Writing a personal statement

What is it?

4,000 characters of your own words on why you want to attend university and study a specific subject. It's just like a tweet: you have a word limit and need to be concise, clear and to the point. It has to be interesting to make people notice it. It has to reflect your personality, so people can relate to you instantly. But, instead of 3 lines, you have 47 (the largest and most important tweet you'll ever write).

The personal statement is part of your UCAS (university application) form. It's sent online to the five unis you would like to study at. It's 100% about you. It's the chance to state to the uni admissions tutors (the people who decide if you're right for their course) why you would fit their course and university. Be really truthful about why their course appeals to you (research and pick out things from the UCAS course profile & uni's own website).

Show how it links to your career ideas & list any relevant experience you have that makes you a good fit for the course. Remember: you can only write one personal statement which all five unis will see, so it has to be relevant for all the different courses you apply for, without being too specific to each place.

What's on it?

The clue to a personal statement is in the name: make it personal. Don't write what you think people want to hear, write about what matters to you: that's your passions, interests, hopes and dreams, attitude to studying, and your career aspirations. Think of it like a story, and like any good story, it should be made of 3 parts:
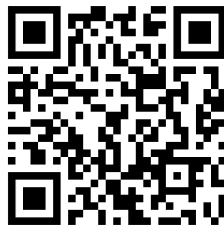
- **Beginning:** an introductory paragraph about how your interest in their course came about. Try not to use the word 'passionate'– make them picture it instead by describing a story about yourself that relates to their subject. It's fine to be funny, so long as what you are describing relates to their subject. Don't just describe a funny story; tell them how it affected you, what you learnt from it, and how it awoke a passion. It's also fine to include a famous phrase or quote, and the names of well known people who inspire you. But don't blab on about them for half of your statement, or include a quote from a play that is 5 lines long. Remember: words count, so be concise, and if it's not relevant to your story and will take up too much space, get rid of it.

- **Middle: Part 1 -** the main chunk of your statement: get down to the nitty gritty about why you are the perfect fit for their course. Go beyond your school grades. Focus on highlighting the experiences you've had (part-time work, volunteering, placements, weekend/after-school hobbies) which give you the skills to succeed at their university, and after in the world of work. With each example, finish by clearly stating how these activities helped you develop the right attitude and work ethic for their course. It's fine to mention some things that haven't worked out well in your life, or things you've perhaps struggled in – but turn it to a positive. Failure is fine – so long as you say what you learned. It can be a great way to show unis your ability to self-reflect, assess yourself and take feedback.

- **Middle: Part 2 -** the part where your research into their course comes through: describe what you know about the course. It shows them you've investigated, know what you want, and aren't taking the decision lightly. You could mention their teaching style, the content (remember don't be too specific), and what university offers you inside and outside the classroom. It's your way of saying: "*I've read all about your course, it suits my needs, and I'm not going to be the one dropping out of your course*".

- **End:** a closing paragraph: your final argument…your one last plea. This should be a few lines which sum up all of the above. It's nice if you can link the ending to your opening story, something like "*ever since the incident from my opening (which made me pursue the activities outlined above) I have known a career in veterinary science is something I would relish furthering myself in each day. From my research, I truly believe your course is the route to me achieving what I want through my working life*."

Things to avoid:

– **Your name:** they know this. It's on your form. Don't waste space saying "hello" or explaining who you are, your grades, your address and how old you are. There's no need for a formal introduction.

– **Their course/uni:** no need for "*I'd really like to study your subject*". They're pretty clever: if you're applying to their course and using your precious time to write a personal statement, they'll assume you want to study their course.

– **Boring words:** it's so tempting to use words like 'passionate', 'excited', 'motivated', 'driven to succeed'. But set yourself a task: once you've written a draft – highlight how many times you've used words like this. Then see how many you can get rid of, and instead use a story or experience that shows them you're that word.

– **Negative words:** '*struggled*', '*failed*', '*difficulties*', '*problems*', '*stopped*', '*quit*'. It creates a negative image of you.

– **Repetition:** if you've made a point clearly, move on. Print out your statement and run through with a highlighter pen. If there are parts where you're basically making the same point, then get rid of it and make a fresh point.

– **Typos:** it's so avoidable, yet still so common. Check for bad punctuation, grammar and spelling mistakes. It really *really* bugs them, shows you're careless and says to universities "*if she can't be bothered prepare one page, how could I expect her to prepare my assignments and pass my course?*"

– **Copying:** it's fine to look up previous examples of personal statements online to see how others have written theirs, but lifting someone words directly is called 'plagiarism'...and is **100% against the rules**. Think you won't get caught? UCAS have read millions of personal statements, and they save them all, so they can scan all the old ones and spot copied words, with very sophisticated plagiarism software. Don't risk it. It may stop you getting to uni. Ever.

One final check:

– **Get inside their heads:** do a final few reads of the statement, but read imagining you are the admissions tutor who knows nothing about your personality, and is reading your words for the very first time. Record it, listen back to your own voice, and ask yourself: do these words build the image of me I'd want them to see in their heads? Do I sound interesting and unique? Do my words make me sound like someone I'd want if I was running the course?

Watch this great insight into personal statements (from 7 mins in) with Moj, Aron and special guest Nathan from the University of Durham.

Watch some inspiring tips on how to sell yourself to unis and employers, from our team and the HOP Humber (Uni of Hull) team.