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24 leading universities working together with schools and colleges
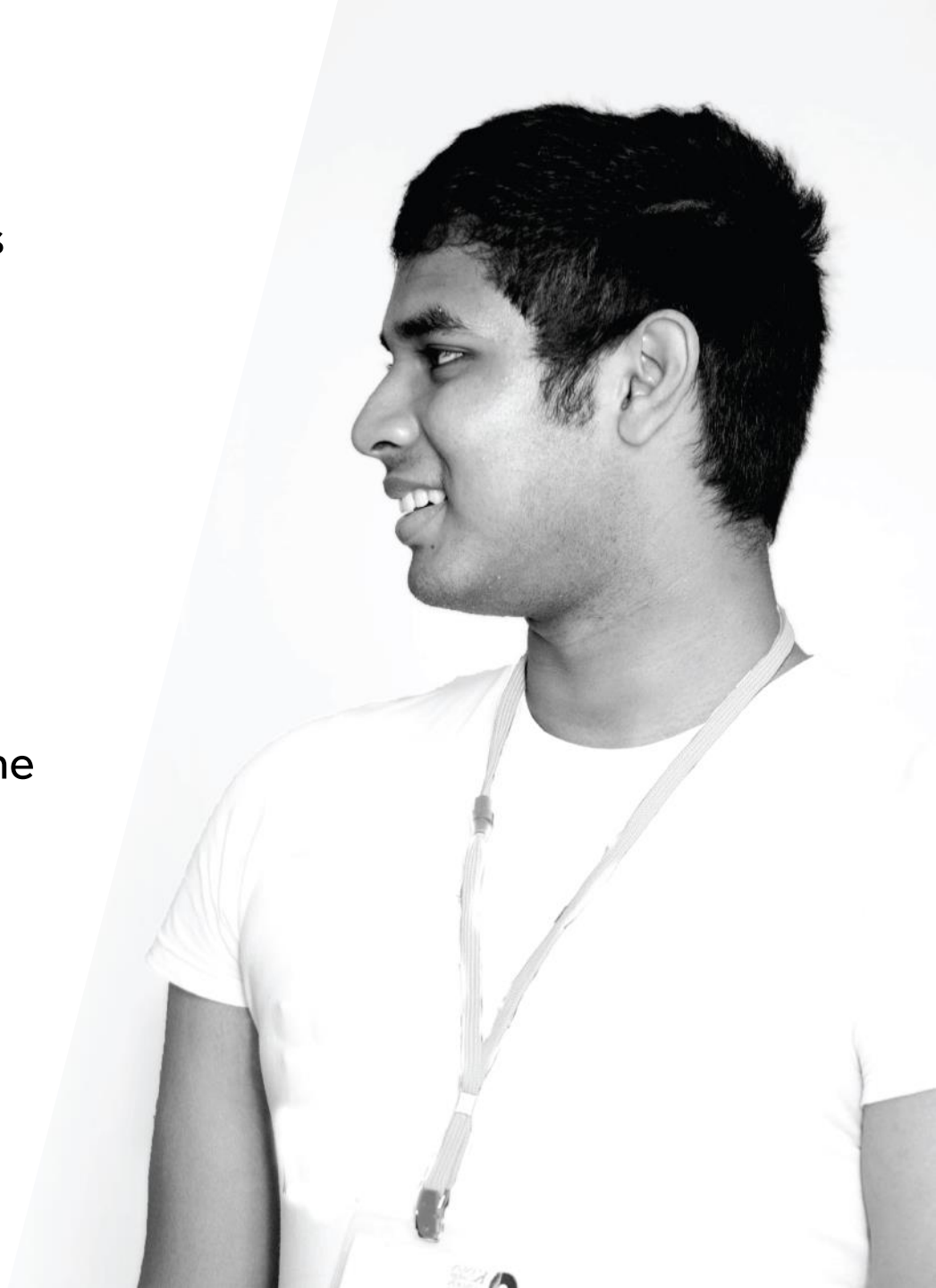
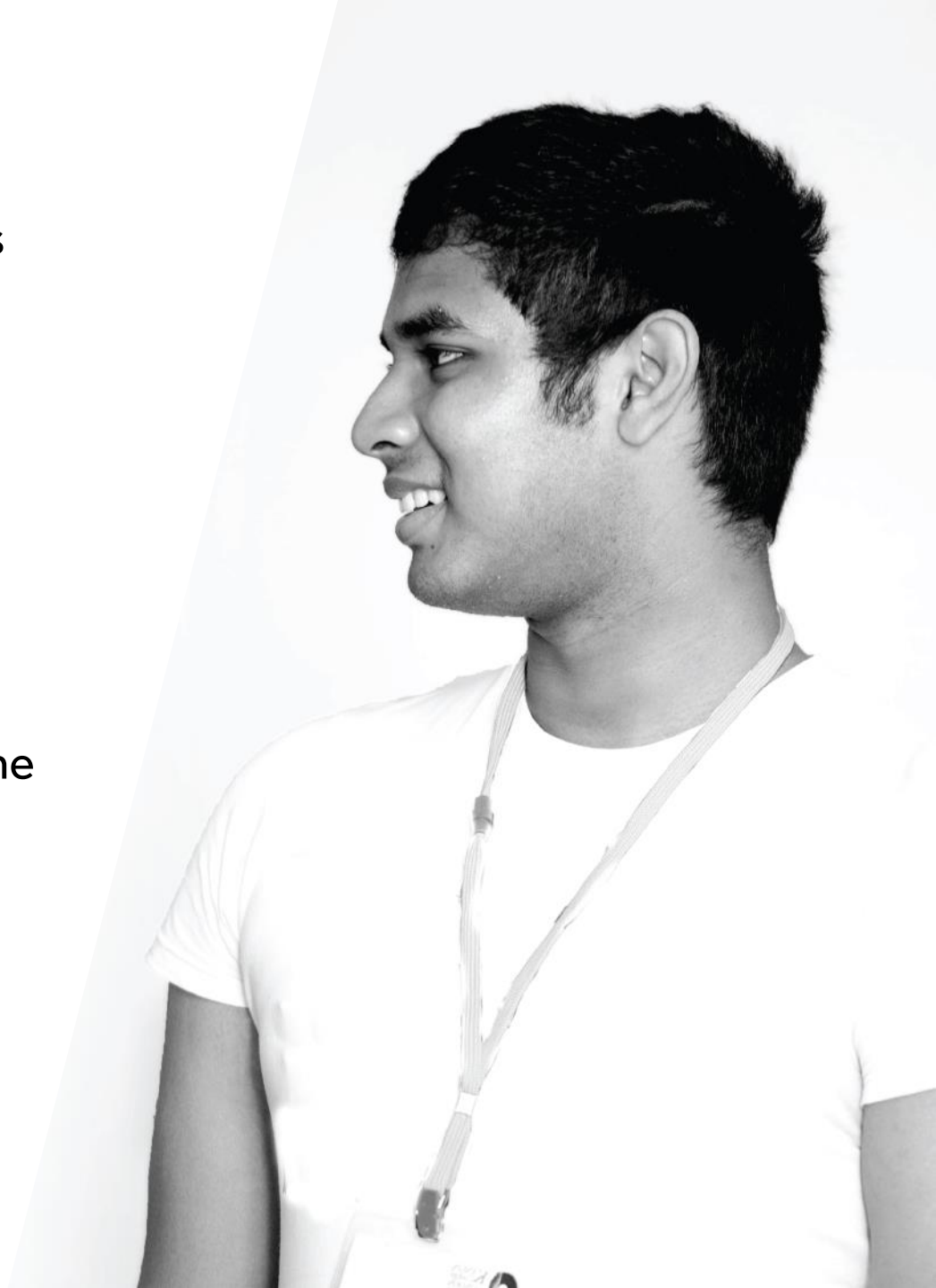# Supporting students to write personal statements

