ADVANCING ACCESS | From the RUSSELL GROUP

Welcome to our Professional Development Day 2025

Event programme

9:30-10:00	**Arrival and refreshments**
10:00-10:10	**Welcome address,** delivered by Advancing Access
10:10-10:55	**Writing effective UCAS References** This session will break down the three key sections of the UCAS reference and provide insights into what selective universities are looking for. Delegates will explore how to write strong, tailored references for competitive courses.
10:55-11:05	**Break**
11:05-12:05	**Supporting students to write Personal Statements** This session will introduce the three new sections of the Personal Statement. Delegates will explore what each section requires and review example statements to give feedback.
12:05-13:00	**Preparing students for interviews and admissions tests** This session explores the admissions tests and interviews required by some selective universities. Delegates will try example test questions and discuss strategies to help students prepare effectively.
13:00-13:30	**Networking lunch and event close**

Anam Hoque
Queens Mary University of London
Student Recruitment and Widening Participation Senior Officer

Rosie Armes
University of Sheffield
Student Recruitment Officer

A big thank you to East Norfolk Sixth Form College for hosting today's event!

Thank you to Lucy Hammond

About Advancing Access...

All 24 Russell Group universities fund this project making our offer completely free to you..

Our Goal:

As a result of our interventions, we hope that teachers and advisers will be in a strong position to best support the progression of their students to Russell Group universities

GATSBY

Bookable CPD sessions

Delivered online or in-person at your school/college, on a range of Higher Education topics.

Book a CPD session:

Online resources

Browse our Resource hub and find guides and tools on all areas of Higher Education admissions - for teachers, advisers and students!

advancingaccess.ac.uk

Online events

We offer a variety of online events including Virtual Conferences and Webinar Series, all designed to bring Higher Education updates to every corner of the UK.

In-person events

Get involved with our in-person events, ranging from our Russell Group Conferences to our In-School Conferences.

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Coming up

Background on UCAS reference changes

Section 1: Providing information about your school or college

Section 2: Providing details of extenuating circumstances

Section 3: Providing additional supportive information

Background

Why UCAS references changed?

- UCAS introduced a new reference process for applicants applying for entry in 2024 onwards

- Feedback to UCAS suggested that long subjective descriptions are not always helpful in enabling universities to make admissions decisions

- The new format will mean you know you are only providing the information that universities require in their decision making

- In a nutshell, referees will now provide responses in three structured sections rather than providing one continuous piece of prose

Won't this create more work?

- Whilst it may take a little time for you to become familiar with the new system, the new format should be less time-consuming to complete

- Previous time which was invested in reference writing can now be used in other ways, for example supporting applicants to research courses and make decisions

The Russell Group view...

- In March 2023, Advancing Access consulted with 10 of our partner Russell Group universities to find out what they were looking for from the new reference format

- We asked them what sorts of responses they might expect to receive in each of the new reference sections

- We will present general advice in this session; however, we encourage you to check advice from individual universities on their websites

What the Russell Group thinks...

Advancing Access consulted with 10 partner Russell Group universities to find out what they were looking for from the new reference format.

"Our members have engaged positively with UCAS to make additional improvements to the final guidance to references for applications to 2024 entry and are satisfied that **the new format and supporting guidance will be able to capture the information needed to make fair and informed admissions decisions.**

In particular, **the changes made mean that students applying to our universities will not require an additional reference** to the one provided to UCAS, ensuring the system remains streamlined for students, schools and colleges and universities.

References in the past...

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Referees used to be given a single free text box where they could write up to 4,000 characters or 47 lines of text. We used to recommend the following structure:

....
....
.... → Details about the school/college plus contextual or extenuating circumstances about the applicant

....
....
....
....
....
.... → Academic information – typically details of performance in each of the applicant's A level subjects (or equivalent), covering the applicant's potential to succeed on the university course.

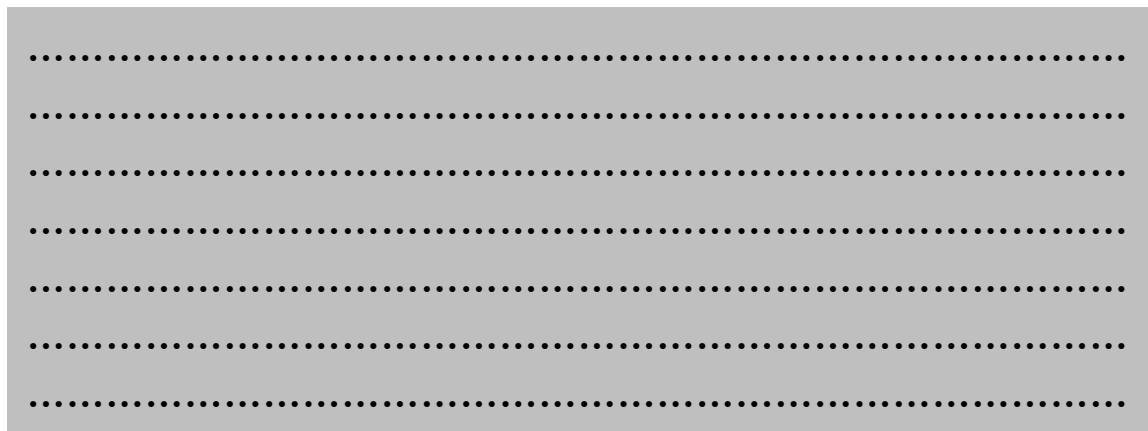This section was the main bulk of the reference.

....
....
.... → Details of extra-curricular activities, work experience, applicant's character and personality etc.

What's staying and what's going?

There are now three defined sections

....
....
....

→ School/college information and extenuating circumstances will now each have their own section

....
....
....
....
....
....
....

→ You may provide less academic information than before and should focus on the most relevant information

....
....
....

→ You may end up providing less extra non-academic information than before

What's stayed the same...?

- Applicants will be provided with a copy of their reference if they request it from UCAS

- The maximum length remains at 4,000 characters, this is the total limit across three sections

- You can begin writing the reference once the applicant registers with UCAS

- You can write the reference in Word and save your own copy (securely and not indefinitely)

- You can read applications in the UCAS portal and make sure that references correspond well with applications

The three new sections...

