

Helping students craft stand-out Personal Statements



Personal statements – the basics



Personal statement structure

The personal statement is split into three sections

Section 1:

Why do you want to study this course or subject?

Section 2:

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

Section 3:

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

Personal statement structure

The personal statement should:

- Be 4,000 characters or 47 lines of text (including spaces) – whichever comes first
- Portray the applicant's suitability for the course (interest, knowledge, and skills)
- Be 350 characters minimum per question

It is good to remind students:

- The statement will be reviewed as a whole – students should avoid repeating information across sections
- To include all the content they want in their personal statement without worrying too much about which section it appears in

In general, all questions will have an equal weighting. However, some questions may be more valuable than others, depending on the course.

Views from the Russell Group...

- Across universities (and courses!) the Personal Statement will be considered in a different way.
- Some may consider it as a weighted component of the application, others may not.
- Some universities (e.g. Oxbridge) may use it as a bases for discussion at interview!
- It can be a particularly useful tool for highly selective courses, where applications outweigh the number of places.

"While it will not be formally assessed, your personal statement may provide guidance to us when we are shortlisting applications for our Assessment Days and will be essential preparation for you if invited to attend."

Edinburgh Medical School

"Applicants need to have met, or are predicted to meet, all our entry requirements. Only then will applicants be entered the selection process.

If an applicant has not met all our entry requirements, for example any required subjects, then we will not be able to consider their application further.

The qualifications and grades required vary by degree programme and may also depend on if an applicant is a widening access student."

The University of Edinburgh

'We get to read very impressive statements full of citations, but they tell me nothing about the applicant's motivations, aspirations, personality or readiness to study at university. The key for me is to get to know the person behind the text.'

Co-Director Combined Honours, Newcastle University

Extra and Super Curricular Activities



What's the difference?

Extra-Curricular (Broadening)

- Any activity that doesn't count towards academia
- Outside of chosen topics, and unrelated to any studies
- Examples include:
 - Sports, clubs, volunteering, theatre

Super-curricular (Deepening)

- Educational activities which go beyond the school curriculum
- The act of taking subjects studied, further
- Examples include:
 - Podcasts, academic lectures, subject-specific events, books, magazines, online programmes, subject-specific work experience

Super-curricular activities demonstrate “thinking like a subject specialist”

Why it matters?

Evidence from the Future Skills Questionnaire (Education Policy Institute, 2023/24) - 230,000 students

Strengthens preparedness for all progression pathways

Attending extracurricular clubs during secondary school is associated with “positive outcomes” when young people reach their 20s

Differences in access to extracurricular activities among pupils mean the benefits are “bypassing those who have the most to gain”.

Strengthens applications to competitive university choices...

Why experiences are valued by the Russell Group...

Subject exploration beyond the curriculum

Evidence of independent learning and academic curiosity

Shows active engagement with the subject, quality over quantity

Demonstrates suitability for the course

Evidence & reflections

For the UCAS Personal Statement, Universities value reflection on an activity over the activity itself:



Weak example, Computing applicant: 'I attended a Newcastle University lecture on AI, which was interesting and reinforced my studies.'

Strong example, Computing applicant: 'Attending a Newcastle University lecture on AI introduced me to algorithmic bias in facial recognition, **challenging my assumption** that AI systems are objective. This **led me to explore** how training data shapes outcomes, **deepening my interest** in developing more ethical computing systems.'

How to help students find activities



What do your students do already?

Many students may think they “don’t do anything” or have “no interests”...

How can you help students spot super-curricular potential in everyday life?



- Gaming = Computing/Game theory
- Caring for siblings = Psychology/medicine/social work

Discuss how you usually help students to find activities

Discuss in pairs/groups



5 minutes

5 questions to prompt your students...

- What do you enjoy learning about?
- What topics from class spark more questions?
- What do you watch or read online?
- What do you do at home that uses problem-solving or creativity?
- What would you explore if someone helped you start?

Widening participation & outreach

Universities have specific goals relating to:

- Widening participation/ Widening access/ Outreach
- Addressing national statistics around underrepresented groups accessing HE
- Social responsibility
 - Access and Participation Plans (England)
 - Outcomes Framework and Assurance Model (Scotland)

Each university makes its own judgement on their criteria, so it's important to check on individual university websites.