Starter for 10...

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- How many lines/characters are allowed?

- What have UCAS identified as the "most overused opening line"?
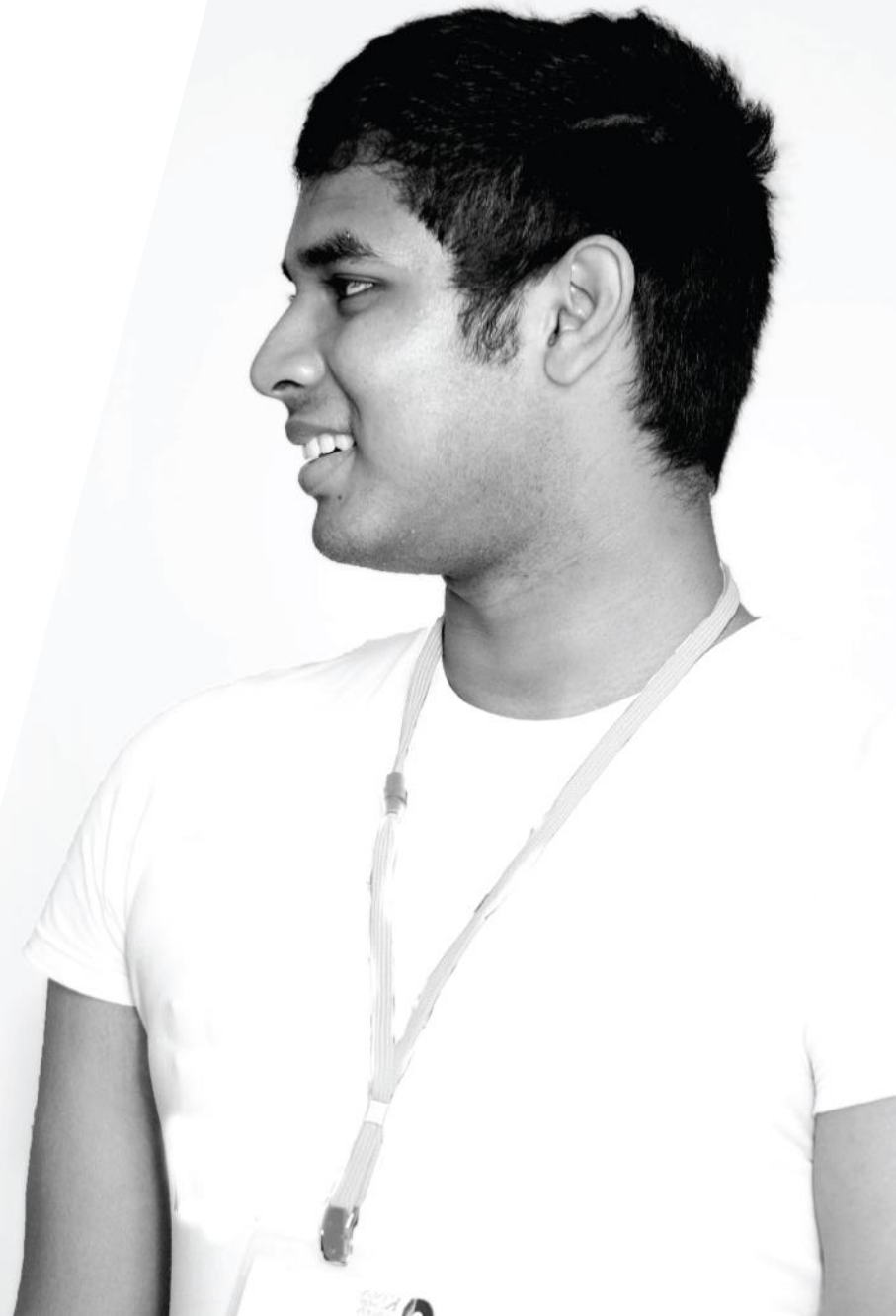
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  ~500,000

