

# The UCAS Personal Statement

*A practical guide to planning and  
writing your first draft*

Mr Leggott, June 2020



# Objectives

- To consider the form and function of the personal statement in your UCAS application
- To outline the structure of an effective personal statement
- To offer guidance on suitable content for each section
- To put you in the best possible position to produce a full first draft by the beginning of Year 13\*

(\* or before the summer break if you are an early entry candidate)



# The function of the personal statement

The personal statement is an opportunity to:

- portray your character, knowledge and ambition
- give evidence of relevant interests, skills and experiences
- show your enthusiasm and commitment to the course for which you are applying
- show admissions tutors that you are worth a place at their institution
- personalise your application and reflect your individuality

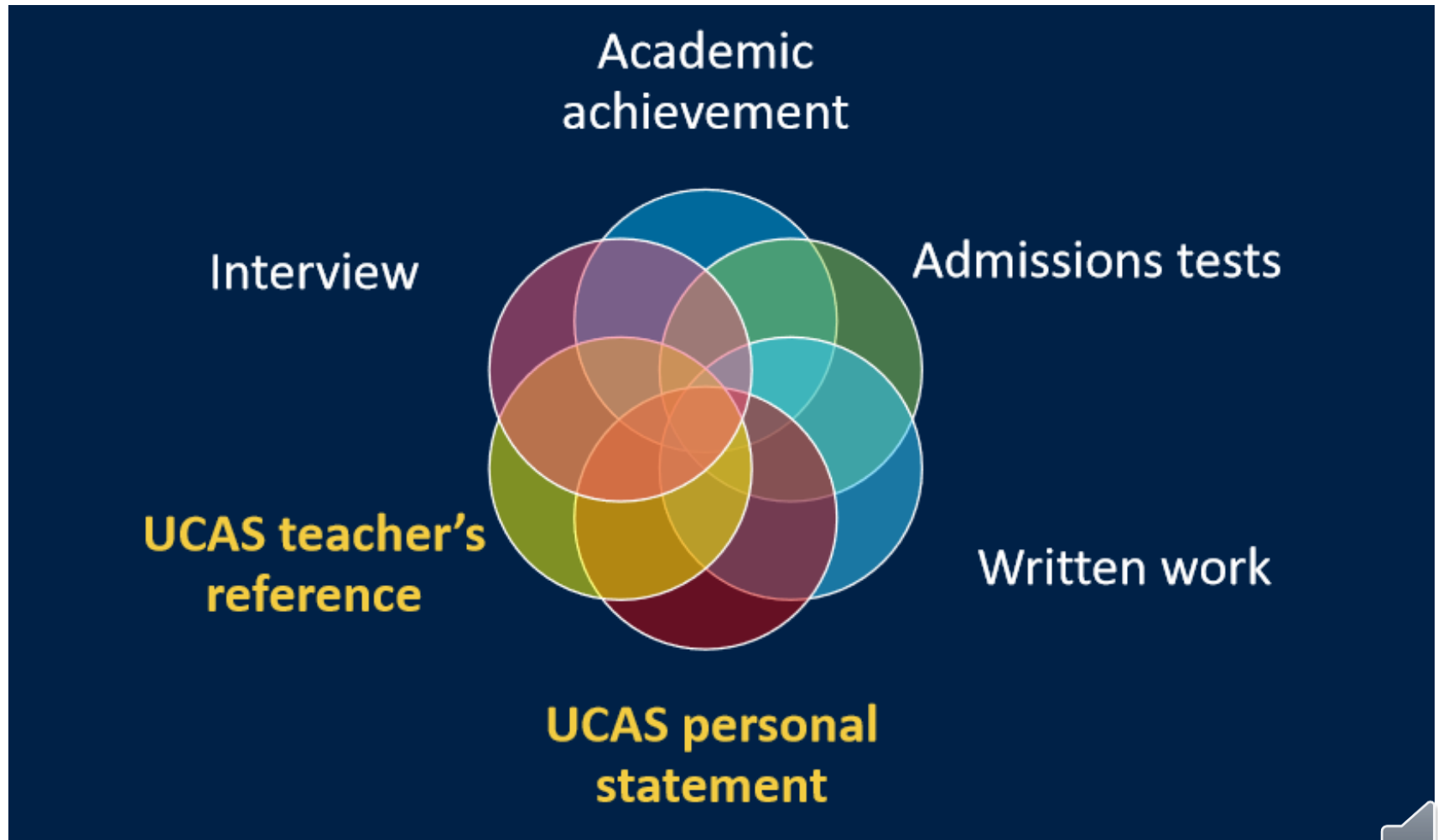


# The function of the personal statement

- All personal statements are read by admissions officers
- Part of a wider data set used to make decisions, along with predicted grades, teacher reference, contextual data and, where applicable, admissions tests, interviews, auditions or portfolios
- 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.
- For non-interview courses, admissions tutors can rely heavily on the information given in personal statements when making their decisions
- Leading universities receive tens of thousands of applications. The personal statement can make a difference between an offer and rejection
- It is a marketing tool for your interests, talents and accomplishments – you are competing against many other applicants and so you have to make yourself stand out
- You will need to take your time and give careful consideration to the key messages you wish to deliver through this document



# Personal statements in context



# Observations from UCAS...

*'A personal statement is what sets up an accurate portrayal of your character to universities. It's one of the most important things you need to do, and it's one of the things that your application relies on, but it's not too difficult to make it perfect.'*

<https://www.ucas.com/connect/blogs/how-write-personal-statement>

And yet it's also very easy to produce something far less than perfect which is bland, insipid and uninspiring...



# Form & Structure

One statement; 4,000 characters maximum (or 47 lines of text when using Verdana font size 12).  
This is approximately 550 words in length. Draft in MS Word to allow for easy editing.

## It should include:

- **Why you want to study your chosen subject**  
(200 words)
