

# How to write an effective personal statement

<http://www.dur.ac.uk/undergraduate/apply/personalstatement/>

The first thing you must remember is that your personal statement will probably be the only opportunity you get to "talk" directly to the admissions person on the programme you want to study. It is therefore vitally important that you make this statement as effective as possible! If you do apply to a programme which invites candidates to interview, your personal statement may also form the basis of your interview.

Your personal statement is an opportunity for you to demonstrate why you think you would be a good student for the programme you are applying to and why the University should select your application over those of other candidates. It is primarily an academic statement and you must target it very directly towards the subject in which you are interested, though a University will also want to know something about your more general interests.

It is recommended that you cover three main areas in your personal statement in the following order:

1. Why do you want to study this subject?
2. What have you done in the past that makes you particularly suitable to study the subject?
3. What else have you done that would contribute to the course and the university community and makes you an interesting and unique individual?

## 1. Why this subject?

This could be a short sentence and needs to capture the reason why you are interested in studying on the programme you are applying for. Some of the most effective personal statements start simply, for example, "I want to study History because...". With this opening statement you are trying to communicate to the admissions officer your enthusiasm for the programme. You might want to think about these questions and areas:

- \* Your knowledge of the subject area
- \* What does the programme entail?
- \* Why does it interest you?
- \* What interests you the most?
- \* Where could studying the programme lead?

## 2. Why You?

Once you have outlined your reasons for being interested in the programme you are applying to, you need to demonstrate why you would be a good student. In this section you are trying to convey your inclination and ability to study on the programme. You need to be able to show the admissions officer that you have the right background in terms of academic ability and the right interest or inclination, that is, that you know what the programme you want to study involves. For example, if you want to be a primary school teacher but have never worked with children of that age, the admissions officer will wonder what your inclination to study to be a teacher is! When writing this section you'll need to think about and quote evidence from:

- \* Your academic studies
- \* Any voluntary work
- \* Your hobbies and interests
- \* Things you have learned from books, newspapers, TV programmes and so on
- \* Experiences in your year out (if you are having one)
- \* Any relevant work experience (e.g. medicine, physiotherapy)
- \* Particular project work in your studies

### 3. Are you interesting and unique?

Finally, you should write about what makes you an interesting and unique person; all those extra things you have done or experienced which will bring something extra to the community of the University you want to join. It doesn't matter what you've done, you need to reflect on the skills and lessons you have learned and write about that. You may want to cover:

- \* What do you enjoy doing outside of school
- \* Your hobbies, leisure activities
- \* Sports you participate in
- \* Other sorts of extra-curricular activities
- \* Significant responsibilities you hold, at home or in clubs or societies
- \* Special achievements
- \* What you have learned if you have had a job
- \* Remember to mention these parts of your life, and if appropriate the skills that will help you with the course.

Some common questions...

Q How can I write a personal statement about the programme I want to study when I want to apply to three (or more!) different sorts of programme?

A You can't! It's possible, but harder, to write a statement that covers two different areas but three simply won't fit. Remember, your personal statement needs to convince an admissions officer that you are the right student for their programme and trying to do that for three or more programmes in one personal statement doesn't work.

Q How far back should I go when mentioning my extra-curricula activities?

A You should only mention those things which help support your application; a long list of everything you've done is much less impressive than picking on one or two things and writing about the skills you learned through them. Remember also that recent activities may be of more significance than those a long time ago. The activities you took part in over the summer will carry more weight than the awards you won when you were six!

Q I think I have achieved some truly great things in my life, should I not make sure these achievements make up the bulk of my personal statement?

A Anything that makes you a unique and interesting individual is important but always remember that an admissions officer is primarily interested in why you want to study their course.

Q I'm not interesting or unique!

A Yes you are! Everyone has special skills, experiences or achievements to mention. We don't have any set ideas for what we are looking for, we just want to know what makes you, you.

Q Do I need to use long words and elaborate language to impress an admissions officer?

A No! An admissions officer will be impressed by the use of good English; a personal statement needs to be well written, in simple English, and laid out carefully. If you try too hard to impress with clever language you will normally make your statement harder to read and your reasons for wanting to study a particular programme less clear.