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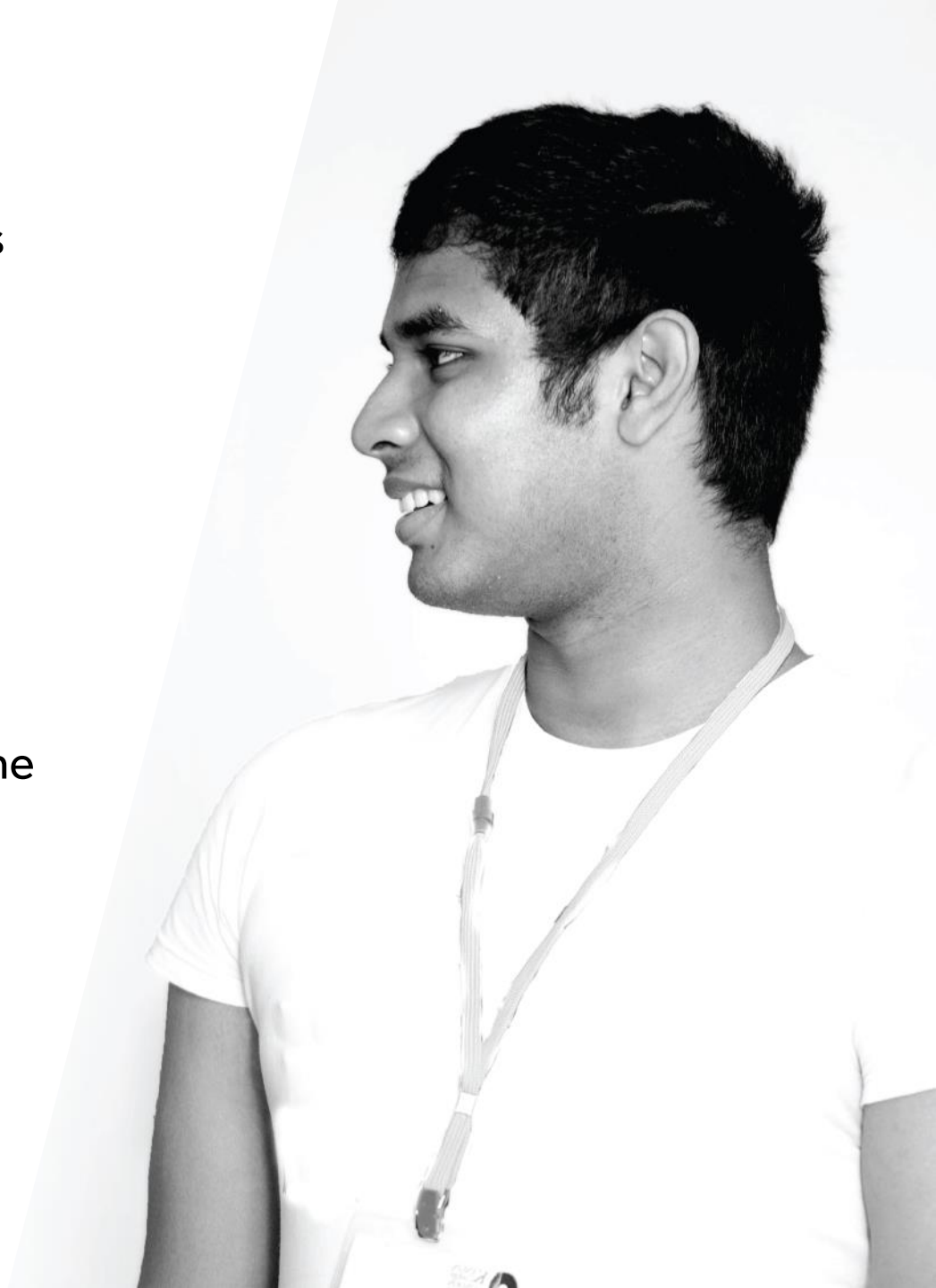
Coming up...