- **How your studies have helped you to prepare for study at university**  
(150 words)
- **Extra-curricular activities, which demonstrate that you are the sort of student a university would be lucky to have**  
(150 words)
- **Concluding statement, linking back to the subject and mentioning future career ambitions**  
(30-50 words)

Between **70-80%** of your statement needs to focus on academic and course-related (super-curricular) information

Extra-curricular content needs to be capped at **25%**

Allow yourself the opportunity to round off your statement



Spelling and grammar must be perfect!



# Making a start

- Try not to use examples from the internet for inspiration – they are ok for reassurance afterwards, but will strike the death knell for originality when starting out.
- ***‘Ever since I accidentally burnt holes in my pyjamas after experimenting with a chemistry set on my eighth birthday, I have always had a passion for science’*** – widely copied by hundreds of applicants a few years ago. Not just plagiarised, but also blatantly dishonest.
- Your Personal Statement needs to be built on concrete truths and should contain as much of **your** voice as possible. Trying to make your statement too much like someone else's is a recipe for blandness.
- That said, there are certain basic ingredients one would expect to find in most Personal Statements...





# Making a start

A strong opening is obviously very desirable, one which clearly and immediately establishes your passion for your subject.

- **Golden rule #1** here, though, is to **show, not tell** – communicate your passion without actually using the word 'passion' or 'passionate'.
- **Golden rule #2** is to avoid these **over-used opening lines**:
  - For as long as I can remember I have...
  - I have always been interested in...
  - Reflecting on my educational experiences...
  - Nursing is a very challenging and demanding [career/profession/course]...
  - Throughout my life I have always enjoyed...
  - I am applying for this course because...
  - I have always wanted to pursue a career in...
  - I have always been passionate about...
  - From a young age I have (always) been [interested in/fascinated by]...
  - *"Education is the most powerful weapon which you can use to change the world..."*
- The last example is a quote (from Nelson Mandela). **Golden rule #3** is to **be very careful about using any quote** – it doesn't really shout 'original thinker', especially when thousands of others are using it too.
- Personally, I am **not a big fan** of starting with **questions** either (e.g. 'Have you ever wondered why...?') These people are academics – they spend their lives wondering why...