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For each applicant, you will be able to enter a response for three sections:

Section 1	Section 2 – if applicable	Section 3
Enter a general statement about your **school/college**	Enter information about **extenuating circumstances** which may have impacted the applicant's education and achievement	Outline other **supportive information** specific to the applicant and relevant to the course(s) applied for that you think universities/colleges should be aware of

Roles in the reference process

Students

Complete their application and personal statement, which the referee should look at

Senior leaders

Senior leaders at your school or college can agree on a statement about the school or college which is included in every reference

Subject teachers

Subject teachers may provide some input, though not all need to contribute, and they may provide less detail than before

Form Tutor

A form tutor might be the one who draws together all the information needed to complete sections 2 and 3 in the reference

Section 1, 2 or 3?

In groups, sort the statements into one of the three sections.

🕐 10 minutes

Section 1, 2 or 3?

The school is one of the 10% most deprived areas of XX; it also falls into the first POLAR3 quintile and has 22% of students declaring FSM eligibility.

Jordan was diagnosed with a form of macular dystrophy known as Best Disease, an eye disorder that can cause worsening (progressive) vision loss for which there is no treatment. He is registered as visually impaired. It has been a life-changing diagnosis. We ensured Jordan sat at the front of the class and was provided with all PowerPoint slides to his personal iPad as he is unable to read the board. The school have contacted the examination board on his behalf.

Harry is the strongest of a large cohort and an outstanding Biologist. His wider reading and passion for the subject underpins his vast subject knowledge and he was involved in the Biology Olympiad, achieving a Silver Award. An exceptional Chemist, he is one of the most able in the cohort, consistently placing in the top 5% in assessments.

Olivia is a gifted and talented U18 national squad hockey player. During her studies she has spent significant time away from the classroom to engage with rigorous training. This has the potential to put pressure on her academic work, however, Olivia has never failed to make up for lost learning time.

We base predicted grades on end-of-first-year exams where available, alongside internal assessments and a range of other work students have completed.

Catrin's Year 12 assessment, along with the rest of her cohort, was impacted by an unfortunate staffing challenge, which led to her class having two new subject teachers in the space of three months in subject XX. She has recovered well from the disruption and remains positive, and we feel that her tenacity will help her to close some of the gap. However, her final grades may not truly reflect her natural intellect and ability.

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Section 1: Details about your school or college

School/college overview

Enter a general statement about your school/college/ centre

You might set the scene by stating...

- What type of school is it?
    - For example, state funded or independent, sixth form or FE college, single-sex or coeducational?

- How big is the school/sixth form/college? And what are the class sizes?

Details of your qualification policy

- What types of qualifications do you offer?

- When students take A levels, how many do they take? Do they take externally accredited AS levels?

- Are additional qualifications available, such as EPQ, Core Maths or Welsh Baccalaureate?

- Are there any combinations of subjects which are not possible?

- How do you arrive at predicted grades? Are there some qualifications you don't predict for?

- Do you have entry requirements

Example statement for section 1...

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We base predicted grades on end of first year exams where available, alongside internal assessments and a range of other work students have completed.

Factors which could apply to you...

You might mention these if they apply to your institution, and you think they're relevant:

- High proportion of free school meals/pupil premium students

- School or college serves disadvantaged community

- High proportion of SEND students

- Low Ofsted rating

- School or college level extenuating circumstances (e.g. fire, flood, staff shortages)

- Below average attainment level

- Small proportion of students progressing to university/Russell Group/Oxbridge etc.

Example statement for section 1...

The school is in one of the 10% most deprived areas of XX; it also falls into the first POLAR3 quintile and has 22% of students declaring FSM eligibility.

Finding statistics on Gov.uk

Advancing Access website...

Use our website to construct your school/college statement

UCAS references CPD module

Configuring the UCAS website

- Once a senior member of staff in your organisation has agreed on a final version of a statement about your school or college, the same statement can be used for every application

- In the UCAS portal, it is possible for each application centre to add a reference template with your school or college details. This will need to be done by someone who has permission to access to the 'Centre Management' section of the UCAS website

- Referees can then use the 'add template text' option to insert this template automatically

Configuring the UCAS website

ADVANCING ACCESS / From the **RUSSELL GROUP**

Centre management 2024

UCAS Training School
UCAS centre number: 19048

Centre and reference details

Contacts

Centre linking (buzzword)

Qualification shortlist

Groups

Application fee payment methods

Referee contact details

Reference template

Reference template

Edit

The information you enter in this section can be added to each applicant reference in the reference section of the Application details page.

Note that if you update the information here it will not update references that you have already added this information to.

This text will count in the 4000 character limit for applicant references.

USE THIS TEMPLATE TO ADD YOUR MANDATORY SECTION 1 (ESTABLISHMENT DETAILS) FOR THE REFERENCE.

AT THE POINT OF ADDING A REFERENCE (UNDER APPLICATION MANAGEMENT) CLICK 'ADD REFERENCE TEMPLATE TEXT' TO INPUT THIS TEXT YOU HAVE PREPARED.

Configuring the UCAS website

Referees can use the button displayed below to add a template

Reference

If a staff member at your centre has entered reference template text in 'Centre management', you can add this to the reference using the button below. This will be included within the character count for the reference.

[Add reference template text]

Please enter the reference here. There is a limit of 4000 characters (including spaces, headings and line breaks). Bold, italics and underlining cannot be used in the reference. Character counts may differ if your input has been pasted from another electronic source and/or you have entered non-English characters and/or symbols such as £, €, among others.

Establishment details *

Enter a general statement about your school/college.

