

Writing your personal statement: what the experts say

Strikingly original or sensibly orthodox? Circumlocutory or straight to the point? The experts tell David Ellis of the Daily Telegraph what they look for in a personal statement.

There are only two truths in this world: just as it is certain you will die, it is a fact that your personal statement will be embarrassing in years to come.

Despite all the advice out there, we all find plenty of room to include things we shouldn't. We've asked the experts how to avoid the most common pitfalls:

Where to begin?

The daunting first line should be handled with care and be sure to strike a suitable tone.

Head of admissions for the University of Sheffield, Alan Carlile, stresses the importance of a striking opening, but warns: "Using humour or a radical statement to get the attention of an admissions tutor can go wrong – particularly if your opening line suggests that Hitler wasn't all bad, or that the first time you were on stage was in your mother's womb. Yes, real examples..."

That said, you'll want to avoid overused opening sentences (see list of Top 10 at end of article). Whatever you say, don't write that you've wanted to study your subject since a young age: there's only so often admissions tutors can read that sentence without risk of mental collapse. Finding a balance is key.

Check obsessively

Don't assume Word will pick up on every error; if you're running factory standard 'American English', the spellchecker will be letting through all sorts of Zs which should be Ss, for instance.

"A spelling or grammar mistake is the kiss of death to an application," says Ned Holt, former head of sixth form at Reading School.

And mistakes are often hiding in plain sight as Ken Jenkinson, headmaster of Colchester Royal College, knows well: "This morning, we had a very bright student who spelt his name wrong."

The advice from both men? "Always have someone proof read it."

Write like you

Many personal statements end up looking less like a record of your brilliance and more like a written application to work as a human thesaurus. Admissions tutors are looking for substance, and pomposity won't do anything to convince them you love their subject.

The personal statements that don't do well, says Alan Bird, head of sixth form at Brighton College, are those which "lack genuine personal flavour". Start telling your universities why you're so keen to study and why you'll be the best student since Hermione.

And never simply say you're right for the course – it's your job to demonstrate that by being specific. Whatever you write needs to be intrinsically you, which is something easy to lose while rattling off achievements.

Make everything count

Universities are looking for someone interested in the course and someone interesting to teach it to. Cut the small talk and press home why what you're saying is relevant.

Alan Bird sees too many lists which say nothing: "Students might name a book and then give it a review – I could read that off the dust jacket."

Remember that anything extra-curricular is padding, albeit the good kind, and needs to be spun the right way. "Charity work or being captain of a sports team is very positive and can be great as part of a statement – but make sure whatever you include has relevance to what you are applying for," says Alan Carlile.

The University of Manchester's head of widening participation, Julian Skyrme, encourages taking a straightforward approach: "We're asking 'why does your part-time job relate to you being an engineer?' Nail your experience to the course. Personal statements can sometimes appear like a biography."

You're good but you're not that good

After flicking through 30,000 admissions, a little modesty is likely to go down better than a literary rendition of *Simply the Best*.

"Confidence is great, veering into egotism is not," says Alan Carlile.

Remember you're applying to study something new. Your statement should convince universities that you're excited to engage with new experiences based on your past experiences. Bragging about your achievements just won't do this.

Personal statement: 10 most overused opening sentences

Ucas have compiled a list of the 10 most overused opening sentences in personal statements. Whatever you do, don't begin yours with any of these...

Writing a personal statement is possibly the most important – and certainly the most time-consuming – aspect of the university application process. It's also rather tricky.

I haven't dared dust off my own to see how many times I used the word "passionate", but the truth is it isn't easy to be original. Nearly 700,000 students applied for university last year – that's a lot of times for tutors to have to read "I have always been fascinated by ...[insert subject]".

To help students avoid the most common pitfalls, Ucas has provided the *Telegraph* with a list of the 10 most overused opening sentences from a previous admissions cycle.

Whatever you do, don't start your personal statement with any of these – not only are they awful clichés, but they're bound to be picked up by Ucas's anti-plagiarism software.

Top 10 most overused personal statement opening sentences

1. I am currently studying a BTEC National Diploma in ... (used 464 times)
2. From a young age I have always been interested in ... (309 times)
3. From an early age I have always been interested in ... (292 times)
4. Nursing is a very challenging and demanding career ... (275 times)
5. For as long as I can remember I have been fascinated with ... (196 times)
6. "Fashion is not something that exists in dresses only" ... (189 times)
7. Nursing is a profession I have always looked upon with ... (178 times)
8. For as long as I can remember I have been interested in ... (166 times)
9. I am an International Academy student and have been studying since ... (141 times)
10. Academically, I have always been a very determined and ... (138 times)

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Personal statement: Structure and Content

First paragraph

- What sparked your interest? - talk about how you reached your decision to study this subject
 - How has it been sustained? –
 - Has taking it to A2 level confirmed you want to take it even further?
 - Be specific - give an example of something in the course that's really fired your interest

Paragraph Two

- Your Academic and Intellectual Curiosity
 - Books that you have read. Try to think about your independent reading.
 - Give the title, the author, a brief synopsis and explain what it was about that book that you liked/seemed relevant to you and your course.
 - If you can, try to get to the heart of what the book was about, or take issue with it
 - The journals or magazines or blogs you've read or follow. Why do you like that particular journal, and which articles in particular have interested you?
 - How have you carried this interest forward?
 - If you refer to something you have read, say what you think of it, a chance to show critical thought
 - The recent developments in your subject that has caught your eye. Have you studied developments in behavioural economics? Or read different books on globalisation and the financial crisis?

Paragraph Three - Related interest in your subject

- The work experience or voluntary work has you done.
 - What it was about that work experience or voluntary work that (specifically) interested you?
 - Any academic competitions you've entered, what did you write about? What did you learn?
 - What extra courses, lectures, summer schools, and seminars have you attended? Who gave them? What impressed you? What did you take from them?

Paragraph 4 - Extra Curricular - the subliminal messages

- The sports/drama/music etc you do and the level.
 - Any scholarships you have, and how you have continued to excel in that area. ☑ Your orchestras, choirs, bands, societies and say why you like them.
 - Your positions of responsibility or occasions when you've led teams. What did you learn from it?
 - What takes up your free time, and why do you give it so much space in your life?
 - Why you think these qualities will make you a good undergraduate?
 - Some areas of your life that show you can work under pressure, to deadlines.

Paragraph 5 - Close

- A short summation in a sentence of why you would be an ideal candidate