# Developing your opening



Returning to our outline structure, you need to focus prominently on these questions as you seek to develop your content:

1. **Why do I want to study my chosen subject?**
2. **How have my studies and experiences helped to prepare me to study (this course) at university?**

The structuring of ideas in these first two 'sections' need not be applied too rigidly. Allow yourself the scope to be fluid and flexible in sequencing your content but keep in mind that this strand of your statement is intended to detail your **academic** strengths, skills and interests, and this should be reflected in whatever content you choose. It will also represent the bulk of your statement (70-80%), but try to focus on quality of content over quantity.



# The academic content

1. Why do I want to study my chosen subject?
2. How have my studies and experiences helped to prepare me to study (this course) at university?

The following are suggestions of examples of suitable 'academic' content that might be offered in answer to these questions. They are not part of a checklist to be ticked off in a given order!



# Academic content – Some suggestions

- Explain **why you want to study that subject** and give specific reasons for your interest in the course.
- What are your **particular areas of interest**? What has sparked these interests? *(Looking at specifications for courses you are interested in can be helpful here)*
- Show evidence of **relevant research and background reading** and of your **engagement with the subject beyond the curriculum**. Don't just produce a list, though – **analyse the experience and reflect critically** on whatever you have read/watched/listened to/visited.
- Why are you studying your **current subjects** and how are you enjoying them? How will they help on your university course? *(Consider both content and skills)*
- Show that you **know and are prepared** for studying the course – especially if it is a vocational course or a subject you haven't studied before.
- What are your **career aspirations** beyond the course? *(You might prefer to mention this in your final paragraph instead)*



# Academic content – Further suggestions

- Mention attendance at any **masterclasses, workshops, summer schools** or related **lectures** – it will enhance the impression of a motivated student – but again, try to **offer some sort of critical reflection** on the experience.
- Describe how you have approached a **syllabus-based project**. Top universities will look for independent academic activity e.g. work done on an A-level or BTEC topic beyond school requirements. **EPQ** or **IRR** can be excellent here, both for evidencing a genuine interest in your subject and also for demonstrating that you have the independence and the skills to make a success of higher level study.
- Include any relevant **job, work placement or voluntary experience**, including any **observations of practice**, particularly if it's helped develop skills and give experience that normal schoolwork would not expose. This can be especially helpful if you're applying for more vocational courses.
- Focus on developing some '**super-curricular**' content...