Sutton Trust Summer School (multiple university partners)

Eligibility:

- First generation to attend university
- In receipt of Free School Meals
- Attending a school or college with below average attainment or a low rate of progression to the top third of higher education institutions
- Living in a neighbourhood with a low rate of progression to higher education and/or a high level of socio-economic deprivation
- Been looked after or in care

The more criteria students meet, the more likely they are to secure a place. Not meeting all criteria will not disqualify students from applying

Resources for your students

UniTaster Days

- Centralised repository for university events and activities
- Searchable by postcode
- Includes guidance and resources for teachers and parents

Online Study Resources

- Lots of Unis host various online resources, for example...
- Edinburgh: 'WP Pupil Resources'
- Birmingham: 'Skills4Uni'

University mailing lists

- Direct comms from universities of interest
- Usually mailing lists for teachers, advisers, parents and prospective applicants

UCAS Connections Service

- Available via the UCAS Provider Portal
- Outreach events and activities submitted by universities, employers, and charities

Some practical ideas...

How can you apply this knowledge when supporting your students?

- Identify students likely to benefit from targeted opportunities
- Invite a university speaker to raise awareness of these programmes and activities
- Start a student-facing Teams Channel (or similar) dedicated to these opportunities
 - Encourage students to post opportunities they find too
- Set students a goal of engaging with least one subject-focused experience per term
- Think about how you can engage parents...
 - Sessions/collateral at parents evenings?
 - School/college-based parent comms plans?

Personal statement: Section 1



Section 1

Why do you want to study this course or subject?

Encourage students to write **in their own voice**. Admissions staff want to see evidence of applicants' interest in their chosen course.

Students should consider:



Their passion and interest for the course



Their knowledge and skills of the subject area



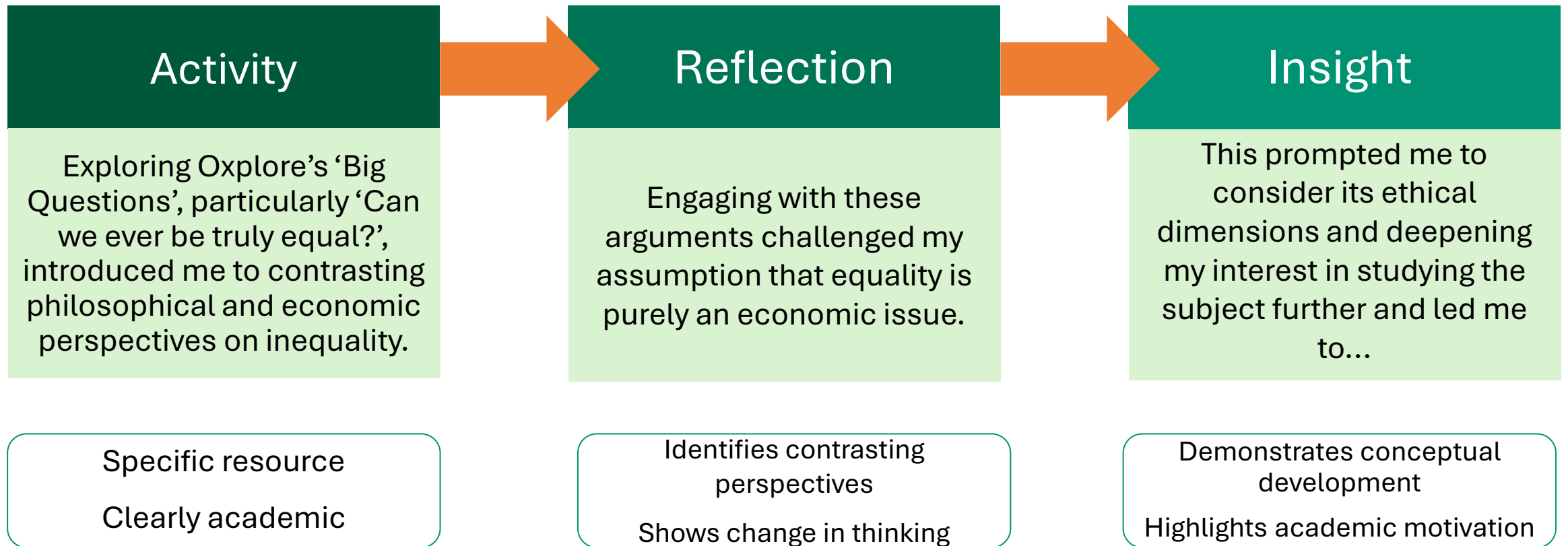
How the course links to their future

This section isn't about proving they're the best; it's about showing why they're genuinely interested in studying their chosen subject.