- Personal statements – the basics

- What does the research tell us?

- Structuring the statement

- Discussing example personal statements

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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

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London School of Economics and Political Science / 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 / University of York

Personal statements – the basics

The basics

The personal statement should:

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

- Portray the applicant's character, knowledge, experience and ambition

- Answer the following questions :

  - Why are you applying for this course?

  - What do you know about the subject and which aspects particularly interest you?

  - What personal qualities, skills and experience will help you in this subject and how did you acquire these?

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How are personal statements used?

Different courses and universities will consider the personal statement in different ways. Personal statements enable universities to:

- Understand the person applying

- See how much preparation they have done

- Determine whether they are likely to succeed on the course

- Differentiate between similarly qualified applicants.

Leading universities receive tens of thousands of applications. The personal statement can make a **difference between an offer and rejection.**

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Admissions process example – University 1: Medicine

- Applications sifted to meet entry requirements (standard or contextual)

  - A level predicted grades (15%)

  - GCSEs (15%)

  - UCAT score (20%)

- **Personal statement scored (50%)**

- Invitations to interview (MMI)

- Places offered

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Admissions process example – University 2: Medicine

- Use a threshold-based system:

- Academic sift

- UCAT results sifted

- **Do not use the personal statement** and instead ask for a separate information form

- Invitations to interview (MMI)

- Places offered

What does the research tell us?

Academic research in to personal statements

There have been all too few academic studies in to personal statements, but some good research has been carried out at the University of Manchester:

"Ensure That You Stand Out from the Crowd": A Corpus-Based Analysis of Personal Statements according to Applicants' School Type

STEVEN JONES

Many nations make use of a "personal statement" (or equivalent) in their higher education admissions system. This article examines how statements differ according to applicants' educational background. Among the indicators used are fluency of expression, quantity and quality of workplace experience, and extracurricular activity. Findings point to major variation among statements composed by equal-attainment applicants: a broader range of social and cultural capital is drawn on by privately educated young people. Ramifications stretch beyond admissions policy in the United Kingdom, where this study was located, not least because of claims that nonacademic indicators of potential, such as the personal statement, bring greater fairness to university admissions processes. No support for this position is found.

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Academic research in to personal statements

- Steven Jones (2013) carried out an analysis of 303 personal statements for entry to a Russell Group university. All of the statements were from students who eventually achieved BBB at A-Level. He looked for differences based on applicant school type

- Statements from comprehensive schools and sixth form colleges contained more spelling, punctuation and grammar mistakes compared to statements from grammar or private schools

- Students from private schools were able to draw upon a wider range of high-prestige work experience and a wider array of extra-curricular activities. More advantaged students are therefore able to draw upon their higher levels of "cultural capital"

Sutton Trust research

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

- Those who followed the approach were much more likely to receive an offer from a Russell Group university when compared to a control group

- However this research threw up something else which was interesting – the things which teachers think make a personal statement more effective can be different from what admissions tutors think make a personal statement more effective

# What types of personal statements increase the chances of success?

The researchers describe their more successful 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)

Structuring the statement

The structure
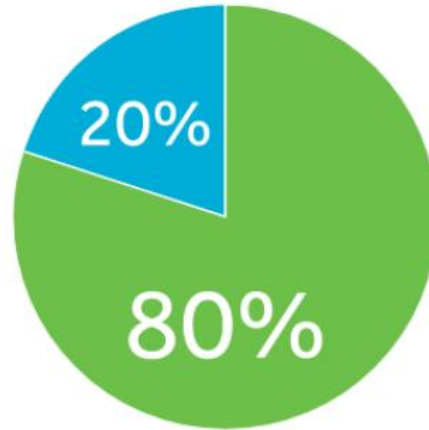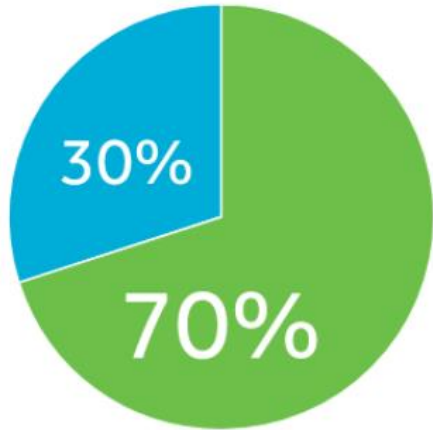
- Between 70% and 80% of the personal statement should focus on **academic and course-related information**