Type here

Characters used here: 0, remaining overall: 4000

What the Russell Group looks for

You should aim to include all relevant factors, but our sample of universities suggested that these were the top 3 factors they were most interested in:

School-level extenuating circumstances (e.g. fire, flood etc.)	Any restrictions on qualifications choices or combinations	Whether the school catchment area is within a socioeconomically deprived neighbourhood

Section 2: Extenuating circumstances

Extenuating Circumstances

If applicable, enter any information about extenuating circumstances which may have impacted the applicant's education and achievement

- This section is optional and there is a box to tick to indicate if there are no extenuating circumstances

- It is likely that you won't complete this section for most applicants

- Applicants will not be disadvantaged if they have no extenuating circumstances

Extenuating circumstances

Possible contextual information about the applicant

- Disability or special educational needs

- Illness

- Bereavement

- Caring responsibilities

- Multiple teachers in a short space of time

- Student looked after in care

- Applicant is refugee or asylum seeker

- Lack of access to necessary technology

- Lack of suitable study environment at home

- Limited choice of subjects (at an individual level)

- Other adverse circumstances

Jordan was diagnosed with macular dystrophy known as Best Disease, an eye disorder that can cause worsening (progressive) vision loss for which there is no treatment and is registered as visually impaired. It has been a life-changing diagnosis. We ensured Jordan sat at the front of the class, all lectures printed off in A3 handouts or given as PowerPoint (to his personal iPad) as he is unable to read the board. The school have contacted the examination board on his behalf.

Example statement for section 2...

Catrin's Year 12 assessment, along with the rest of her cohort, was impacted by an unfortunate staffing challenge, which led to her class having two new teachers in the space of three months in subject XX. She has recovered well from the disruption and remains positive, and we feel that her tenacity will help her to close some of the gap. However, her final grades may not truly reflect her natural intellect and ability.

Attainment trajectory

You could offer some commentary on actual or predicted attainment in section 2, for example:

- There is a mismatch between actual grades at GCSE level and predicted grades at A level (or equivalent)

- The student is not predicted to meet the advertised entry requirements of the course

You don't need to state predicted grades as these are entered elsewhere

Support you've put in place

- In section 2, you can tell the university if there is any support you have put in place to enable the student to succeed at school or college

- Universities may be able to offer similar support themselves in future

E.G. We ensured Jordan sat at the front of the class, all lectures printed off in A3 handouts or given as PowerPoint (to his personal iPad) as he is unable to read the board.

General points

- Seek the consent of the applicant first before including extenuating circumstances

- You should still mention extenuating circumstances that the applicant has chosen to mention themselves in the personal statement

- You can also flag extenuating circumstances with exam boards, though you should mention you have done this in the reference to avoid 'double counting'

- References cannot be amended once submitted. If extenuating circumstances emerge further down the line, contact universities to tell them

- Some universities may have their own extenuating circumstances form to fill in, especially in cases where applicants have faced particularly difficult circumstances (if you have sent a separate form, you can state this in the reference)

Students can flag things up too...

Remember: There is another section of the UCAS application where the applicant can identify if they...

- Have been in receipt of free school meals

- Have parents in the armed forces

- Are estranged from their parents

- Have caring responsibilities

- Are a refugee or asylum seeker

- Have been looked after in care

- Have parenting responsibilities

You can see our blog post on these questions that were introduced from 2023 entry onwards.

Section 3: Additional supportive information

Section 3 – Supportive information

Outline any other supportive information specific to the applicant and relevant to the course(s) applied for that you think universities/colleges should be aware of

- This is your chance to provide other relevant information to support the application

- This is **not** a space to add everything you would have put in the "old" reference – expect to write a little less than you did in the past

- When supporting applicants for some of the most competitive universities, expect to write around 2,000 characters in this section

Supportive information

You might provide details of:

- Evidence of the applicant's suitability for the course

- Details of relevant work experience which has been completed (may not be necessary to include part time jobs)

- Challenges in balancing school or college work with other responsibilities

- Positions of responsibility, e.g. Head Girl or Class Representative

- Relevant extra-curricular activities

- Verification of things mentioned in personal statement (which are not verified elsewhere)

Olivia is a gifted and talented national and GB level U18 national squad hockey player. During her studies she has spent significant time away from the classroom to engage with rigorous training. This has the potential to put pressure on her academic work, however, Olivia has never failed to make up for lost learning time.

Academic information

- Details of academic skills and achievements in relevant subjects (for example, a subject which is being applied for or is a pre-requisite for the course being applied for)

- Information about super-curricular activities and evidence of engagement of a subject outside of the school or college syllabus

- Details of students who are near the top of their class in particular subjects

- Information can be presented in bullet point style

- You may not need to cover all subjects the student is studying and are likely to require a smaller contribution from subject teachers than in the "old" reference style

Put your students in context

Instead of:

"Alice's performance in Maths has been very strong. Her last three test scores for mechanics, statistics and calculus have been 79%, 82% and 84% respectively."

Go for:

"Alice's average score in her last three assessments is the second highest in a class of 19 students and is consistent with students who have gone on to achieve a grade A* in previous cohorts."

Example statement for section 3...

Harry is the strongest of a large cohort and an outstanding Biologist. His wider reading and passion for the subject underpins his vast subject knowledge and he was involved in the Biology Olympiad, achieving a Silver Award. An exceptional chemist, he is one of the most able in the cohort, consistently placed in the top 5% in assessments.

Details of barriers

You might describe certain barriers the student has faced or could face, such as:

- Barriers in accessing suitable work experience opportunities

- Factors which might affect an applicant's performance in an interview

- Difficulties a student may have faced in putting together a portfolio for an art or design course

Other resources

Additional resources...

From Advancing Access:

- 'How do I write an effective UCAS reference?' interactive CPD module

- 'How do I help my students apply to university?' resource strand

- Sign up to our mailing list

From UCAS:

- Changes to undergraduate references for 2024 entry

Questions?

