

# Writing a Personal Statement for Postgraduate Applications



## When will you be asked to submit a personal statement?

You will usually be asked to prepare and submit a Personal Statement as part of an application for a taught postgraduate course such as a Masters or Postgraduate Certificate in Education (PGCE) as well as for a research degree such as an MRes, MPhil or PhD.

### ► What will they be looking for?

Motivation, enthusiasm and a clear understanding of why you are making the application to this particular course, and to this particular institution.

Evidence of how your academic background and other experiences have shaped your decision to apply and how the course contributes to your plans for the future.

Evidence that you have the ability, experience, skills and motivation to successfully contribute to the course, and to complete it.

### ► Structure

Many universities give clear guidance about what they want you to cover in the personal statement. In this case, make sure you follow the instructions carefully. Others are less directive. In this instance your statement needs a structure with an introduction, a main body and an ending. The opening paragraph sets the framework for the rest of the statement and offers an opportunity to grab the reader's attention.

Try to be succinct, avoiding jargon, clichés and the temptation to write solely to impress. Stick to word limits (if given) and in most cases you should be able to say what you need to say on one side of A4. Keep the language simple and clear so it is easy to read whilst still being professional. Be positive and show enthusiasm for the subject.

## Within the main body of the statement you should aim to cover:

### ► Why you want to study this topic or field

Is it a natural extension of your current interests? How did you become interested in this area? Why does it continue to fascinate you? What have you done within your degree or outside of your study to fuel this interest? Would the course provide a step towards a longer-term goal?

### ► **Why you have chosen this specific course and institution**

Are there particular options or modules that interest you? Is there particular expertise in that department? Has access to specific resources such as libraries or laboratory equipment been a factor? Has the reputation (through recommendations or other means) of the course inspired you? Are you attracted by opportunities for collaboration, accessing professional networks or work placements? Have you attended any Open Days or other visits?

### ► **How your experience equips you for the course**

Consider the subjects you studied at undergraduate level; your relevant knowledge, skills (technical, language, computing, research methods); independent study or research; prior (relevant) experience; academic awards and other achievements. The focus here is likely to be on your academic suitability for the course but if you have relevant work experience or extra-curricular activities that provide further evidence of your interest or ability then include them too. Your non-academic achievements might also provide evidence of project management, resilience, effective communication and so on.

### ► **Where the course might lead you**

You don't need to have a detailed career plan but you do need to show how this course fits in with your general aspirations. Are you intending to continue on to a PhD? Do you have a broad interest in contributing to a particular issue or field, eg social enterprise, public policy, human rights, sustainability? Or do you have a more specific goal in mind? How will your chosen course help you to achieve your goals?

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.



## ***Did you know?***

You can access our leaflet series and further resources on Surrey Pathfinder:  
[www.surrey.ac.uk/pathfinder](http://www.surrey.ac.uk/pathfinder)

## What do I need to avoid?

You shouldn't:

- ▶ be negative
  - ▶ include irrelevant course modules, personal facts or extracurricular activities
  - ▶ include other people's quotes
  - ▶ make pleading statements
  - ▶ namedrop key authors without explanation
  - ▶ needlessly flatter the organisation that you're applying to
  - ▶ use clichés, gimmicks or humour
  - ▶ use overly long sentences
  - ▶ use the same statement for each application
  - ▶ Waffle
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## Final Checklist

When you have completed the first draft of your personal statement use the list below to make sure you have included everything that is required.

### Have you?

- ▶ Explained why you want to study this subject?
  - ▶ Evidenced why you have chosen this course in particular?
  - ▶ Told the admission tutor what you can offer – interest, enthusiasm, relevant skills and experience (work experience/voluntary work)?
  - ▶ Included some reference to how it fits with your aspirations?
  - ▶ Highlighted additional skills, achievements or involvements that might be relevant?
  - ▶ Explained why you have chosen this institution to apply to?
  - ▶ Structured it effectively with a strong opening paragraph, a main body and a conclusion that sums up what you have to offer?
  - ▶ Checked the spelling and grammar?
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## Applying to postgraduate study in other countries

If you are making an application to study outside the UK make sure you take time to understand the application process. For more details see:

- ▶ [www.prospects.ac.uk/studying\\_abroad.htm](http://www.prospects.ac.uk/studying_abroad.htm).
- ▶ <https://targetpostgrad.com/advice/studying-abroad>

## Research Proposals

For PhD and some research Masters applications the personal statement is often accompanied by a research proposal – a document that sets out your research interests and proposed area of study. The detail required in this section varies hugely for different disciplines. For some sciences it may simply be a list, in order of preference, of the named PhD projects you wish to be considered for. However, for most areas and especially in the arts, humanities and social sciences you will need to devote a considerable amount of time to developing your ideas, discussing them with potential supervisors and writing a proposal. Your academic tutor may be able to give you some guidance on writing research proposals. For more details see our leaflet titled 'Applying for a Phd - Useful careers resources (for Phds in the UK only)'.

## Teacher training applications (PGCE)

The personal statement for PGCE applications is the key part of your application. The focus should be on your motivation for becoming a teacher and how your teaching and other relevant experience to date have shaped this. Ideally you should also analyse some of those experiences setting out what you have learnt from them, and how they have helped you to understand the role, and the sort of teacher you aspire to be. Tips on writing a personal statement for teaching are provided here:

- ▶ [www.ucas.com/postgraduate/teacher-training/apply-through-ucas-teacher-training/how-write-ucas-teacher-training-personal-statement](http://www.ucas.com/postgraduate/teacher-training/apply-through-ucas-teacher-training/how-write-ucas-teacher-training-personal-statement)
- ▶ [www.prospects.ac.uk/jobs-and-work-experience/job-sectors/teacher-training-and-education/teaching-personal-statement-examples](http://www.prospects.ac.uk/jobs-and-work-experience/job-sectors/teacher-training-and-education/teaching-personal-statement-examples)
- ▶ <https://targetpostgrad.com/subjects/teaching-and-education/how-to-write-your-personal-statement-for-teacher-training>

For general information on further study please check out our Useful Information leaflet *Postgraduate Study*



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