# Super-curricular: Some good starting points (accessible from your armchair)



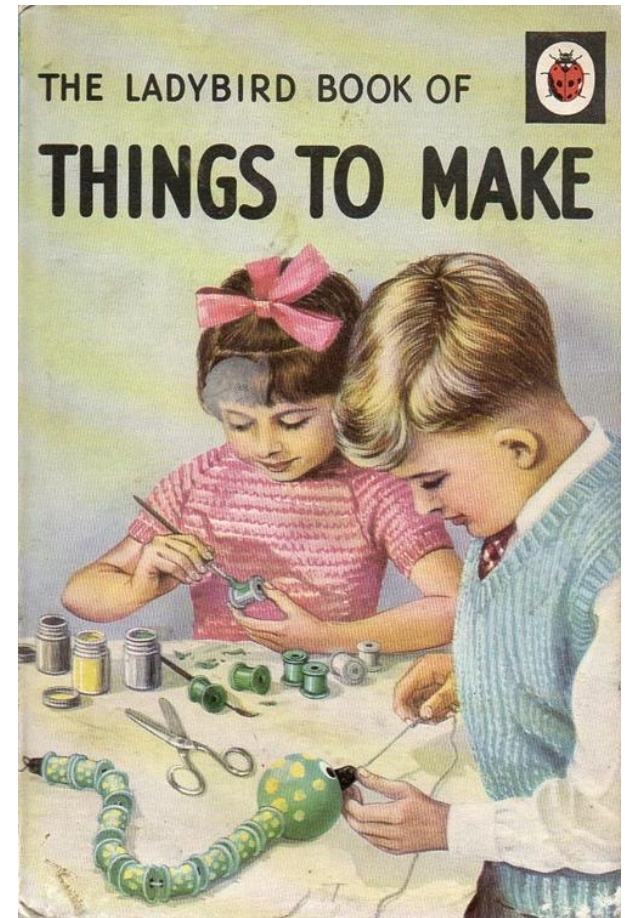
**iWantToStudyEngineering**

A website to help you compete for engineering places at top universities.



# Extra-curricular content

- Your **non-academic** interests, hobbies, pursuits and (significant/relevant) achievements and responsibilities e.g. sport, music, volunteering, clubs, societies, paid employment
- No more than **20-25%** of your final statement
- **Anything you spend lots of time on might** be worth adding, especially if it is **slightly unusual** e.g. breeding rare llamas. 'Socialising' is neither unusual nor interesting.
- Again, avoid simply listing items – focus on the **transferable skills** these experiences have helped develop e.g. teamwork, leadership, organisation, commitment, reliability
- If it's already listed on your **UCAS form**, ask yourself whether **using up valuable characters** in your personal statement is really worth it e.g. D of E bronze award.
- Try to make sure **everything flows** together into one story, ideally one in which most of your interests and abilities lead towards the course you've picked.



# Concluding your statement

## Compose a brief concluding statement(s), linking back to the subject and mentioning future career ambitions

- Round off your personal statement, restating your course choice and linking to where you think this will take you beyond university, if this hasn't already been established
- End positively: I look forward to...
- Without this, most statements will invariably close with a reference to something extra-curricular, like volunteering with the Beavers – not the most impactful of endings...





## Comments from Admissions Tutors

*“Careful research is the key to finding the right course at the right university. I look for individuals who understand and show motivation for the subject of their choice and have taken the opportunity to find out about and gain a feel for the experience of studying the subject at university.”*

*“You need to go beyond a proclaimed love for the subject – show detail and research and justify any statements.”*

*“An element of reflection and analysis really makes the difference to the application. It’s not about what you’ve done but how you think about what you have done.”*

*“What makes a good personal statement is enthusiasm, wider reading and a statement that is, in fact, **personal** and that touch different or interesting.”*



# Task: Evaluating Example 1



## Personal Statement 1

## Read Personal Statement 1

How could this personal statement be improved?

What advice would you give to the student who wrote it?

Since a very young age I have always been fascinated with some of life's big existential questions: who am I? Is there a God? What makes some human beings good and some others evil? And what is 'knowledge', and how do we achieve it?

These are some of the very same questions which have been puzzling philosophers for millennia. When I started my A Level in Philosophy at the beginning of Year 12, I realised that the questions which had perplexed me for so long could be answered by studying this fascinating subject. My studies in Philosophy at A Level have made me realise just how passionate I am about this subject and I hope to complete a Philosophy degree at university so that I can explore my passion in life even further. In addition to my A Level in philosophy I am also studying for two other A Levels in History and Mathematics.

Philosophy is the study of general and fundamental problems concerning matters such as existence, knowledge, values, reason, mind, and language. It has a history of thousands of years, and the term "Philosophy" was probably first used by the philosopher Pythagoras. My favourite areas of philosophy are ethics and political philosophy – two recent debates we have had in class recently which I particularly enjoyed were on the ethics of abortion and also on whether the Government should interfere to stop adults from engaging in behaviour which is harmful to themselves.