Break 10:55 – 11:05

9:30-10:00	**Arrival and refreshments**
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13:00-13:30	**Networking lunch and event close**

Supporting students to write personal statements

Coming up

The basics

Section 1

- Overview
- Top tips
- Examples

Section 2

- Overview
- Top tips
- Examples

Section 3

- Overview
- Top tips
- Examples

Top tips

Resources

Starter for 5…

1. Universities don't read/use the Personal Statement

True, False, or It Depends? **It depends: Different universities and courses may have varying approaches to assessing the personal statement.**

2. Reflection is more important than just listing experiences

True or False? **True! Universities value quality over quantity. They want to see relevant experiences with reflection, not just a list of activities.**

3. Personal Statements should be completely unique and creative

True or False? **False! While originality is great, what matters most is clear, well-structured content showing motivation, skills, a and suitability for the course.**

4. Admissions tutors look for evidence of transferable skills

True or False? **True! Skills like critical thinking, communication, and problem-solving are just as important as academic knowledge.**

5. The total limit for the Personal Statement is still 4,000 characters

True or False? **True! 4,000 is still the overall character limit for the Personal Statement**

Personal statements – the basics

The basics – 2026 entry & beyond

The personal statement should:

- Be 4,000 characters or 47 lines of text (including spaces) – whichever comes first

- Portray the applicant's character, knowledge, experience and ambition for the course they're applying to

Key dates – 2026 entry

There are two key deadlines for the Personal Statement:

- **15 October 2025** – Deadline for applications to Oxbridge, medicine, dentistry, and veterinary medicine/science.

- **29 January 2026** – Deadline for most undergraduate courses
    - Referred to as the Equal Consideration Deadline

What's changing?

ADVANCING ACCESS / From the **RUSSELL GROUP**

Instead of one longer piece of text, the new structure is split into three sections

Section 1:	**Section 2:**	**Section 3:**
Why do you want to study this course or subject?	How have your qualifications and studies helped you to prepare for this course or subject?	What else have you done to prepare outside of education, and why are these experiences useful?

What's staying the same?

The overall character count will remain at 4,000 across all answers, the amount students may write for each question can vary

The new structure still enables students to showcase their passions, interests, knowledge and experiences of their chosen subject area and allows them to demonstrate why it's a good fit for them and their future ambitions

"It is our responsibility - where we can - to remove barriers, both real and perceived, which might prevent those who want to pursue a university education from doing so." – Dr Jo Saxton, Chief Executive, UCAS

Why the change?

To ensure the highest quality, UCAS partnered with an external research agency to rigorously test the new template, guidance, and wording. Findings below...

Over half the students UCAS spoke to found completing the three questions "very easy" or "easy".

Admissions teams said it **made it easier** for them to assess applications and **more confident that they will receive the information they need** to make decisions.

Most advisers preferred the new format and said it would **enable students to provide more complete and detailed statements**, with the majority of advisers surveyed as part of the research stating they were "very confident" or "extremely confident" that the questions clearly convey what is needed for each answer.

Mixed responses...

Some students feel apprehensive about the change...

Source: Student Room

254 votes – 6/12/2024 – 13/12/2024

I'm in favour of the changes (41)
16.14%

I don't really mind either way (46)
18.11%

I don't think they should be changed (68)
26.77%

I'm unsure how I feel about them (35)
13.78%

I haven't heard about the changes (59)
23.23%

Tell us more about your answer in the thread (5)
1.97%

"This seems like they have to guide every paragraph and spoon feed students with what they need to write rather than allowing personal voice to shine through."

"All it does is restrict how most people apply for university"

"I've noticed that everything gets dumbed down - what was wrong with writing a long one pager?"

How are they used?

Different universities and courses may have varying approaches to assessing the personal statement.

HEIs use Personal Statements to...

- Understand the person applying

- See how much prep the student has done

- Determine whether the student is likely to succeed on the course

- Differentiate between similarly qualified applicants

- May be used to formulate interview questions

Russell Group universities receive tens of thousands of applications.

The personal statement can make a difference between an offer and a rejection.

Responses from the Russell Group

ADVANCING ACCESS / From the RUSSELL GROUP

"Personal statements are exactly that – personal to each student writing them. We recognise that each individual student will have a variety of experiences to draw upon and interests they wish to discuss. We would advise students to ensure that their personal statement overall contains all the different content they want to share and not to worry unduly about which section the information is contained within. At the University of Birmingham, we will continue to review each personal statements as a whole alongside the other information we use to make decisions on a student's application."

Nick Hull, Director of Admissions, University of Birmingham...

We'd generally say that all questions are equal. The whole point of the reform is to ensure students cover all three sections so we would want to see effort being made in each one.

Lydia Stride, Student Recruitment Manager, University of Sheffield

We no longer use the personal statement as a weighted component of our selection criteria. Should we need to differentiate between applicants who have identical scores at interview when making offers, UCAT scores will be used as our primary differentiator. Should there be a situation where applicants achieve the same interview result and UCAT score, only then will the personal statement be used as a deciding factor.

University of Bristol Medicine course (as of 2022)

Other key information...

The 3 sections

- Made up of 3 questions

- 4,000 overall character limit

- 350 character minimum per question
  - All questions are equal

- The statement will be reviewed as a whole – students should avoid repeating information across sections

- We advise students to include all the content they want in their personal statement without worrying too much about which section it appears in

"We'd generally say that all questions are equal. The reform is to ensure students cover all three sections so we would want to see effort being made in each one."

Section 1

Section 1

Why do you want to study this course or subject?

Encourage students to write **in their own voice**. Admissions tutors want to hear **their** story, not what they think universities *want* to hear.

Students should consider:
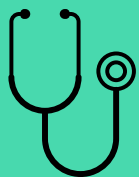
Their passion and interest for the course	Their knowledge and skills of the subject area	How the course links to their future

This section isn't about proving they're the best; it's about showing why they're genuinely excited to study this subject!

Why do you want to study this course or subject?

How can you support your students to prepare a response?

Encourage students to:

- Read the course description and identify key skills

- Reflect on key moments that inspired their interest or why certain experiences influenced their choice

- Think about <u>how and why</u> they have an interest, not just that they have one!

- Be specific in their responses E.g. a specific book, topic, or event

- Consider how they could connect their subject choice to real-life issues e.g. Climate change

- Address their career or academic aspirations e.g. where do they see this subject leading them?

Examples for section 1

Discuss in groups

🕐 5 minutes

- How would you support this student to improve their answer?

