

UCAS Application

Making a personal statement

In an increasingly competitive university environment, your personal statement is an important part of your application that can give you the edge. **Anthony Curtis** offers valuable advice and guidance on how to achieve this.

I have been fortunate to work on both sides of the UCAS admissions process. During my time at a university psychology department I received personal statements and made the judgement call on whether A-level students had the passion, commitment and , perhaps above all, the academic potential for a psychology degree.

My current job involves preparing A-level students for university, helping them structure their personal statements effectively and then challenging them on what they mean by what they write.

This is not always an easy process, with Socratic questioning on both sides, but the end result is usually worth all the drafts that go on between the first attempt and the final version of the personal statement.

Your personal statement could make the crucial difference in terms of whether you are offered a place on a psychology degree at the university of your first choice or not. There are no second chances to get this right.

What is a personal statement?

Your personal statement is, as the name suggests, your own personal account of why you want to study a particular subject(or subjects) at university and what skills, knowledge and experiences you have gained to help prepare you for the point you have now reached in your academic life. It is a 'conversation with a purpose' or your own 'personal narrative' with the universities that you have selected as the next destination for your academic journey. They are selecting you and you are selecting them.

You have 4,000 characters(about 47 lines of text) to show admissions tutors why they should pick you over other candidates. You will need to have decided what subject you want to study before you start, as one of the main reason for writing the statement is to prove your suitability and passion for your chosen course.

What are admissions tutors looking for?

Whether you have opted to study psychology, zoology or accountancy at university, the same basic tenets are being assessed through analysis of your personal statement. These are:

- The standard of your education – are you proficient in reading and writing?
- Can you express yourself clearly?
- Are your motives for wanting to study at university sound?
- Will you fit into their university?
- What can you offer the wider university life (i.e. in addition to your studies)?
- Will the course benefit you and make a difference to your life?
- Are you a creative, original thinker – thinking laterally and out of the box?

How do I start?

The most important thing is to get writing. Don't think too much initially about the end result – you will have plenty of opportunities to redraft your writing later (with the help of your sixth form or personal tutor).

You will first need to provide a brief but convincing explanation as to why you want to study psychology at university. Think of the 'personal trigger' that got you interested in psychology. This could be a book, a museum trip, a documentary, a childhood experience, and inspiring teacher or original work experience placement, for example. Now develop this line of thinking by explaining how and why psychology inspires you to the extent that you want to study this further at degree level. You could, for example, relate this to current affairs in the media or focus instead on what you aim to achieve with a psychology degree..

Having stated with a broad account, you should then focus on specific areas of interest in psychology that you can follow through to degree level. You will need to do your research and make sure you know the content of each university degree course. For example, does the psychology degree allow you to specialise in forensic psychology as part of your final year project? Is the sandwich year in the third year of a four year course and how will this develop your knowledge and understanding of applied psychology?

Each psychology course has its own unique 'entry profile'(EP) which should be available online from the university website. Check out what these entry profiles are looking for and see how your skills, knowledge and experience match these requirements. For example, if the university is looking for 'highly numerate students who enjoy dealing with uncertainty and complexity' make sure your personal statement refers to this explicitly but also in a genuine way (i.e. don't pretend to be someone you are not in your personal statement – this may backfire on you at interview).

Should I start with a quote?

One option is to begin with a quotation from an expert in the field, famous author or psychologist. Only do this if it relates directly to your course and what you want to study psychology. Your statement should also show that you understand the implications of the quote and make it flow neatly into your introductory paragraph.

What is the best way to mention my A-levels?

Your statement should definitely reflect what you have learnt in your a-levels and wider school/college life. Start by making a table and reflect on the skills and/or knowledge and/or experience that studying each subject has given you. Table 1 shows a suitable template.

Table 1 Planning for statement reference to your a level

	A-level 1	A-Level 2	A-Level 3
Skills, knowledge and experience			
Skills, knowledge and experience			

For example, studying mathematics may have given you more confidence in describing and interpreting data, which has particularly helped you in the research methods element of your psychology course.

Now repeat the above exercise but focus on extra-curricular interests and achievements. For example, completing your Gold Duke of Edinburgh certificate may have given you the determination to succeed in overcoming a series of obstacles in your life. Universities love students who are determined and who have overcome setbacks as this gives them an insight into your own personal resilience and commitment to succeed in a competitive environment.

If you have an idea of what you want to do once you have completed your university degree, you should also include this here. Remember, though, that you are applying for an academic degree and not a job, so don't focus too much here on your career.

What about my wider skills?

- You will need to show an admissions tutor a sample of skills you have developed in or out of school/college and your interests and hobbies. This could be through, for example, voluntary work, a part-time job or work

experience. The kinds of skills you could consider here for a psychology degree are:

- Communications skills
- Commitment
- Time management
- Teamwork
- Personal initiative
- Public speaking
- Sense of responsibility
- Adaptability
- Organisation
- Leadership
- Research and analysis

You could usefully select three of four of the above and explain how you have developed these skills to best effect.

Should I mention my gap year plans?

Yes. If you are planning to take a gap year before your psychology degree, and are applying for deferred entry, you must explain what you plan to do-give details! This shows that you are organised and want to pursue interests outside of your studies.

If you can relate your gap year plans to your psychology degree then, that's even better. For example, the statement that 'working with rurally disadvantaged children in Africa will enhance my own perspectives on cross-cultural factors affecting child development in my psychology degree' shows real engagement of your planned experience with subsequent benefits of studying psychology at university.

Closing summary

Finish your personal statement with a one-or-two line summary of why you want to go to university and study psychology. Make sure you don't simply repeat your previous words, and do state clearly why you deserve to be offered a place. For example, 'Overall, I am a hard-working, active person, and enthusiastic about achieving my goals and becoming a clinical psychologist. I am looking forward to university life, both academically and socially.'

A word of warning..

UCAS have some sophisticated software for detecting statements that have been 'copied and pasted' from so-called modal applicants. The software, called 'Copycatch' works out how much of a personal statement has been copied, and the

universities then decide what action(s), if any, to take regarding notified cases. Although such cases are exceptions rather than the norm, it is worth making sure that your personal statement is your personal and original account of why you want to study psychology at university.

UCAS feedback

UCAS has helpfully published on its website why certain personal statement resulted in students not being offered places. Specific examples(adapted) include:

- Your personal statement does not strongly support your desire to study your chosen psychology degree.
- Your personal statement does not show sufficient understanding, relevance or knowledge about the psychology course you are applying for.
- Your application form (including your personal statement, reference and predicted grades)

And finally

Going through this rigorous process may make you think again about studying for a psychology degree or even going to university at all. Consider your motivations, aspirations and abilities carefully and then enjoy getting busy with all your research and writing.

Further Reading

Visit the relevant pages of the UCAS website:

Explore purepotential.org at:

Visit studential.com:

Look at information on university websites, e.g.

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