.
- ☑ **DO** build a narrative and flow by bridging sentences and especially paragraphs.
- ☑ **DO** be ruthless when cutting. If a sentence does not impart any new information, cut it.
- ☑ **DO** get it done early and read by your teachers and several other people. When it comes to submission, the phrase 'the early bird catches the worm' really rings true.
- ☑ **DO** ensure that your statement is a reflection of you. Irrespective of your peers and teacher's opinions, **you** must be happy with the end product.
- ☑ **DO** take charge of your UCAS application. Ask for your reference early so it's ready to go with your personal statement. If there's a major problem i.e. your teacher lost your reference with two days to go (it does happen), ring UCAS and ask for support, they'll know what to do.
  
- ☒ **DON'T** start with a generic opening line.
- ☒ **DON'T make grammatical or spelling errors**, they are a sad means of getting rejected.
- ☒ **DON'T** capitalise your subject throughout unless it's a language.
- ☒ **DON'T** wait until the last week to get going, writing a good statement can take over a month.
- ☒ **DON'T** say "My dad is a lawyer..." Universities aren't interested in nepotism so instead discuss the relevant experiences and skills you have gained from this act of good fortune.
- ☒ **DON'T** put anything negative about yourself or make any excuses.
- ☒ **DON'T** be afraid to boast about yourself.
- ☒ **DON'T LIE**. If you have to lie it is about something you clearly require to get in, and it will be one of the first thing you will be asked about at interview.
- ☒ **DON'T** write numbers as digits. The general rule is "less than 100, write it out."
- ☒ **DON'T** be repetitive, especially not when using descriptive words such as 'passion' or 'interest'.
- ☒ **DON'T** make lists of books, skills or qualities.
- ☒ **DON'T** swallow a thesaurus. Don't use many words or phrases you wouldn't ordinarily.
- ☒ **DON'T** copy anybody. Plagiarism is checked and will guarantee you a unanimous rejection.
- ☒ **DON'T** make unsubstantiated claims about yourself or a subject e.g. "I am an excellent team player".
- ☒ **DON'T** mention a specific university.
- ☒ **DON'T** apply for multiple unrelated courses. Decide on one subject area. NB: many courses have different titles at different universities. Applying for multiple differently named courses is fine so long as they are centred on the same topic e.g. Business studies, Business management and Business management and corporate identity.
- ☒ **DON'T** misspell the name of an author, a theory, a process, or a medical term.
- ☒ **DON'T** rely on yourself or spell-checker to pick up your grammatical and spelling errors.

# Useful links

UCAS' most common opening sentences –

<https://www.ucas.com/corporate/news-and-key-documents/news/ucas-shares-most-frequently-used-opening-lines-university>

UCAS' own personal statement advice –

<https://www.ucas.com/ucas/undergraduate/getting-started/when-apply/writing-ucas-undergraduate-personal-statement>

UCAS' worst and most common personal statement mistakes –

<http://www.essayzone.co.uk/blog/21-ucas-personal-statement-mistakes/>

Ted Talks –

<https://www.ted.com/talks>

Imperial College London admissions team personal statement tutorial –

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=5jQ3MJgdkJY>

Horizons Wales –

<http://horizonswales.org/>

Also keep up with us on Social media under Horizons Wales:



# FAQ's

## **I'm applying for a joint honours course, should my statement be different? –**

Admission boards receive many of these unique statements. The only difference is that you need to split your personal statement evenly between your two subjects. Be sure to state what you are applying for openly at the beginning. You don't double up on every section, just ensure you have a quality justification of interest for both courses. Finally, don't pretend you are passionate about a career in both subjects if they are very different fields. These statements can be tricky so make sure it gets approved by your teacher.

## **I'm applying for a deferred place, do I mention this? –**

Be sure to mention this in the latter half of your statement. The major pet-hate with deferred place applicants is that they set out many great plans which likely won't come to fruition whilst they are living it up at a full moon party in Bali. Therefore it is essential to use the assertive; that you **WILL** be going to Calais on a voluntary mission to help refugees and that you **HAVE ARRANGED** to spend six months working at a local refinery. Remember to give a time-frame for any plans.

## **I'm applying for Medicine or Dentistry, do I mention my back up course? -**

Medicine, dentistry and veterinary applicants apply for a fifth choice which is generally within the medical sciences. Admission boards will be aware that you are applying for medicine for example, as your statement will be screaming "I love medicine". It is therefore unnecessary to mention your back-up subject in your statement as universities will still consider your application based on the fact that you are smart and your medical statement is of generally high standard. They are fully aware that you will not make them a firm-choice if you get offers from elsewhere.

## **Got more questions?**

We're here to help, especially at this crucial time. Connect with us on social media under Horizons Wales or via the Students tab on our website: [www.horizonswales.org](http://www.horizonswales.org)

For all other queries please feel free to contact us at: [admin@horizonswales.org](mailto:admin@horizonswales.org)