- The remaining 30% to 20% could include relevant information on the student's extracurricular activities.

What to include

The bulk of the statement should be **academic** in its focus

1) Introduction

2) Interest in subject

70-80%

3) Wider skills

4) Concluding statement

20-30%

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The competitive edge

Writing the personal statement shouldn't feel like a chore if students have chosen the right course for them. Points to consider:

- Details of wider reading with **accompanying critical reflection.** This can go in to a **research paragraph.**

- Extra reading: quality vs. quantity

- Details of work experience for competitive vocational courses with **critical reflection**

- Extra-curricular vs. **super-curricular** activities

- Narrowing it down to one subject

- Don't summarise the whole subject – it's okay to focus on something niche.

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Group task – compare statements

Read Personal Statement 1. How could this personal statement be improved? What advice would you give the student who wrote it?

Discuss in your groups

What's wrong with personal statement 1?

- Too many clichés – from a young age, "passion", "fascinated" etc.

- No need to offer a definition of what philosophy is

- The extra reading is just a long list. No critical engagement, and seems too good to be true

- No indication of how the hobbies and work experience are relevant to the subject of philosophy

- The final two paragraphs don't really add anything

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What about personal statement 2? Why might this be a more effective statement?

Discuss in your groups

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Personal statement 2

- This time the applicant doesn't just say that they have passion, they actually demonstrate this through their writing

- There is a focus on the skills which would make the applicant successful on the degree course

- There is a "research paragraph". It has a particular theme (Stoicism)

- Quality as opposed to quantity with extra reading. The applicant has engaged critically and ties the different pieces in to one story

- The applicant still focuses on relevant skills when talking about their extra-curricular activities and employment

- No unnecessary concluding paragraph

And finally...

What other support does Advancing Access offer?

- Check our free "Supporting personal statement writing – top tips" resource

- Download our resource to help students to write their personal statement

- We have several webinars on the subject of personal statements

- Read our blog post – "What can we learn about personal statements from academic research?"

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Personal statement

Different courses and universities will consider personal statements in different ways. The personal statement can make a difference between an offer and rejection for highly selective and competitive courses.

Top ten tips for personal statements

1. Ensure that the personal statement gives an insight into t and interests. The personal statement is the only place in admissions staff **can hear from the student.** They will wa applicant is enthusiastic and knowledgeable about the su who are going to love studying the subject for three years

2. Check **spelling and grammar.** Spelling mistakes and gram that the applicant has not given the statement sufficient

3. Ensure that everything in the personal statement is **relev** Not everything needs to be in there; only include informat subject or the skills required.

4. Encourage your students to express themselves, avoiding from other people. Leading universities want applicants t **thinking and ideas.**

5. Make sure that all the information your students include i If a student says they have a particular skill, it needs to be

6. Students should **reflect on their experience and skills wi** Admissions staff want to understand what a student has l

7. Make sure the personal statement is **unique** to the stude want to hear about the individual student. Universities tal statements very seriously and can reject any applicant wl statement. UCAS screens all forms and will investigate ar applications.

8. Make sure your students **avoid jokes.** Admissions staff dc but sometimes a joke can get lost, or the reader may find

9. Make sure the student is telling the **truth.** This is their for form part of their contract with the university.

10. Ensure your students are **positive.** The statement should knows, what they have learnt and how they will make a po course.