I have read extensively around the subject of philosophy. This has included reading many extra books in my spare time which have taken me beyond the A Level syllabus. My extra reading began in the world of ancient philosophy and on my summer holiday last year I worked my way through "The Republic" by Plato and "The Nicomachean Ethics" by Aristotle. This gave me an excellent grounding in the basics of ethics and political philosophy. I was therefore able to move on to more modern material, and I learnt more about deontological ethics by reading the work of Immanuel Kant. I complemented this with reading some material by a consequentialist – John Stuart Mill (I have read both "On Liberty" and "Utilitarianism"). I've developed a particular interest in the philosophy of "Stoicism". I've read many books on this subject including "Discourses" by Epictetus. I've also read books on how ancient Stoic philosophy can be applied to solve some of the problems of modern living, such as "A Guide to Rational Living" by Albert Ellis and "A Guide to the Good Life" by William B Irvine. I am looking forward to learning more about ancient philosophy at university.

In my spare time I take part in a wide range of hobbies and extra-curricular activities. I am a keen pianist and have got up to Grade 7 on the piano. I recently performed the piano at a recital at a celebration evening at my school to a crowd of over 150 parents and students. I enjoy watching films and some of my favourite films are "Natural Born Killers", "Goodfellas" and "The Greatest Showman". I enjoy football and from Year 7 up until Year 10 I was the goalkeeper in our school football team. I keep up to date with current affairs and often read newspapers and topical magazines also like reading books and newspapers and always keep up to date with current affairs, for this reason I have especially enjoyed my Saturday job at WH Smith. My roles in this job include dealing with customers, replenishing stock and keeping the stock room tidy.

After I have graduated from university, I am interested in working in either the publishing industry or would like to become a newspaper columnist or blogger.

Thanks for taking the time to read my personal statement, and also to consider my university application.



# 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



# Task: Evaluating Example 2



## Personal Statement 2

## Now look at Personal Statement 2

Why might this be considered a more effective statement?

When I was taking my GCSEs, my favourite subject on my school timetable was Religious Studies. I chose to do a GCSE course in Religious Studies with some reluctance as I am not an especially religious person. During this course however I realised what it was which appealed to me most about this subject – it was not necessarily religion per se which interested me most but rather the opportunity to grapple with some of the big ideas about life and tackle some of the biggest questions which face human beings. I wanted to find out more about the nature of good and evil, what constitutes genuine ‘knowledge’ and think about how we can work together to create the finest possible society.

I am extremely grateful to my former Religious Studies teacher who recommended that I take an A Level in Philosophy. He had realised that it was philosophical questions which interested me the most. Within just a couple of months of beginning my A Level in Philosophy I was certain that this was the subject which I wanted to pursue to degree level and the decision on which course I should choose at university has been effortless. The parts of my philosophy lessons which I enjoy the most are when we engage in class debates. For example, recently my teacher has organised class debates on the ethics of abortion and also on whether the Government should interfere to stop adults from engaging in behaviour which is harmful to themselves. In these debates I enjoy listening to other people’s opinions equally as much as expressing my own. They have taught me the skills of careful, respectful listening and presenting a clear and reasoned argument. I have also learnt the importance of remaining open minded and always being willing to change my opinion on a particular issue if I am presented with a compelling enough argument. The two other A Levels I am studying have complemented my studies perfectly. My A Level in History has taught me to critically analyse texts and my A Level in Mathematics has taught me how to think in a rational and logical way. These are two essential skills which every philosopher needs.

In my spare time I have enjoyed reading philosophy books which have taken me beyond the A Level syllabus. I read an ancient text called ‘Discourses’ by Epictetus. I struggled with this a little at first, but once I found an updated translation of the original text by Robert Dobbin I was able to fully comprehend Epictetus’s ideas. In the book, Epictetus observes that when human beings suffer it is not because bad things have happened to them. Rather, they suffer because of their interpretation of these events and their internal narrative which tells them that these events are bad and ought not to have happened. This observation led me to develop a more general interest in the philosophy of Stoicism, which Epictetus espouses. My philosophy teacher then recommended that I read a book called ‘A Guide to Rational Living’ by the psychologist Albert Ellis. In this book Ellis explains how he managed to use Epictetus’s ancient advice to improve the quality of the psychotherapy he was offering to his patients. By using these ancient Stoic principles, Ellis was able to make his patients feel less depressed about their lives. The final book I have read on the topics of Stoicism is ‘A Guide to the Good Life’ by William B Irvine. This has shown me how I can use Stoic principles every day to improve my own life, such as imagining that my life is less successful than it actually is to enable me to realise how fortunate I am. Now that I have developed a particular interest in Stoicism I hope to write a dissertation on this subject at university.