I want to study psychology because I find it really interesting, especially how the brain works and why people behave in certain ways. Learning about memory in my A-Level course made me think more about how psychology applies to real life. I have read some articles online about mental health, which I found thought-provoking, and I enjoyed discussing different theories in class. I think psychology will be a good subject for me because it is relevant to everyday life, and I hope to work in mental health in the future."

How to stand out...

ADVANCING ACCESS / From the RUSSELL GROUP

Tips to equip your students to design a strong response

Students should be specific in their response

☒ "I enjoyed my chemistry lessons."

☑ "My fascination with organic chemistry grew when I completed an independent research project on pharmaceutical drug development."

Students should show their motivation, without saying it

☒ "I love biology because..."

☑ "Witnessing the rapid development of vaccines during the pandemic led me to explore the mechanisms of genetic coding and immune response, sparking my deep interest in molecular biology."

Activities for your students...

These activities aim to equip students to overcome common challenges

Students may neglect to include specific details in their responses

Encourage students to work in pairs.

One student explains why they want to study the subject.

The partner's job is to keep asking "why?" or "how?" until a specific answer is found!

Students can find it challenging to begin writing their response, and sometimes use "clichés"

Give students a time limit of around 2 minutes.

Within that time frame, ask them to jot down as many sentence starters as they can.

This can support students with beginning their responses.

Section 2

Section 2

How have your qualifications and studies helped you to prepare for this course or subject?

How can you support your students to prepare a response?

Encourage students to:

- Demonstrate active engagement with the subject

- Be specific and reflect on their experiences

- Show <u>how</u> they've gained their skills and how this relates to their chosen course

- Include critical reflection

What could increase success?

Steven Jones and HEAN (2016) tested an "Academic Apprenticeship" scheme providing a structured approach to personal statement writing

"The Academic Apprenticeship took a new approach to the personal statement which sought to provide students with a set of **structured activities enabling them to analyse wider reading and academic activities related to their course**. Instead of listing wider reading texts or simply naming other enrichment activities, Academic Apprentices were encouraged to scrutinise academic materials and course-related activities in greater depth. Through a set of subject-specific pathways, the Academic Apprenticeship **advised students to create personal statements that focused on showcasing their academic suitability for a course, particularly by offering detailed analysis of a topic that went beyond the A-level syllabus**. In the case of vocational subjects such as medicine, applicants were encouraged to scrutinise a work experience placement in depth." (Sutton Trust/Steve Jones/HEAN, 2016)

Those who followed this approach were much more likely to receive an offer from a Russell Group university when compared to a control group. This is largely because Russell Group institutions are research intensive.

Academic examples...

Students can up-skill or advance their knowledge in their chosen subject area

- MOOCs

- Articles e.g. JSTOR, ScienceDirect, PubMed

- University-led free online courses

- UCAS Springpod tool

- Subject tasters

- Virtual work-experience

How to stand out...

Tips to equip your students to design a strong response

It's important for students to link their academic studies to the course or subject they want to study.

☒ "I did an EPQ about the ethics of animal testing. I enjoyed it a lot because I learnt about science."

☑ "I did an EPQ about the ethics of animal testing, during this I had to research, condense information and make good notes. This is a skill I know is important to study Philosophy. I also enjoyed learning about ethical dilemmas, and I want to study it in more detail at university."

Students should show their motivation, without saying it

☒ "I study History at A-Level, which I enjoy. I think it will help me with a Law degree because I like writing essays. I also did a course on Human Rights Law, and I watched a court case, which was interesting.

☑ "Studying A-Level History has strengthened my ability to evaluate sources and construct arguments, skills essential for a law degree. To deepen my understanding, I completed an online course on Human Rights Law and attended a local court case, which gave me insight into legal processes."

Examples for section 2

Discuss in groups

5 minutes

- Which response is better? And why?

- How would you support this student to improve their answer?

My A-Level History course has enhanced my ability to analyse primary and secondary sources, particularly when studying the causes and consequences of the World Wars. In my coursework, I critically examined how different historians interpret the impact of the Treaty of Versailles. Writing essays has helped me develop my argumentation skills, as I learned to structure complex ideas and support them with evidence. Additionally, studying English has improved my ability to read critically, enabling me to engage more deeply with historical texts and debates, which will be crucial for university-level history

Studying History at A-Level has helped me prepare for a degree in History because I've learned a lot about different periods, like the World Wars and Medieval history. I have written essays on various topics and discussed events like the causes of World War I. I also study English, which has helped me with reading and writing, and I feel this will help me with my university work. These subjects have given me a good understanding of how to approach historical topics.

Examples for section 2

The example in blue was stronger, here's some reasons why:

Specific examples – Refers to *the Treaty of Versailles* and *analysing sources*, showing depth of understanding.

Critical thinking and engagement – Demonstrates the ability to critically examine sources and historical interpretations.

Clear connection to future study – Links **skills** like **argumentation** and **critical reading** to what will be needed at university.

Lacks Specificity: Refers to *"different periods, like the World Wars and Medieval history"* but doesn't explain what specific aspects or events they studied

Vague Connection to Skills: - *"I feel this will help me with my university work"* lacks concrete examples of how the student's A-level studies have prepared them for the challenges at university. The response doesn't elaborate on how those skills were developed or tested in the context of history.

Misses Critical Engagement: For example, the student doesn't mention any analytical skills used to assess historical sources, evaluate differing viewpoints, or argue a position, all of which are important aspects of a history degree.

Section 3

Section 3

What else have you done to prepare outside of education, and why are these experiences useful?

Students should consider:

Work experience, employment or volunteering

Personal life experiences, responsibilities and achievements
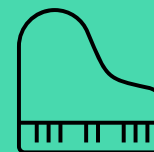
Hobbies and any extracurricular or outreach activities

This section is not just about listing experiences – students should explain why these experiences are useful and how they link to their chosen degree

What else have you done to prepare outside of education, and why are these experiences useful?

How can you support your students to prepare a response?

Encourage students to:

- Reflect on the skills they've gained from their experiences

- Show how the experiences link to their chosen degree or university-level study

- Include critical analysis of their experiences

- Focus on the impact of the experience, rather than over-explaining what the experience was

Examples for section 3...

