

Personal statements: Notes for students based on advice from UCL

Do lots of research on the courses you are applying to read and ensure that your statement fits with what they are looking for. Think about the qualities that are required to be a good practitioner in the subject you are applying for and therefore about the evidence you can quote, that shows you have those qualities. Make a list of all of this before you start to write your statement. Then do a draft. It may well be that you have too little, in which case you need to make it a priority to get a few more things done. It may be that you have too much, in which case you can cut some things out. If so, it may be appropriate that they are mentioned in your reference so do liaise with your referee.

The statement has a limit of 4000 characters or 47 lines. That is about 500 words. 75% of the statement (at least) should be focused on the “academic” i.e. on why you want to do the subject you are applying for and what makes you suitable for it. No more than 25% should be spent referring to your other interests.

The best structure is an “arresting” opening (i.e. one that gets the reader’s interest) followed by 2-3 paragraphs, developing your material and explaining your interest and how you’ve followed it up. Keep it reasonably simple and clear. Using long, complicated words to make something sound “intellectual” doesn’t work. Don’t just write a long list of books you’ve read or things you’ve done. The important thing is that you analyse and reflect on what you learnt from an experience, not that you can cram in lots of examples. Try to avoid clichés such as “I have always had a passion for.....”, “I have a thirst for knowledge.....” etc and don’t give your own definitions of subjects (“to me Economics is about.....”). Admissions tutors will know what their subjects are about and don’t need you to be telling them! Support what you write with evidence and let the evidence speak for itself. “I’m an outgoing, confident person with excellent communication skills”...is a vague, unproven statement with no evidence. This statement: “I got through to the finals of the Jack Petchey Speak Out Challenge in Hackney last year, giving an improvised speech on race and immigration issues to an audience of 200 people” provides real evidence of communication skills. You don’t need to say afterwards that this shows you have those skills. It is obvious from the statement itself and admissions staff will pick that up.

The key thing about the personal statement is that it is personal and that those, who know you, can recognise you from what you say. It is important also that everything in it is true. If you are found out putting in something that isn’t true or making exaggerated claims, you will end up being rejected. Show your statement to other people – get at least one person to check the accuracy of your spelling, punctuation and grammar. Ask others if you’ve left anything out, what you could have expressed better and what you’ve overdone. Allow yourself time to redraft and incorporate their suggestions.

Alison Home (Senior Outreach Officer for UCL) recommended the following in notes written in September 2012:

- (1) **Use of language.** Take care to avoid common mistakes such as using “affect” when you mean “effect” etc.. Be consistent in writing numbers/ letters. Don’t write “thirteen” in one sentence and then use “13” in the next. UCAS removes all formatting, so don’t attempt to use bold type, italics or underline things because they won’t appear in your final version. Avoid informal English. “Yr 11” should be “Year 11” and avoid abbreviations such as etc, i.e., e.g., I’m, I’ve. Keep to straightforward vocabulary – “I took part in.....” sounds better than “I partook in”, which may be more formal but sounds pretentious.
- (2) **Structure.** Every paragraph should be clearly focused on something specific, like A-level studies/ further reading you have done/ work experience and what you got from it. You need to be analytical: don’t give just a passing mention to a week’s work experience or to a major academic project. If it is an impressive achievement, you should give some space to analyse it properly and say what you learnt from it. Avoid any waffle or attempts to be chatty or, even worse, to crack jokes.
- (3) **Content.** Make high quality references to things you’ve done that provide evidence for your interest and understanding of what you are applying to read. Don’t say that watching “Casualty” made you want to study Medicine or talk about it being Harry Potter books that have made you want to read English. Ideally you should try to relate extra-curricular activities, volunteering and work experience back to the degree. Often experiences can be presented in terms of “soft skills” like time management, organisation and commitment. For example: working in a busy customer service call centre shows that you can deal with aggressive calls, calm people down and get clear information and resolve cases – all great skills for an aspiring lawyer. Volunteering in an old people’s home demonstrates empathy with vulnerable people – skills a medical student needs. If you are planning a gap year, account for it and describe your plans. How do you think your gap year will make you a stronger candidate for the course? If you use a quote, ascribe it and explain why it is relevant to what you are saying. Do not put in quotes just to sound impressive. Saying that you were so impressed “when” Martin Luther King said something comes across as ridiculous, when you could not have been born at the time!

(4) If extenuating circumstances have affected your academic performance, make sure that your referee explains it in the reference that is written for you. You do not need to explain it in your statement; you should make the most of your word count by focusing on your academic interests. Equally some things are better said about you than by you so liaise with whomever is going to be your referee.