Example: Oxplore (Oxford Uni)

Why do you want to study this course or subject?

Interactive and engaging online study resource. As the 'Home of Big Questions', it aims to challenge those from 11 to 18 years with debates and ideas that go beyond what is covered in the classroom



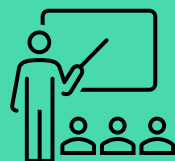
Personal statement: Section 2



Section 2

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

Students should consider:



How their studies have prepared them for their course/subject



The skills and knowledge they've developed



Any independent learning or academic achievements

This section is about highlighting evidence to show they are prepared for the challenges of university-level study

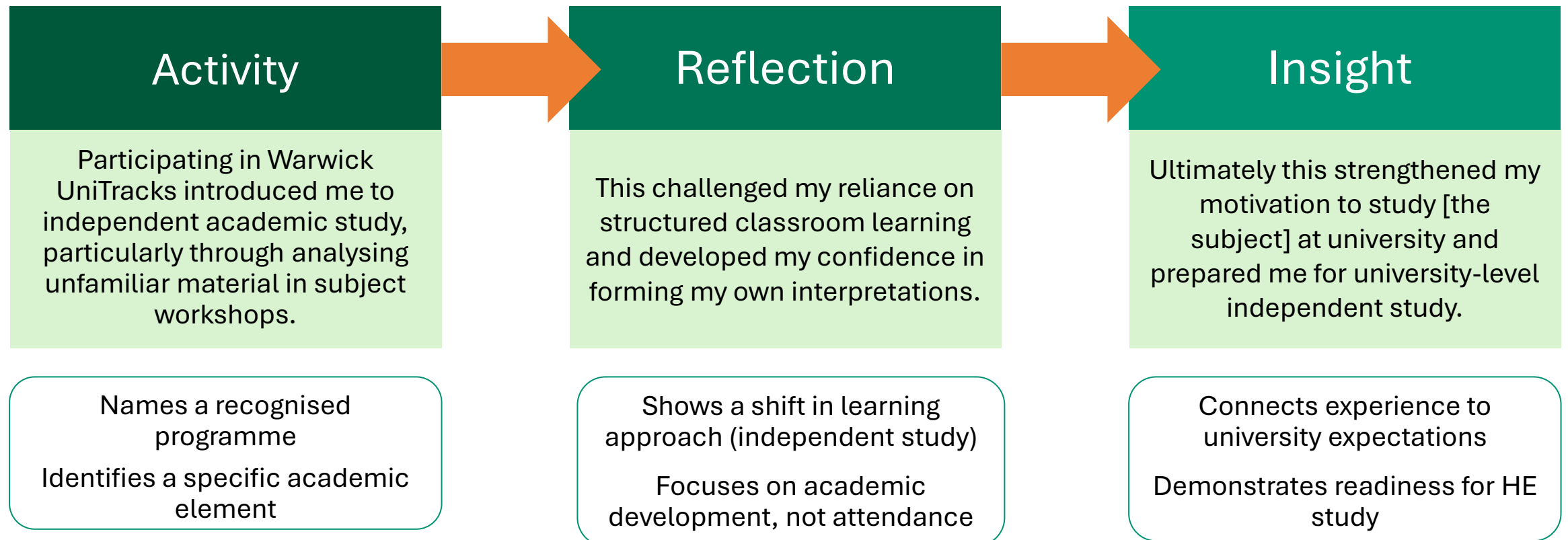
Example: UniTracks (Warwick Uni)

ADVANCING
ACCESS

From the
RUSSELL
GROUP

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

Each year has a different focus that form a series of stepping stones on the participant's journey to Higher Education: **Explore, Develop, Equip and Attain**



Personal statement: Section 3



Section 3

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

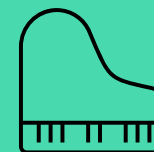
Students should consider:



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

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

Additional info



The Application Cycle

Admissions departments assess personal statements at different stages of the application cycle, in particular:

Initial Offer-making	Interviews	Confirmation & Clearing
<p>September until UCAS decision deadline</p> <p>Used to decide which applicants receive an offer of study and/or invited to interview</p> <p>All applicants</p>	<p>November - February</p> <p>Course specific (eg Dentistry)</p> <p>Applicants may be asked to expand upon specific aspects of their statement</p>	<p>Early August (pre-Results Day)</p> <p>Used to decide which offer holders gain their place of study</p> <p>Usually specific to 'near miss' candidates</p>

Questions?



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