

PERSONAL STATEMENT FOR UCAS

It's that time when you stare at the large blank screen, needing inspiration, hoping for a brainwave to produce an amazing Personal Statement which will get you a place at Uni. You CAN do it, without phoning a friend or seriously attacking the cookie jar. Let's look at how you can 'sell' yourself, taking it a bite at a time.

What do you need a Personal Statement for?

Part of the selection system for a place at university requires you to write a brief statement telling the selectors something about you and your motivation to study psychology. Producing a short piece of work gives the selectors some idea of your potential, which is why it is so important to give yourself time and space to develop the personal statement. Also, the statement shows how you put your ideas together, your writing and thinking style and ability to rise to a challenge. At the moment, you will be very aware that there is a lot of pressure on Universities; this reflects the tough economic climate. Reading your personal statement helps the reader get some insight into your motivation, what you have gained from experiences, how you see yourself developing and your hopes.

Why psychology?

Studying psychology gives you the opportunity to investigate the complicated strands involved in being human, offering a wide range of ideas, views and approaches. You may have already studied psychology, so you can refer to this, by mentioning an interest or aspect which 'hooked' your interest. Examples could include; attraction, personality traits, animal behaviour or psychological explanations for mental disorder.

Many personal statements reveal that the applicant has decided on a lifelong career in psychology having read the latest psychotic 'slasher' from the top of the paperback bestseller list. Perhaps because psychology is about people, it seems familiar, even the darker aspects of human nature, so people choose to study it because of this. However, a vital element of study in psychology is developing critical ability. This involves asking questions, which Passer et al (2009) suggest include;

“What exactly are you asking me to believe?”

“How do you know?”, “What is the evidence?”

“Are there any other possibilities?”

“What is the most reasonable conclusion?”

Involving yourself in psychology not only offers a career, but also a way of getting more out of life. Developing critical ability will feed into greater self confidence and belief in your ability to be part of change, rather than an observer of it. You might have been given feedback which highlighted particular strengths or attributes you have, such as logical reasoning or tenacity in solving problems.

A major piece of advice for writing the personal statement is to pass on your enthusiasm for the subject you want to study. Sounds simple, but you run the risk of sounding able to sell false nails to a footballer's wife by being too gushing, rather than mature, motivated and focussed. You can make direct statements; for example, "I believe studying peoples' interactions using information technology is crucial, and see myself focussing on cognitive aspects in this fascinating, complex area of psychology"

You have to choose me because...

This is the tricky path between false modesty (too cool for fame) and oversized ego (too hot to ignore).

1. Psychology involves investigating people as individuals and in groups. You will be part of possibly many different groups in University; your personal statement is an opportunity to offer evidence of your ability to take an active part in a group. You might reflect, for example, "We had to make time to talk through what we wanted from the group"
2. A brief self evaluation to let the selectors know how you view yourself, and what you could bring to the course is useful. For example; "I enjoyed work experience, from this, I believe I can make constructive, challenging comments in discussions".
3. Highlight examples of your being motivated, self organised and able to meet deadlines. Unless your mum is coming with you, or you have a personal assistant, getting work in on time, and fulfilling the other course requirements, regulating social and study time will be solely up to you. Academic study can be tiring, frustrating or boring at times, BUT, can also be deeply satisfying, exciting, rewarding and self confirming. Learning at higher levels is a unique challenge on many levels.

Making the selection team happy

1. Follow the guidance from UCAS, go to their website and remind yourself what is needed.
2. Be genuine, trust that you do have something to offer.

How to shoot yourself in the foot

1. Cheat! Plagiarism is an academic serious 'crime', so be aware of unknowingly copying a personal statement, especially if looking for inspiration from the internet or getting advice from a friend. UCAS uses Copycatch, a similarity detection system, and will alert university admissions staff to any 'dodgy' statements.
2. Fail to check and triple check your spelling, grammar and punctuation. This is the first time the university sees your writing

style, and gets some idea of what makes you tick. First impressions really do count (as you will find out about in Social Psychology!), so aim for enthusiasm, not losing sight of clarity.

3. Write a witty, bouncy, humorous magazine filler personal statement. The applications officer may have a sense of humour, but will be mindful that humour is fine in the right context, so this is not the occasion for 'verbal bling'.
4. The personal statement could be used in an interview, so 'keep it real'.

Good luck, I hope you continue to be inspired by learning and pushing your boundaries!

*"Thumbnail" Tess Parkinson RMN, BSc(Hons), RNT, M.Ed, Cert.CBT
Senior Lecturer, mainly concerned with psychological aspects of mental health and illness, and professional development for individuals. I started working life as a dental surgery assistant, then completed mental health nurse training, which was responsible for my initial interest in psychology. I have been involved with admissions for a year, and have been impressed with the breadth, maturity and vitality of the personal statements people have written.*