Three actual statements, submitted for different degrees follow. Analyse them for what you think are their strengths and weaknesses and then decide whether you would make an offer based on them.

Statement 1: An application for Law

“It may be true that the law cannot make a man love me, but it can keep him from lynching me, and I think that’s pretty important”. Martin Luther King Jnr. A strong legal system is one where society is protected; I want to ensure that this is the case for everyone not just for the privileged. I don’t believe any country in the world has a perfect legal system, I don’t think one exists. It also reflects the limitation of law, and I am interested in the power of law and its limits.

I have lived in (XXX country) and therefore seen what a negative law system can do to a country. Consequently I understand the importance of creating a strong system to challenge any injustices put onto to people. I have a strong motivation to do so and I can back this up with a hard working attitude.

As I am not studying A-level law I have tried to read around the subject to confirm my decision. I have read “Learning the Law” by Glanville Williams and “The Law Machine” by Marcel Berlins and Clare Dyer, which have both re-enforced my idea about studying law at university and in July 2009, I had the benefit of being chosen to attend the (XXX university) Summer School, none of the other subjects like medicine seemed as powerful to me as law was. Due to my love of Politics, I worked at my local MP’s office for two weeks in July. I visited Westminster, where I worked on the constituents case studies, and witnessed oral answers to Questions on the Ian Tomlinson case. I also spent time at (XXX Solicitors), a Commercial Law Firm. While working there I was delighted to be given the opportunity of visiting the Royal Courts of Justice, which was such a magnificent place and I got a real sense of working there, and I hope one day I will get the privilege of working there myself. I witnessed how much work needs to be put in, in order to be successful, as I was asked to read through a case file and give my opinion on it, I was also asked to research an ongoing case on obtaining a freezing injunction. I will do a further week in a magistrate’s court later this term.

Law incorporates my love of studying both Politics and Sociology. At the moment the branches that interest me are EU Law and family law, but I am looking forward to discovering all new areas the law course has to offer. I have studied the Factortame case (1990). EU Law fascinates me because the EU has so much power over the member states, and the conflict between UK law and EU law is very captivating. Studying Sociology has enabled me to use logic, which is essential in constructing persuasive arguments. Politics and English Literature has prompted me to use the analytical side of my brain to pick apart pieces of text and critically examine them and build up a strong argument.

A law career would be the most suited to me and the characteristics I acquire, such as leadership, organisation, perseverance, motivational and communication skills. I have demonstrated these skills through my experiences in school. I was elected tutor representative in both Secondary School and College, which has heightened my leadership and organisation qualities. Debate club in College, has helped improve my leadership and perseverance skills, which are needed in law. I believe I possess the perseverance and motivation needed to succeed on a law degree.

Apart from being involved in many activities within school and college, basketball has helped with my leadership potential, as leading a team can be very challenging. In addition, I am very fond of reading; I have recently read “To Kill A Mockingbird”, which has a strong moral theme which represents why I want to study law, to help create a strong, moralised legal system.

Law is, however my main focus as it not only links into my academic journey but also my expedition out of academia.

Statement 2: An application for Medicine

When considering my future career, I sought a profession that would explore both my passion for science and my desire to benefit the lives of others. Medicine definitely offers such an occupation involving the application of science to an extremely wide range of challenging scenarios in order to deliver health care at the highest level. My experiences shadowing medical professionals have helped to recognize and improve the required skills.

During a work experience in renal medicine, I acquired a wider appreciation of what a typical day would entail as a junior doctor. The early meetings in the doctors' office and subsequent ward rounds alerted me to the importance of teamwork in devising the next plan of action and treatment. By visiting the haemodialysis unit, I was able to understand how the machine functions as well as consider the differences when using the alternative method of peritoneal dialysis. Watching the insertion of a Hickman line highlighted the numerous measures promoting sterilisation and informed me of the high level of manual dexterity involved in such procedures. A difficult encounter between a specialist registrar, a patient and his wife regarding the decision to end dialysis and proceed with no further treatment demonstrated to me the key attributes of empathy and compassion.

Having examined the daily routine of a medical speciality, I was able to carry out my next week in the surgical department of urology. Unlike in the renal unit, I was introduced to a medical support worker whom I shadowed and from whom I gained an insight into the NHS system including the Patient Administration System. Observing outpatient clinics beside the registrar allowed me to recognize the high level of communication proficiency practised towards colleagues, patients and relatives. Again I witnessed these crucial skills in action during a multidisciplinary team meeting where I discovered the critical importance of feedback from a number of different departments when assessing the future of patients. During late October I will be carrying out a week of work experience at Balham Park Surgery in order to be more familiar with the different demands and aspects of life as a GP.