Students can up-skill or advance their knowledge in their chosen subject area

- Young enterprise

- Work-based learning

- Shadowing

- Trips and visits

- Podcasts, TED Talks, documentaries

- Duke of Edinburgh/Duke of York awards

- Extra-curricular activities

- Positions of responsibility

- Outreach events and programmes

Remind students that even seemingly unrelated experiences can develop key skills for university

Examples for section 3

Discuss in groups

5 minutes

- Which response is better? And why?

- How would you support students to improve their answer(s)?

Outside of my studies, I have done some volunteering at a local charity shop. I have learned how to interact with customers and help with the organisation of donations. I also enjoy reading books in my spare time, which has helped me improve my general knowledge. These experiences will help me at university because they have taught me how to manage my time and communicate with others

Outside of my studies, I have volunteered at a local charity shop, where I have developed strong communication skills by assisting customers and working as part of a team. I have also taken part in a community project that involved organising fundraising events, which improved my leadership and project management abilities. Additionally, I have read extensively on topics related to history, such as the causes of the Industrial Revolution, to deepen my understanding of the subject. These experiences have not only enhanced my teamwork and organisational skills but also prepared me to engage with the interdisciplinary nature of history at university.

Examples for section 3

The example in orange was stronger, here's some reasons why:

Vague description of activities – The response mentions volunteering and reading but doesn't provide details or explain how these activities were meaningful or connected to their subject.

Lack of depth in skill development – It mentions *"how to manage my time"* and *"communicate with others"*, but doesn't give examples of how these skills were demonstrated or developed in a specific context.

No clear link to the degree – The response doesn't explain how these experiences prepare the student for studying their chosen subject at university. It focuses more on the general skills rather than those that are directly relevant to academic study.

Specific examples of experiences – The response provides concrete examples, such as volunteering in a charity shop and participating in a community project. This makes the response more engaging and insightful.

Clear explanation of skills gained – The student highlights **leadership**, **teamwork**, and **project management skills**, explaining how they were developed through specific activities.

Connection to university study – The response links the **skills** gained to what will be useful at university, such as the ability to engage with interdisciplinary content and work in a team.

Activities for your students

These planning activities aim to equip students to overcome common challenges

Students may need support linking their experience with their chosen course

When planning their response, consider asking your students to answer the following questions:

- **What did you do?** (e.g. Attended a summer school)
- **So, what did you learn** (this can be knowledge, skills or how the experience inspired them)
- **Now what**? (How will this help at university, or on your chosen course?)

Students might find it challenging to identify their own skills

When planning their response, consider asking your student to reflect on their skills by creating a Reflection Grid

- Have students list their experiences in a table in one column
- In the next column, they write which skills they've gained
- In the final column, they explain why these skills are useful or how they link to their degree choice

Top tips

Top tips

- Ensure that the personal statement gives an insight into the student's motivations and interests

- Check spelling and grammar

- Ensure that everything in the personal statement is relevant to the application

- Encourage your students to express themselves, avoiding clichés and quotes from other people

- Make sure that all the information your students include is supported by evidence.

"We want every student with the qualifications, potential and determination to succeed at a Russell Group university to have the opportunity to do so whatever their background." Dr Piatt, Director General of Russell Group

Using AI for Personal Statements

- **Cheating?**
  - Personal statements written by Generative AI will be untruthful and low-quality.
  - UCAS will detect when students have used AI, such as ChatGPT, to write "all or a large part" of their personal statement – this is considered cheating by universities and can affect student's chances of an offer.

- **How to use AI ethically**
  - Generating **prompts** to support with writing e.g., *"What should I include in a UCAS Personal Statement for studying Law at University?"*
  - Suggesting **areas for improvement** when the student has written a draft personal statement.

You can read more on this topic on the Advancing Access blog – "Should you be helping your students to use Chat GPT for their UCAS Personal Statements?"

What not to include

- Over-exaggeration

- Repetition and waffling

- Lists of skills and work experiences

- Starting every sentence with 'I'

- Specific universities - apart from when referring to outreach activities/ summer schools

- A definition of the subject

- Long quotes

- Generalisations and clichés

- Passive comments

- Jokes, puns or wordplay

Resources

Additional resources...

- Use our **new checklist** to help you provide feedback when reading your students' personal statements

- Use our **reflection sheet** to help you grow your own knowledge and understanding

- Watch **webinars** from our partner universities

Additional resources...

Advancing Access resources...

- **Activity sheets** to help students to write their personal statement

- Read our **blog posts**:
  - What can we learn about personal statements from academic research?
  - Should you be helping your students to use Chat GPT for their UCAS Personal Statements?
  - What can Year 12 students do over the summer to prepare for writing their personal statement?
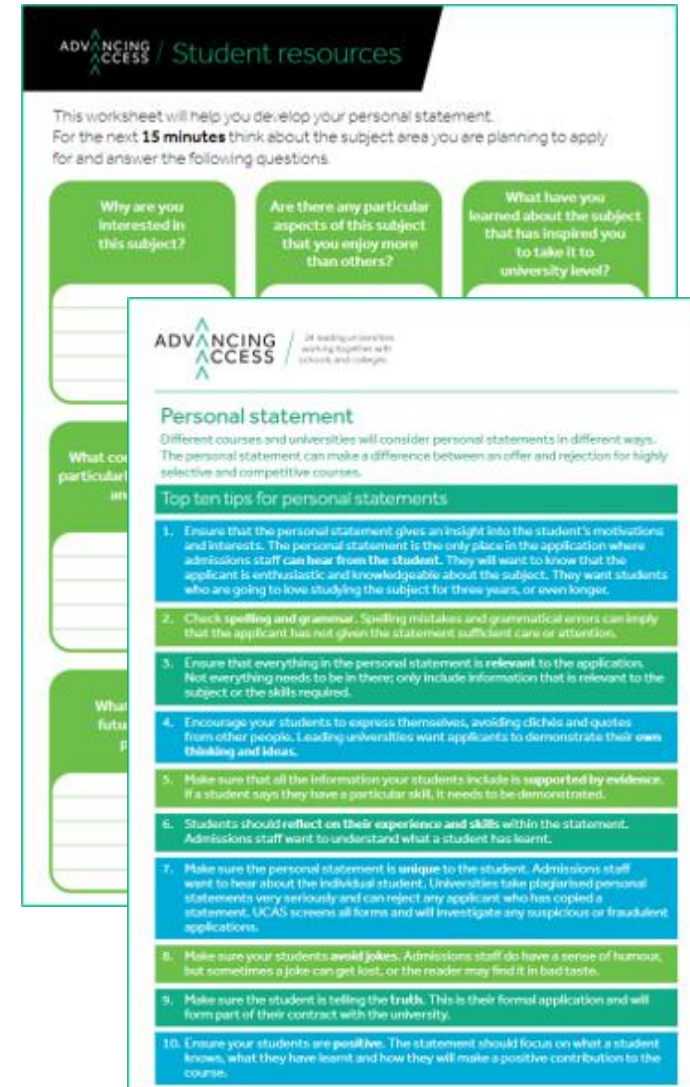
Questions?

