

Perfecting the personal statement

By Bella Malins, Director of Access and Admissions, UCL

What are universities looking for?

We are looking for excellent writing and a statement that is personal and unique to you. It is your opportunity to show us your passion for your subject and why you are a good fit for our course and university community.

Personal statements are not about what you have done, but what you have got out of each experience. Make your point, evidence it and explain how it has helped your understanding of the subject or improved your key skills.

The person reading your statement will want to choose the most interesting and most motivated students to teach. How can you show them that it is you?

Demonstrate enthusiasm

You get one personal statement and it needs to be relevant for each course you apply for. Read course descriptions and modules to understand the qualities, skills and experiences necessary.

Demonstrate enthusiasm and motivation for the subject(s) – including what you have done to enhance your knowledge (attending talks, reading articles, independent research, competitions or awards).

Experiences and achievements

Around 75 to 85 per cent of your statement should focus on the subject and your learning with around 15 to 25 per cent on activities or work experience.

We know that not everyone can secure work experience at a City law firm or Parliament. We are more interested in knowing what you learned from any opportunity - whether volunteering at your local hospital or attending an exhibition or summer school. It is not so much about what you have done, but what you got out of it.

Evidence any 'transferable skills' that are required by the course, such as communication, teamwork and problem solving.

Make every word count

You only have 4,000 characters or roughly 500 words. Select your best examples and write in a detailed, reflective and succinct way. Be true to your own voice and use vocabulary that you are comfortable with.

Get a second opinion

Before submitting your statement, ask a teacher, family member or advisor to proof read your statement and look for things you may have missed.

We DO read them

Imagine you have 3,000 applications for 100 places. Now imagine that 95% have the grades you are asking for.

Every single personal statement at UCL gets read and there are plenty of programmes where a well-written personal statement can make the difference. They may even be ranked.

Be truthful

We can see through exaggerated claims and you may be asked to expand on something you have written in interview or at an open day. UCAS also checks each personal statement for plagiarism.

What puts us off?

- Rambling
- Clichés and bland statements such as “Ever since I was a child...”
- Unnecessary Quotes
- Poor grammar and spelling
- Abbreviations
- Over-use of the thesaurus
- People who apply for a joint subject, but only mention one

Finally, good luck!