Attending several lectures on medical topics has reinforced my scientific understanding and interest in biology. As a member of XXX medical society, my participation in discussions has both enhanced my ability to express ideas and updated my medical knowledge. Particular articles from magazines such as "Scientific American" have contributed to my research into countering common diseases including cancer, which was related to one of the topics examined at our medical society.

For over two months I have volunteered at St. George's Hospital. Helping out in the Acute Stroke Unit has increased my awareness of how patients feel and has certainly boosted my confidence when speaking and establishing a relationship with patients and relatives. Administrative tasks have expanded my awareness of the documentation involved with looking after patients. Volunteering at a primary school by reading with year 2 pupils has been another rewarding experience due to the progress they have made and the increasing enthusiasm for the weekly session.

As a school prefect I have been involved in several roles of responsibility and leadership including monitoring duties and coordinating activities within a year 8 class. Being a year 7 mentor, I am a guide to the youngest members of the school and this has allowed me to build up my communication skills. Working at a sushi restaurant has enabled me to develop my ability to cope with pressurised situations and my capability as a team player.

Determination and diligence are also vital qualities that I possess, and I believe that my academic achievements reflect this. During my course I intend to develop my skills further to contribute to university life and make the most of the opportunities ahead of me.

Statement 3: Application for Ancient World Studies (Classics)

Coming from a culturally mixed background I have always been fascinated by the ways in which our history formed the society we live in. The influence of classical civilisations on society has always made me ask the question: have people really changed? This sparked my interest in ethics and philosophy as I wished to study the thinking behind the behavioural codes which people live by. Classical Civilisations have always appealed to me throughout my GCSE and A-level courses and a true passion for the Ancient World was reinforced when I attended a JACT Ancient History summer school. I enjoyed reading the epic poems “The Iliad” and “The Odyssey” and found that the question of authorship of the poems was greatly debated. At the summer school I had the opportunity of engaging in deep discussion with my contemporaries as to who “Homer” really was.

From a young age I was a keen reader of the myths and legends of past civilisations, in particular Greek mythology. I was amazed at how flexible mythology was and the ways it was used to give meaning and answers to fundamental questions of life. Having studied several works of Euripides such as “Hippolytus” and “The Bacchae” I came to understand the importance of divine reverence for the Greeks. I am intrigued by the stark contrast in the role which religion plays now compared to its significance then. For example, in a modern context the Olympics are primarily political whereas religion was the cause for the Games beginning in honour of Zeus.

Through my A-level subjects I have found certain elements which assist my study of the Classical World. At Religious Studies A-level, I have been introduced to archaeological methods which help determine the dates of historical events in the Old Testament. I find this interesting as I have had the opportunity to study other ancient civilisations such as the Assyrians in contrast to the Hebrews. Studying Mathematics and Chemistry has also taught me to adopt an analytical approach which would be useful in archaeological study. The discipline of philosophy in Religious Studies is an area which I am keen to pursue; I especially enjoyed reading Plato’s “The Last Days of Socrates” as it explores his feelings just before death. I am also interested in the way Plato’s writings can be used as more than just a philosophical dialogue but as a source for our knowledge of Greek Society.

At school I am a regular member of the Debating and Classical Society. I enjoy hearing the opinions of others in such forums and participating in discussions. I am an enthusiastic reader of the magazine “Omnibus” which helps give me an insight into the views of scholars in the Classical World about debated issues, such as the lives of women and the role of fate.

Throughout my extra-curricular pursuits I have been given various responsibilities. In my position as a prefect I frequently interact with younger members of the school helping them with any issues that may arise. Also being a youth leader I engage in charitable events regularly and spend time every week at an Alzheimer’s Elderly Care Home. I am a dedicated member of the RAF cadet force and am at the rank of corporal. I also have the responsibility of Library Monitor.

I enjoy participating in school trips and benefited from a visit to Greece in October. There I had the opportunity to see Olympia, Delphi and the treasures at the National Archaeological Museum. I am fascinated by how such pieces of artwork were constructed so many centuries ago and the manner in which the people used the resources they had. This brings me back to my question on just how much people have changed and how their lives flourished and left an impression on us now. It is therefore the relevance of the Ancient World in a modern context and the uniqueness of their language and culture that compels me to pursue this subject as an area of genuine interest.