One of my hobbies is watching films and during the month when I was in charge of my school’s film club I arranged to screen a series of films by one of my favourite directors Oliver Stone. I used the skills of forming a reasoned argument to persuade our headteacher to allow me to screen the film ‘Natural Born Killers’ to a small group of Year 13 students. The headteacher agreed on the basis that we collected permission slips from parents and followed the screening with a debate about violence in the media and censorship. The debate helped to get a wide range of different Year 13 students more interested in the subject of philosophy. Another hobby of mine is music and I have recently passed my Grade 7 examination in piano. Studying the piano has taught me the skill of self-discipline as I have to practise at least five times a week to maintain the standard I have reached. This self-discipline has helped me with my studies, for example meaning that I have the self-discipline to prepare for exams and meet easy deadlines. In addition to my studies, I work for six hours every Saturday at WH Smith. This has meant that I have had to improve my time management skills to ensure that I am able to balance the demands of work and study successfully.



# The relative virtues of 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 into one story
- The applicant still focuses on relevant skills when talking about their extra-curricular activities and employment



# Common pitfalls...

**Using  
generalisations  
and clichés**

My passion has been history for as long as I can remember.

**Not  
developing  
and analysing**

Books I have read such as 'A Brief History of Time' and 'The Universe in a Nutshell' by Stephen Hawking and 'Quantum Theory Cannot Hurt You' by Marcus Chown have confirmed my belief that Physics is the right course for me.



# Common pitfalls...

**Over emphasis  
on extra-  
curricular  
activities**

I have taken private lessons and played the double bass in the school orchestra for seven years, played in a symphony-sponsored all-bass group for five years, and played in an orchestra for two years.

**Use of  
unnecessary  
language**

While my academic interests focus on the past, I plan to apply the knowledge and experience I gain at university to the present and future.



# In summary...

## DO

- Establish your commitment and motivation to study your chosen subject
- Emphasise your academic interests
- Use your own insights and personal experiences to stand out
- Develop research references by being critical, analytical and reflective
- Refer to any relevant work experience
- Show that you have an appreciation of current developments in your field
- Be careful with attempted uses of humour (and quotes)
- Be original
- Proof-read your work carefully

