



**Durham**  
University

# Supporting your Students' Applications: References and the 2026 personal statement reforms'

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# Admissions Updates!

- UCAS personal statement 2026 information available on the website: [UCAS Personal Statement 2026](#)
- Can also be found through “[Admissions Guidance for Teachers and Advisors](#)”
- Separate "Ask Us" forms and phone lines for Home and International applicants
- Phone cover escalation for calls only UG Admissions can answer
- Working on guidance on which courses the personal statement is used more heavily in selection.
- Possible UG Admissions Portal changes for next admissions cycle.

# Why is the Personal Statement Important?

- An opportunity to talk to the selector – especially where we don't interview
- In competition with other applications
- Chance to show how they stand out – why they're applying and what makes them an excellent candidate for the programme

# UCAS Personal Statement 2026: What's new?

- Personal statement split into three sections:
  - Why do you want to study this course or subject?
  - How have your qualifications and studies helped you prepare for this course or subject?
  - What else have you done to prepare outside of education, and why are these experiences useful?
- Still 4000 characters – but each question requires minimum of 350 characters.

# UCAS Personal Statement 2026: Why do you want to study this course or subject?

What are the applicant's own thoughts about the subject?

They could think about:

- Why do they like the subject?
- What books or articles have they read that have stood out?
- Did this prompt them to do more research? If so, what did they find out?
- Is there evidence to support their views?

# UCAS Personal Statement 2026: How have your qualifications and studies helped you prepare for this course or subject?

What transferrable skills are they bringing from their academic qualifications or studies?

Things they might like to think about:

- What skills might they need for their chosen course(s)?
- What have they done that evidences they have these skills?
- Have they taken part in any educational challenges or competitions and what does this demonstrate?
- Have they done any additional reading or research and what did they learn from this?

# UCAS Personal Statement 2026: What else have you done to prepare outside of education, and why are these experiences useful?

Other experiences outside of their education and the ways this has helped them prepare for the course.

This could be through:

- Personal life experiences or responsibilities
- Work experience, employment or volunteering
- Hobbies, clubs, or outreach activities
- Achievements outside of school
- Post-education activities (if no longer in full-time education)

# Personal Statements: Subject Focus

## Social Sciences:

- Originality and independence of thought
- Engagement with reading & research

## Science:

- Wider reading, their opinions and engagement with what they've read
- Super-curricular activities

## Business:

- Originality and independence of thought
- Correct use of terminology

## Arts & Humanities:

- Engagement with reading & research
- Evidence why they think what they think

## Combined or joint honours courses:

Ensure they talk about at least two of the subjects they're interested in!



# Our selectors will be looking for....

**Modern Languages**  
Beyond class  
(reading, TV etc)

**Sociology**  
Interest in  
sociological  
issues

**Anthropology**  
Interest in people  
and cultures

**Criminology**  
Interest in real  
criminal justice  
issues

**Mathematics**  
Mathematical  
ability & interest

**Biosciences**  
Beyond class  
(reading, field/  
lab work)

**Liberal Arts**  
Interest in each  
individual subject

**PPE**  
Understanding of  
how subjects  
connected

**Classics**  
Interest in  
language and  
translation

**English Literature**  
Academic  
interest in subject

**History**  
Themes over  
time/  
geographical

# Personal Statement: Top Tips

**Research courses so personal statement can be relevant**

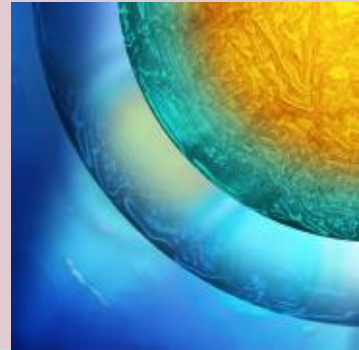


**Think about why they're including things – what do they tell us**

**Be specific; use examples and give evidence to support**

**Ask someone for ideas and feedback**

**Draft personal statement then paste into Apply – don't forget to spellcheck!**



# Personal Statement: Top Tips



**Don't try to be funny**

**Don't 'name drop'  
individual institutions**

**Don't write a  
chronological history**

**Don't waste characters!**

**Don't copy!**



# UCAS Reference

This is split into three sections:

- A general statement about your school/college (mandatory) – this can be a template and can be applied once to all your applications.
- Any extenuating circumstances which may affect the applicant's performance in examinations or other assessments (optional)
- Any other circumstances specific to the applicant you think universities/colleges should be aware of (optional)



# UCAS Reference – How we use this

- We use the reference to understand the applicant's educational journey
- This is through considering their personal and school context.
- For us the first two sections are the most important.
- The exceptions are for applications for:
  - our BA Primary Education for which we will be looking for commentary on the applicant's suitability as a teacher, which we would expect to find in section 3 of the reference.
  - Our Foundation Programme where applicants may have been out of education for a long time and we may be looking for more about their suitability.

# UCAS Reference – How we use this

- It doesn't matter if there's nothing to complete in section two of the reference – this is just there if there are extenuating circumstances to tell us about.
- It's okay if you tell us more than we're looking for – we know different providers will be looking for different things and your applicants won't be penalised for this.
- Make sure that the email address used in the reference is a school email address.

# Section 1: General Statement about School/College

- Tell us about the context of your school/college.
- But don't rely on URLs, include the information you need us to see in the box.
- This doesn't need to be long, but it's helpful if we know the performance of the school so we can understand how an applicant's grades compare in this context.



# Section 2: Extenuating Circumstances

Tell us:

- if there is a story behind the applicant's grade profile
- if the applicant has significant additional commitments
- if the applicant has or has had significant barriers to overcome
- if the applicant is in receipt of free school meals, has spent time in care or is estranged from their parents.





# Section 3: Other circumstances

**Tell us:**

- **Any achievements relevant to the application (especially if it saves the applicant words in their personal statement)**
- **This might be e.g. if they completed an essay competition or other extracurricular activities**



# Other Tips

If the extenuating circumstances you wish to report would not be appropriate to include within the UCAS reference (e.g. if it is sensitive in nature), we will also accept evidence submitted from the school or other third-party professional to:

[documents.educators@durham.ac.uk](mailto:documents.educators@durham.ac.uk)

Please ensure a school email address is included in the reference (i.e. ideally not a gmail, hotmail, btinternet etc account).

Where possible, please ensure applicants apply using their own personal email account which they will have continued access to over the summer.

# Ask Admissions!

**Ask Us:**

**[www.durham.ac.uk/study/ask-us](http://www.durham.ac.uk/study/ask-us)**

**Call Us:**

**'Home' Callers:**

**Tel: 0800 987 4120**

**Phone lines are open Mon - Fri  
10am – 4pm.**

**International Callers:**

**+44 191 300 4557**

**Visit our website:**

**[www.durham.ac.uk/study/undergraduate](http://www.durham.ac.uk/study/undergraduate)**

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