Personal statements for PG study

Writing good personal statements takes time. You’ll need to make several drafts and ask tutors, friends, and others to review your statement before you submit it. Book an appointment with one of our Application Advisers to check your statement too!

Often you’ll be given very exact guidance on what evidence and information to include: it is vital that you pay attention to these instructions, and include only what is relevant. On other occasions, you’ll write a statement with fewer constraints or specific instructions. In either case, the following ideas should help you to structure your answers, and create the best possible impression.

The Opening Paragraph
Start with a strong opening paragraph to catch the reader’s attention – examples might be a personal experience, an explanation of why you love this area of study, or a thought-provoking statement concerning the academic discipline. For example, if somebody would be applying to an MSc in Management, he/she could start the personal statement by writing about an interesting business case study that was recently in the news and then discuss how that example shows his/her interest and reasons for applying to the master’s programme. Make sure you are specific and remain to the point, making it as easy as possible for the reader to understand your story flow in the introduction. It may be easier to write the main body, and then return to this paragraph at the end.

The Main Body
The reader (often the programme director of the course you are applying to) wants to know you and your motivations. The main body of the statement is your chance to present yourself. You don’t need to cover every single point below, but a strong application will demonstrate that you have considered these kinds of questions.

In general, it is recommended that, after the introductory paragraph, to start with your academic paragraphs, followed by discussing any relevant work/internship/extracurricular experiences that further demonstrate your interest in the course and end with one or two paragraphs highlighting what you will get out of the course and what you hope it will lead to in terms of your career. A strong personal statement is one that has a solid line of reasoning and indirectly incorporates your motivations for the course and university throughout your paragraphs.

Why them? – Why this is exactly the right course for you.
• Why do you want to do the course/research?
• Why this subject field? How did you become interested in it? Why does it still interest you?
• Why this university? Is there specific expertise, or are there academic staff you want to research or study with?
• Are there particular options or modules that interest you?

• Are there specific resources locally that appeal to you? Museum collections, libraries, field-work locations or lab equipment?
• Has the reputation (through recommendations, league-tables etc.) of the course inspired you?
• Are you attracted by opportunities for collaboration or work placements?
• Have you attended any Open Days or other visits?

Why you? – How your skills and experiences equip you for this course.
• What academic skills do you offer? E.g. technical, language, computing, research methods, awards, essay competitions, previous (relevant) work experience/shadowing.
• Which of your undergrad modules & courses are particularly relevant, and why?
• What have you done outside of your study to enhance your understanding of the topic? E.g. conferences, membership of organisations & societies, relevant travel, blogging.
• What personal skills can you offer, which would be useful in academia? Give examples. e.g. team work, time management project management, resilience, effective communication.
• What are your personal strengths?

What’s next? What will you get out of the course, and what you hope it will lead to in terms of your future career.
• A detailed career plan isn’t necessary, but you should show how this course fits in with your general aspirations.
• What are your career aims?
• Would the course provide a step towards a longer-term goal?
• Are you intending to continue on to a PhD?
• Do you have a broad interest in contributing to a particular issue or field? e.g. social enterprise, public policy, human rights, sustainability.
• Do you have a more specific goal in mind?
• How will your chosen course help you to achieve your goals?
• This paragraph is often the last paragraph before the closing paragraph on your personal statement.

The Closing Paragraph
Use your closing paragraph to summarise your application, return to any themes you introduced at the beginning and to restate your enthusiasm for the course. Do not worry about it being shorter than the previous paragraphs – it should be to the
point and wrap up your statement in a concise, professional yet enthusiastic way.

**Tips and Hints**
These tips were provided by careers advisers, application advisers and academic staff from various universities (with particular thanks to Royal Holloway, University of London, and the University of Oxford).

- Good English, grammar and spelling are essential.
- Don’t copy/paste the same statement for all applications. Obviously, it is okay to have a number of similar paragraphs, but in general try to make the statement specific to the course and university you are applying to.
  - Research the university and course/research area.
- Give your statement a structure – make sure the line of reasoning makes sense.
- Demonstrate a strong academic background, motivation and that you have the right skills and qualities.
- Stick to the word limit - usually one or two sides but pay attention to their requirements. If there is no specific word limit, use approximately two pages, 1.5 spaced.
- Avoid jargon and make it understandable by non-experts.
- Keep the tone positive, enthusiastic and lively in order to convey enthusiasm and make yourself stand out, but remember that this is a document introducing you in a professional capacity.
- It’s a good idea to mention relevant individuals whose work has truly inspired you, but avoid name-dropping for the sake of it, and excessive and evidence-free flattery of the institution or the course.
- Make sure you follow specific instructions. If they ask for evidence and examples, make sure you give them. If they say ‘explain in under 200 words’, they mean it.

**Summary**
Your personal statement should demonstrate motivation, enthusiasm and a clear understanding of why you are applying to this particular course, at this particular institution. What experiences have lead you to apply for the course, what will you offer the institution, what will you get out of the course, and what do you want to do after?

For more information, and to book a feedback appointment with one of our Application Advisers to go over your personal statement, please visit:

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