Preparing students for interviews and admissions tests

Coming up

A deeper understanding of admissions tests and interviews

Identify different types of tests and interviews used by Russell Group universities

Consider how to help your students prepare for admissions tests and interviews

Admissions Tests

Admissions Tests

Many Russell Group universities use admissions tests to inform the decision-making process. They can be used in different ways:

- To inform whether an offer should be made.

- To decide whether to invite a student to interview.

- Following an interview, to decide between two equally ranked applicants.

The good news is that most university applicants do not have to take any kind of additional admissions tests.

Students need to be proactive and research which of their university choices require admissions tests, which tests they require, and what the deadlines are.

The logistics

Registration deadlines, where and when the tests are held, and UCAS deadlines

- Tests generally take place between **August and November the year before** starting the course.

- Oxbridge applicants will usually have to take admissions tests earlier, due to the early UCAS application deadline.

- Test locations vary depending on the type of test – these can be found on the admissions test websites.

- Some tests have a cost associated (approximately £50-£100) but bursaries may be available.

Commonly used tests

- **UCAT**
  - The most used test for Medicine and Dentistry courses
  - Assesses verbal reasoning, decision-making, quantitative reasoning, abstract reasoning and situational judgement
  - Testing runs from July-October, and students can book up to 90 days in advance.

- **MAT (Mathematics Admissions Test)**
  - Used to test mathematical ability
  - Commonly used by the University of Oxford (for Maths and Computer Science) and Imperial College London (for Maths).

- **STEP (Sixth Term Examination Paper)**
  - Mathematics
  - Consists of up to three paper-based examinations
  - Takes place in June during the summer exam season

25% of students who took the UCAT in 2023 achieved a Band 1 in Situational Judgement

Commonly used tests

- **LNAT (Law National Aptitude Test)**
  - For applicants to Law
  - Online test in two parts
  - Register from August, Oxbridge applicants must take the test by 15th October

- **Thinking Skills Assessment**
  - Used to identify critical thinking and problem-solving skills
  - Three different tests used by the universities of Cambridge, Oxford and University College London

33%
of Russell Group universities require the LNAT for admission onto their Law courses.

New tests for 2025

ADVANCING ACCESS / From the RUSSELL GROUP

"In January 2024, Imperial and the University of Cambridge launched University Admissions Tests UK as a way of streamlining the number of admissions tests that applicants to their institutions are facing"

Changes to admissions tests for Imperial and Cambridge

When: Testing windows: October/January

Where: Pearson VUE test centre, students to self-register

- **TMUA (Test for Maths for University Admission)**
  - Application of maths knowledge
  - 2 hours 30 mins, 75 mins each
  - Computer based
  - Multiple choice

- **ESAT (The Engineering and Science Admissions Test)**
  - Maths and Science, along with reasoning
  - Multiple choice, Maths 1 compulsory
  - 2 additional assessments only to be completed for some subjects

New tests for 2025

Advancing Access / From the Russell Group

Read the Advancing Access blog article on "How important are admissions tests and why do universities use them?" for more information [here](#)

Changes to admissions tests for Imperial and Cambridge

Preparing for the tests

- The content for these tests is based on curriculum learning in GCSE and AS Level maths/science

- Encourage students to familiarise themselves with the test format and style of questions.

- There are free practise materials and information about the test content and format

- These is a practise site which offers students to practise and get a feel of the test format – This is offered for free

Admissions Tests

From the **RUSSELL GROUP** — ADVANCING ACCESS

Universities	MAT	LNAT	STEP	TSA	UCAT	TMUA	ESAT
University of Birmingham					✔		
University of Bristol		✔	**		✔		
University of Cambridge		✔	✔		✔	✔	✔
Cardiff University					✔		
Durham University		✔				✔	
University of Edinburgh					✔		
University of Exeter					✔		
University of Glasgow		✔			✔		
Imperial College London						✔	✔
King's College London		✔			✔		
University of Leeds					✔		
University of Liverpool		✔			✔		
London School of Economics		✔				✔	
University of Manchester					✔		
Newcastle University					✔		
University of Nottingham					✔		
University of Oxford	✔	✔		✔	✔	✔	✔
Queen Mary University of London					✔		
Queen's University Belfast					✔		
University of Sheffield					✔		
University of Southampton			**		✔		
University College London		✔	**	✔	✔		
University of Warwick	✔		✔		Postgrad entry only.	✔	
University of York					✔		

** May give a reduced offer.

Warwick strongly encourage students planning on entering the Mathematics and Statistics, MORSE or Data Science degree courses to take an additional maths paper (STEP, TMUA, AEA, MAT).

Activity

Practice Papers

The aim of this activity is for you to develop an understanding of the styles of questions used in a range of admissions tests.

Individually or in pairs, look at the example questions.

What do you notice about the style of these questions?

How would you help your students to prepare for answering these questions?

10 minutes

How to prepare

- **Practice papers** – Support students to practice questions under examination conditions. Timing is important. Practice tests and answers are available on test websites.

