

How To Write A Standout UCAS Personal Statement

ALTHEONE

A condensed guide to the three-question format - and the one distinction nearly every applicant misses.

What did you learn? → What do you now think?

QUESTION ONE · MIN. 350 CHARACTERS

Why do you want to study this course?

Not your origin story - evidence of a live, developing interest. Tutors are checking whether your understanding has survived contact with difficulty, or sharpened into a specific question. A well-worn origin story earns nothing; a mind visibly working through a problem earns an interview.

- ✗ Opening with "I have always loved..." - show the moment your understanding changed, not when you noticed the subject
- ✗ Naming enthusiasm without engagement - cite the specific thing that corrected an early assumption
- ✗ Describing the subject like a prospectus - narrow to one thread and follow it somewhere specific
- ✗ Surveying several interests at once - end on a live, unresolved question, not a settled conclusion

WORKED EXAMPLE · CHEMISTRY

Weak - "I have loved Chemistry since I was young, and visiting a science museum confirmed it."

Better - "Studying reaction kinetics led me to research independently how catalysts work at a molecular level."

BEST

"Researching enzyme catalysis showed me that the kinetic models we're taught describe idealised behaviour, which breaks down once real conditions - competing substrates, temperature gradients, shifting pH - are introduced. I've come to think school chemistry oversells the predictive power of simple rate equations, and that the more interesting chemistry begins exactly where those models stop working."

Notice the shift: this states a position, not just a fact about what was read.

QUESTION TWO · MIN. 350 CHARACTERS

How have your studies prepared you?

Not a recap of grades - proof you can already think at degree level. Every competitive applicant has strong results; what's assessed here is whether an essay, EPQ or experiment produced a genuine shift in understanding, not just a mark on a script.

- ✗ Restating grades as if they were evidence - choose the one piece of work that shifted your thinking most
- ✗ Summarising a topic with no stated impact - show the specific moment evidence disagreed with your assumption
- ✗ Listing several projects thinly - state what you now believe, and hold it provisionally
- ✗ Treating "I learned that X" as an endpoint - connect it forward to a question for degree level

WORKED EXAMPLE · ENGLISH LITERATURE

Weak - "Comparing Ishiguro and McEwan taught me about how unreliable narrators can distort the truth."

Better - "Comparing Ishiguro's and McEwan's unreliable narrators showed me how distorted memories can reveal a character's need to reshape uncomfortable experiences, rather than simply hide the truth."

BEST

Comparing Ishiguro's and McEwan's use of unreliable narrators made me question whether distorted memories hide the truth or reveal how characters reshape the past to protect themselves. I became interested in how this exposes the gap between what happened and what a character needs to believe happened. Exploring critical writing on memory and self-deception made me consider whether an unreliable narrator can sometimes reveal more than a reliable one.

Weak tells us what they learned. Better shows us what they understood. Best shows us how that understanding developed into independent curiosity.

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QUESTION THREE · MIN. 350 CHARACTERS

What else have you done to prepare?

Not a highlights reel - evidence you sought out difficulty on your own terms. Tutors read this question expecting a list; what earns attention is the same thing that mattered in questions one and two - what changed in your thinking, not what you did. Where it happened matters far less than most applicants assume.

Listing activities as achievements - choose relevance over prestige, always

Choosing a placement because it sounds impressive - be specific about what you actually observed

Repeating an idea from question one or two - say what you now think, and why it differs from your reading

Mentioning material you couldn't defend - include only what survives five minutes of follow-up questions

WORKED EXAMPLE · ECONOMICS

Weak - "I completed a two-week placement at a local bank, which taught me a lot about finance."

Better - "Shadowing loan officers, I saw how interest rate changes affected lending decisions in real time."

BEST

Shadowing a small business owner made me question an assumption running through my economics course: that firms respond to rising costs mainly by increasing prices or reducing output. Instead, I saw them absorb higher costs to avoid losing customers, even as profit margins narrowed. It made me interested in how customer relationships and fear of losing market share can complicate the rational behaviour assumed in economic models.

The placement is one sentence; the thinking it produced is the rest - that ratio is the goal.

THE RULES

Five principles across all three questions

01 Reflection beats description. What you did is the setup; what you now think is the answer - the part almost every applicant leaves out.

02 Depth beats breadth. One example, properly examined, outweighs five that are merely listed.

03 Never write what you couldn't defend at interview. If a follow-up question would catch you out, it doesn't belong in the statement.

04 Only write about genuine interests. Manufactured enthusiasm is the easiest thing for a tutor to spot.

05 Make every answer earn its place. If an idea already appeared in a previous question, cut it and use the space for something new.

BEFORE YOU SUBMIT

Does every example end in a position, not just an observation?

Have I shown where my thinking changed, not just what I did?

Could I discuss every example in detail if asked at interview?

Do the three answers cover genuinely different ground?

Have I contributed an opinion, rather than summarised someone else's?

Is every sentence doing work - none purely decorative?

The strongest applications don't try to prove the applicant is exceptional. They demonstrate that the applicant thinks exceptionally.

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