

Personal statements for postgraduate study applications

What to expect

Personal statements are usually part of the formal application process to study a particular subject area, at a specific institution. Some application forms will give you a clear indication of how much to write and what to cover, others may be more open-ended. Whatever the format, you will need to provide evidence to support your application. Aim for a clear impact statement at the beginning that will hold the reader's attention for the rest of the text and which will provide a framework around your reasons for choosing your postgraduate course and studying at your choice of university.

Structure

Plan your statement in the same way that you would any other formal document:

- **an introduction:** aim for a strong opening statement that clearly states your intentions. It should:
 - provide your motivation for applying for the course
 - grab the attention and make the reader want to continue reading
- **a main body of evidence** that demonstrates the points made in the opening paragraph:
 - your past academic achievements
 - your skills and experiences gained through employment as well as your interests, linking these to the course for which you're applying
 - why you've chosen that university and course
 - how the course would contribute to your future career

Give the narrative behind your choice: using a **Situation, Task, Action, Result (STAR)** approach can help to make your experiences more concise while creating impact. The STAR method sets the scene for an individual story, describing the action you have taken and the outcome and/or what you accomplished as a result.

- **conclusion**

What should you include?

Why you want to do the course/research and why you have chosen that university?

Is the programme noted for a distinctive emphasis or speciality? Are there certain academic staff with whom you want to do research or study? What is it about the structure of the course or the choice of modules that appeals to you?

Why you have chosen this specific course/subject and how it fits into your study interests. Show that you have carried out detailed research into the course and that you meet the required entry criteria. When did you become interested in this field and what have you discovered about it since?

How have you learned more – through seminars, classes, work or conversations with academic staff? What is the relevance of your first degree and any non-academic interests to this study? Depending on the subject, Arts graduates may need to prove that they can handle quantitative topics.

You need to show that you have the **ability to study independently**, combined with strong study skills. Demonstrate your enthusiasm and motivation for the course/research by including actual examples such as your final year dissertation to display your academic ability. You could write about how you found the initial idea, how you went about researching it, methodology used, problems encountered and how you solved these and what you have learned from the experience.

What are your unique selling points? Show that you have seriously considered your strengths and weaknesses for postgraduate study or research. If you have done vacation jobs, what skills have you learned, eg team-working, communication, working under pressure? Have you had to overcome any obstacles or hardships in your life? This will show evidence of determination or resilience.

What are your career aims? You may not have a clear pathway in mind but you should at least have some ideas. A strong sense of direction will help convince selectors that you have a commitment to do well in your studies, particularly if you can show how the course fits into your career plans. Most vocational courses such as teaching or law will expect you to have obtained a period of relevant work experience to support your application.

Attention to detail

You should not use the same statement for all applications. Not only will a generic statement be obvious to admissions tutors, but you will need a slightly different emphasis for each university to which you are applying.

As with all applications it is imperative that you focus on detail and verify that you have not made any spelling, grammar or punctuation mistakes. Proof-read carefully and don't rely on spelling and grammar checkers alone. Get someone else to look over the draft before you send it and make sure you have not exceeded any word limits.

The conclusion should be positive, upbeat and reiterate the unique selling points that differentiate you from other applicants.

Remember: Admissions tutors are looking for candidates who have academic potential, who are motivated and have researched the course and who can outline clearly why they want to undertake that particular study programme.

Checklist

- Have you thoroughly researched the course to which you are applying?
- Have you decided who you will ask to be your academic/employer referees?
- Have you provided plenty of evidence of your commitment to the course and your ability to study at postgraduate level?
- Are you able to explain clearly how you plan to fund your studies?
- Have you got someone to proofread your statement and are you sure that it is 100% accurate?