Developing your students' skills and knowledge prior to application

To make a strong application your students need to develop their subject knowledge, interests and relevant experience. The balance between subject knowledge, skills and experience will depend on which universities and courses they are applying for.
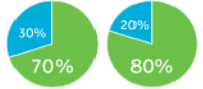
% of a personal statement should applied for and focus on academic ity.

| Transferable skills ❶ | Work experience ❶ |

subject

uild their knowledge of the subject and become further s and themes. They should be able to express their views and y developments in that subject.

resources to help build your students' nem are free. Here are our top sources:

sites
s keep up to date with the latest developments and thinking papers focus on different topic areas (for example, science) on

subscribe to certain publications that are then made available r students to share their views on these latest developments.

nagazines
g further insight into the subject. For example, psychology sychologist and those interested in science could read **New** azines have good websites, so a subscription is not always

mple reading lists for some first-year courses. This material to the subject at university level.

websites that provide subject resources.
nk of resources with articles and revision guides for most ties have developed online learning programmes that are ts' learning about particular subjects. **Future Learn** ❶ has a list e.

This worksheet will help you develop your personal statement.
For the next **15 minutes** think about the subject area you are planning to apply for and answer the following questions.

| Why are you interested in this subject? | Are there any particular aspects of this subject that you enjoy more than others? | What have you learned about the subject that has inspired you to take it to university level? |

| What course modules particularly interest you, and why? | **What subject are you applying for?** | Write down something interesting about the subject that may have been in the news or you have read about. |

| What are your future career plans? | What skills do you have that will help you in this subject? | Are there any aspects of your current studies that relate to the subject you have chosen? |

Personal Statement

47 lines or **4,000** characters

- **A chance for the student to reflect on their chosen course – why they want to study it and why they would be good at it**
- A statement giving evidence of interests, skills and experiences
- The chance to 'sell themselves' to universities as a potential student of the subject

Progression to Russell Group Universities Conference 2018

1,779: 'From a young age I have always been…'

148: Number of applicants who used a Nelson Mandela quote

"Education is the most powerful weapon which you can use to change the world"

www.advancingaccess.ac.uk

Top Tips

- No Lists

  'I play football, rugby, tennis and the piano…'

- Do not mention university names unless the student is applying for one university

  'The prospect of studying at King's College London is one that greatly excites me…'

- Lying or over exaggerating, as you may be questioned in an interview

  'I have an intricate knowledge of Thomas Piketty's Capital…'

> **How to write it**

- **S** Identify the SITUATION or problem they solved or encountered
- **T** What was the specific TASK or target? (who, what, where, when)
- **A** Detail your specific ACTION What did they do? How did they do it?
- **R** Explain the RESULTS Quantify it (accomplishments, savings, recognition, etc.)

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Overused opening lines

For as long as I can remember I have...   [1,451]

I have always been interested in...   [927]

Reflecting on my educational experiences...   [257]

Nursing is a very challenging and demanding [career/profession/course]... [211]

Throughout my life I have always enjoyed...   [310]

I am applying for this course because...   [1,370]

I have always wanted to pursue a career in...   [160]

I have always been passionate about...   [160]

From a young age I have (always) been [interested in/fascinated by]...   [1,779]

Education is the most powerful weapon which you can use to change the world... [148]

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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.

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Top tips

- Students should reflect on their experience and skills within the statement

- Make sure the personal statement is unique to the student. Admissions staff want to hear about the individual student

- Make sure your students avoid jokes

- Make sure the student is telling the truth. This is their formal application and will form part of their contract with the university

- Ensure your students are positive.

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What **not** to include

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

- Over-exaggeration

- Repetition and waffling

- Lists of skills and work experiences

- A definition of the subject

- Jokes and quotes

- Generalisations and clichés

- Starting every sentence with 'I'

- Passive comments

- Unnecessary language.

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Questions?

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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 and Political Science / 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 / University of York