

UCAS application dos and don'ts

Useful tips to help you apply to university

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Choosing your degree

You might know straightaway what course you want to study at university, but a lot of people will find choosing their course is a daunting prospect. There are over 37,000 courses offered in the UK through UCAS, so there are certainly a lot to choose from, but the right course for you will be out there – you just need to find it. Start by thinking about what subjects you enjoy at school. Also think about where you want your degree to take you – do you already have a career in mind that you'd need a particular degree subject for? Do your research and take your time. Don't be limited by the subjects you've studied at school – you might discover a course you've never even heard of before that's exactly what you want!

Choosing your university

Are you up for the hustle and bustle of city life, or do you prefer the quieter atmosphere of a rural university? There are lots of things to consider – halls of residence, nightlife, cost and even how far away it is from home. Choosing your university is a very personal thing. Try not to be too influenced by where your friends are going or where your parents or your favourite cousin studied. Only you know what will make you happy. Try to go to lots of open days to get a proper feel for where you might be spending the next few years of your life.

Writing your UCAS personal statement

Ok, you've chosen your course and your university. The only thing you need to do now is convince the admissions team to offer you a place.

You've registered with **ucas.com** and filled in your details. So far so good. Now one of two things might happen. You reach the personal statement section and writer's block strikes – you have no idea how all the hours you've spent playing video games or working in the local café demonstrate your ability to study Civil Engineering or Economics. Or you've only written down half the things you want to say and you're already over the word limit. How are you going to make it fit?

Think of it this way: you are writing an essay – just like all the essays you've written at school – except the question this time is '*Why should I be given a place to study X?*' Everything you say in your personal statement should relate back to that question. If it doesn't, then do you need to say it at all? Follow our handy guide and you'll be fine.

Do show your enthusiasm

There must be a reason you've decided to study Astrophysics or Ancient Greek so tell us what those reasons are. What inspired you to study this subject? What do you want to get out of it? By understanding why you want to study a particular subject, you will be in a great position to write your personal statement.

Do your research

As well as why you want to study this subject, why do you want to apply to this type of course? Perhaps it is a particular topic taught on the course, or the fact that there's a large practical element? The style of courses will vary from one university to another even if they have the same title, so show that you've thought carefully about your choices and why you've chosen them.

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Do tell the truth

It may seem obvious, but expanding your interests or inflating your achievements does you no favours in the long run. Claiming to speak fluent Russian may seem like a great idea now but when your tutor, Vladimir, approaches you on your first day you may feel a tiny bit stupid! Being chosen for a course based on a false personal statement might mean you end up on a course that you're not going to enjoy. If you work best on your own, making up examples of teamwork and being chosen on how well you work with others will backfire once you start the course and find yourself having to work in ways that don't suit you.

Do show, not just tell

As with everything in the personal statement, you must show that you have the skills and qualities that the admissions tutors are looking for. Whenever you talk about your skills, give examples of when you have demonstrated them. Don't just say, *'I play football therefore I have good teamwork skills,'* when you could say, *'I am an active member of my local football team and an excellent motivator when things aren't going well. I like to organise the team according to the particular strengths of all the players to make sure we play as a unit.'*

Do check your work

You may have won the school spelling competition three years in a row, but no-one, not even you, is immune from the odd typo or mistake. Don't rely on the computer's spell check. Read and re-read your work and then let friends, family, teachers, the postman read it too as they may spot things you've missed. Be careful though that they don't try to

make you write it in the way they think is best – it's important that you write it in your own style. When it comes to spelling however there is only one 'right' way.

Don't cover too much

You won't be able to fit your entire life history in, so think about what's relevant and what isn't. You may be proud of your first prize in the pie-eating competition, but is this really what you want to put on your UCAS form?

Don't overdo it

You might think the best way to impress an admissions tutor is to use big words and long sentences, but remember that they have to read hundreds of personal statements, so don't make it hard for them. By all means use a Thesaurus now and then, but your personal statement should be clear, to the point and actually sound like you've written it!

Don't write it at the last minute

This should go without saying but starting the whole thing the night before the deadline won't give you enough time to do it properly. If you haven't already put in the time and effort, do you really want to send in a rushed application? If your priorities are elsewhere it might be worth thinking about whether you really want to apply right now. Are there other things you want to do before you go to university? There's nothing wrong with taking some time to think about what you want to do. When you know what you want to apply for and where, you'll probably feel much better about writing the application and get it done in plenty of time.

Good luck!