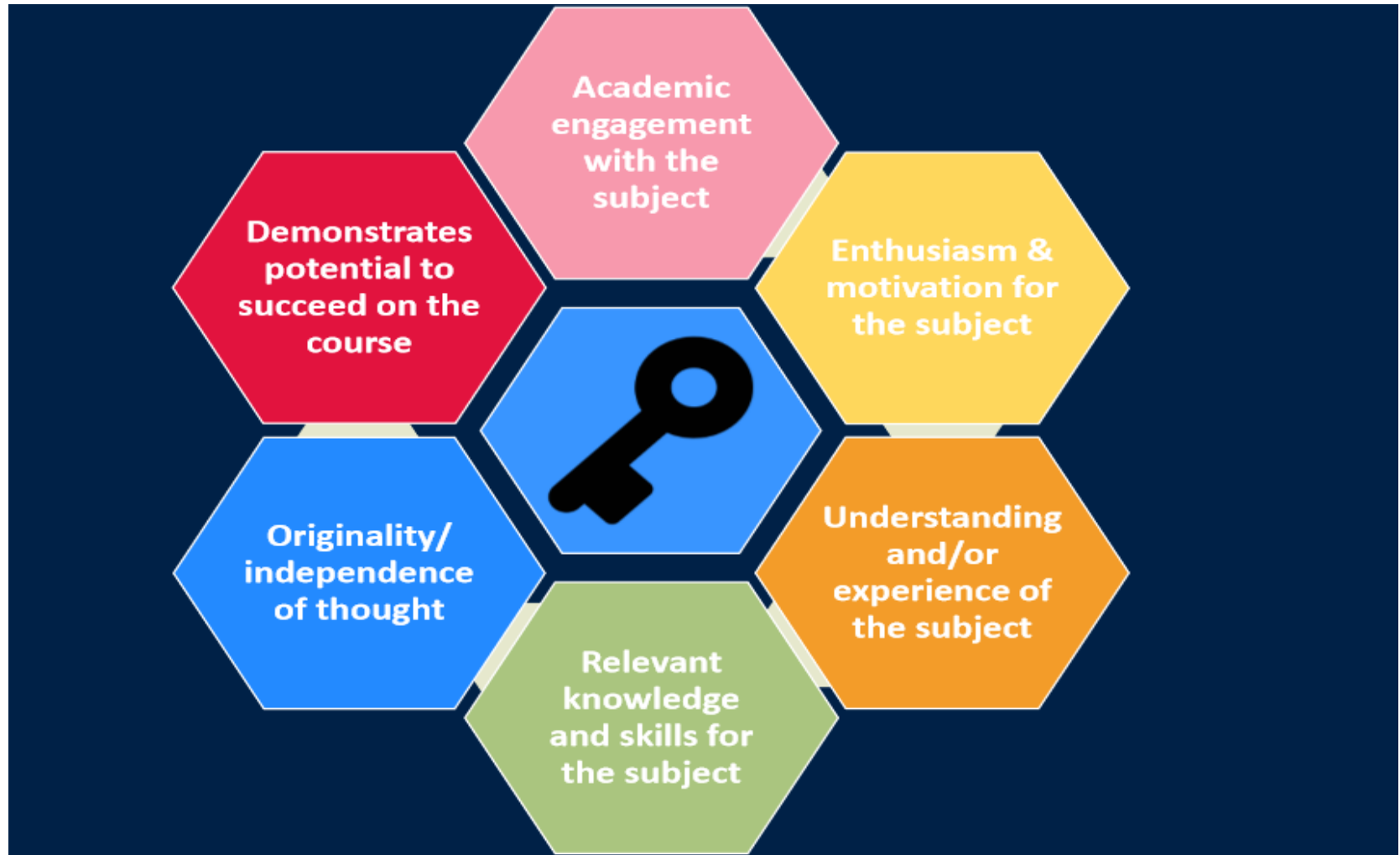
## DON'T

- Use generalisations or clichés
- Refer to specific universities - apart from when referring to outreach activities/summer schools
- Lie or over-exaggerate
- Use unnecessary or unnatural language – avoid repetition and waffle
- Compose lists of wider reading/skills/work experiences without seeking to discuss them further
- Include definitions of the subject
- Start every sentence with 'I'





# Key ingredients...



# Recommended links

- [UCAS - How to Write a Personal Statement](#)
- [Which? - How to Write a Personal Statement](#)
- [The Uni Guide - Personal Statement Advice](#)
- [The Complete University Guide - Tips for Writing your Personal Statement](#)
- [The CATalogue - Materials to Support the Planning and Writing of Personal Statements](#)



# Next steps...

- Your tutor will be expecting to see a **full first version** of your statement **in September**.
- In addition to the input and guidance offered by your tutor, statements will receive a **final check** from **Mr Leggott or Mrs Cronk** before they are uploaded to UCAS forms.
- A **premium checking service** will be guaranteed for all students whose personal statements are approved (by tutors) for sending to Mr Leggott by **Friday October 23<sup>rd</sup>**.
- A **basic checking service** will be on offer for statements received after that date and up until **Friday November 20<sup>th</sup>**, CSF's internal deadline for all UCAS paperwork.



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