- **Read the guidance** – Students should read the guidance for candidates. This will help them understand the structure of the test and how it is used by universities.

- **Deadlines** – Ensure you and your students know the deadlines - some courses may not accept a student if they have not taken the test.

- **Study groups** – Encourage groups of students undertaking the same tests to form study groups to support each other.

- **Mailing lists** – Staff can sign up to University Outreach/Admissions mailing lists to receive email reminders about when admissions tests registrations are open.

Interviews

Interviews

Russell Group universities may use interviews to help them decide which candidates should receive offers. Universities may:

- Interview for all courses (e.g., Oxford and Cambridge)
- Have two interviews: one of the course, and another for the college/university
- Interview for specific courses only
- Use interviews for information gathering
- Use interviews as an opportunity for the applicant

Many universities provide (free) accommodation for applicants during the interview process.

"Decisions are not based on your manners, appearance or background, but on your ability to think independently and to engage with new ideas beyond the scope of your school or college syllabus."
– University of Oxford, *Why Does Oxford Interview?*

Types of interviews

There are different types of interviews, the structure can differ depending on the university or course. Example types:

Individual interviews

- Panel or one-to-one
- Traditional method
- Opportunity to ask questions
- Could be very subject-specific or more general
- Academic discussion rather than traditional questions (Oxford and Cambridge)

Group interviews

- Q&A session
- Task or scenario
- Contributions from each candidate

MMI Interview

Multiple mini-interviews may be used by professional courses such as Medicine, Dentistry, Veterinary Science and Nursing.

- Typically consists of six to ten different stations
- No more than 10 mins each
- Assess qualities required for that course and profession

Example stations include:

- Traditional interview questions
- Working through a scenario
- Written exercise
- Interacting with an actor
- Data interpretation
- Ethical reasoning

"Keeping abreast of medical issues appearing in the news and media and discussing and debating them with friends and family" – University of Birmingham, *How to Prepare*

Activity

Sample MMI questions and scenarios

How would you answer these questions?

How would you support your students to practice these questions?

⏰ 10 minutes

1. You're a medical student and you see a patient who you recognise from your GP placement in a supermarket car park, getting into a car. You remember the GP telling the patient that he is unable to drive due to his uncontrolled epilepsy. Discuss the relevant ethical issues with the examiner.

2. Without using your hands, explain how to tie shoe-laces.

3. Discuss one of your hobbies outside of school and how the skills you gained from this activity will help you in your career.

4. What personal qualities do you think are not required for a Nurse?

5. Role play: You are on your way home from a lecture and you reach a bus stop. A student from your course is sat at the bus stop looking very upset. You don't know their name and you haven't spoken to them before. Demonstrate how you would approach this situation.

How students can prepare

There are some things that your students can do before an interview that will make them feel more confident.

- Think about how they might answer possible questions – students can practice with friends, family and teachers.

- Be careful not to over-rehearse – interviewers will not want to hear scripted answers.

- For academic discussions – practice speaking out loud when completing homework.

- Read around the subject and think about relevant topics that particularly interest them.

- Reread their personal statement.

Students with disabilities are entitled to accessibility adjustments for interviews.

Your students should email the university or check the university's Accessibility and Disability Services webpage to find out what is available to them.

How staff can support students

ADVANCING ACCESS / From the RUSSELL GROUP

Research – Create the space and time for your students to research the course and university beforehand. University websites often have interview tips and advice pages which can also support students.

Practice – Set up mock interviews at your school or college. Encourage students to think about their body language whilst interviewing. Practice should support students in being as relaxed as possible at the interview, so they can be themselves and confident in their knowledge and abilities.

Prepare – Help students to prepare responses to standard questions such as "why do you want to study this subject?", and to think of questions to ask the interviewer(s). Make sure students know how to get to the interview.

Reassure – Support students with combatting imposter syndrome "It's not for me".

Tip: Students can wear casual clothing to Oxbridge interviews if they prefer this.

STAR technique

- **Situation**
  - Students should begin by very briefly presenting a recent challenge or situation in which they found themselves.

- **Task**
  - Students should briefly explain the task and what they set out to achieve.

- **Action**
  - What did the student do? The interviewer will be looking to find out what action the student took, why, and what the alternatives were.

- **Results**
  - What was the outcome of the student's actions? What was achieved through the actions taken and did they meet the objectives? What was learned from this experience and has this learning been used since?

Additional resources

Further resources

- **Admissions testing service:** http://www.admissionstesting.org/

- **LNAT:** https://lnat.ac.uk/

- **MAT:** https://www.maths.ox.ac.uk/study-here/undergraduate-study/maths-admissions-test

- **STEP:** http://www.admissionstesting.org/for-test-takers/step/about-step/

- **UCAT:** https://www.ucat.ac.uk/

- **TMUA/ESAT:** https://esat-tmua.ac.uk/about-the-tests/tmua-test/.

- **The Uni Guide interview preparation tips:** https://www.theuniguide.co.uk/advice/ucas-application/university-interviews-how-to-prepare

- **UCAS information page about admissions tests:** https://www.ucas.com/undergraduate/applying-university/admissions-tests

- **UCAS advice on interviews:** https://www.ucas.com/undergraduate/after-you-apply/undergraduate-interview-invitations

- **Advancing Access:** www.advancingaccess.ac.uk

Questions?

Thank you...

Time	Session
9:30-10:00	**Arrival and refreshments**
10:00-10:10	**Welcome address,** delivered by Advancing Access
10:10-10:55	**Writing effective UCAS References** This session will break down the three key sections of the UCAS reference and provide insights into what selective universities are looking for. Delegates will explore how to write strong, tailored references for competitive courses.
10:55-11:05	**Break**
11:05-12:05	**Supporting students to write Personal Statements** This session will introduce the three new sections of the Personal Statement. Delegates will explore what each section requires and review example statements to give feedback.
12:05-13:00	**Preparing students for interviews and admissions tests** This session explores the admissions tests and interviews required by some selective universities. Delegates will try example test questions and discuss strategies to help students prepare effectively.
13:00-13:30	**Networking lunch and event close**

Share your feedback

bitly

Stay connected

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