

Lesson 7: Revising personal statements

PERSONAL STATEMENTS (FULL) WITH FEEDBACK

We spoke to experts from a variety of relevant fields including admissions officers, representatives of the Russell Group and leading graduate recruiters to ask for their feedback on the example personal statements. The main conclusions are outlined below and should be used by the teacher to stimulate a group discussion *after* the pupils have been through the personal statements and given their own feedback.

General comments

History

- Everyone asked said that they preferred personal statement A or C because they were the most focused on the subject. It was commented that it is very specific about why they enjoy history and gives concrete examples of how they have demonstrated this passion for the subject. It was advised that a two thirds of a good personal statement should be subject specific or be directly relatable to the subject.
- It was commented that the real strength of personal statement C is that the pupil has clearly thought about why history is a valuable subject to study and shows an appreciation of the enormity of the discipline.
- It was advised that statements about the purpose/value of history must explain thoroughly why it is believed to be the case. For example, it was recommended that the opening paragraph of personal statement A needs further explanation.
- It was advised that when talking about extracurricular activities it is important not to simply list them but to explain why they have been valuable and which skills they have helped to develop. For example, in the third paragraph of personal statement A the second half of the paragraph is stronger than the first.
- Everyone asked said that personal statement B was generally the weakest.
 - a. It was advised that it is wasted time explaining national exam achievements when all of this information would be available from the UCAS form.
 - It was felt that there is not enough of a focus on why the pupil wishes to study history.
 - It was also advised that it is usually a bad idea to 'name drop' historians without saying which books you have read and what they were about.
 - Similarly, it was highlighted that more specific information about the museums that they have visited would have been beneficial.

Chemistry Personal Statements

- Everyone asked agreed that personal statement B was the strongest chemistry personal statement because the pupil clearly appreciated the importance of the subject and could evidence their interest in it through wider reading.
- However, it was noted that there are several points at which the pupil makes statements that do not add anything to the personal statement. For example, they state that they have joined the Royal Society of Chemistry without explaining what they have learnt through this. Statements like 'I hope to take advantage of the social opportunities at university as well as the academic ones' were not felt to add to the quality of the application.
- It was again advised that there is no need to explain your A Level grades as this information is available on your UCAS form.
- The first sentence of personal statement C was felt to be unconvincing, with some thinking that the reference to the applicant's parents suggested they might have been 'forced' into the subject.
- It was also advised that personal statement C dedicates too many words to simply listing extracurricular activities C rather than the applicant explaining the skills that they developed through these activities. It was noted that care should be taken in order that it doesn't make it sound like their true passion lies elsewhere to chemistry.
- Everyone asked said that personal statement B was generally the weakest.
 - It was advised that it is wasted time explaining school history national exam achievements when all of this information would be available from the UCAS form.
 - It was felt that the statement '*currently*, I am particularly interested in chemistry,' makes it sound like the commitment to the subject may be temporary.
 - It was advised that the pharmacy work experience should have explored further links to chemistry.
 - It was also advised that when listing achievements in competitions it is important to explain what skills have been developed/evidenced through the competition.
 - It was strongly noted that the most serious flaw is that the personal statement barely covers chemistry.

History personal statement A

History and politics have had a profound impact on my outlook. From childhood, the tangible history I found in castles, museums and family photographs appealed uniquely to my imagination. As I grew up my interest in the past introduced me to the political traditions and ideas of my community, and the study of politics became equally absorbing. Both subjects retain their fascination for me, the extent of their interrelation making them a perfect platform for a more complete understanding of our world and its future.

My A Level studies have confirmed my commitment to history and politics, and encouraged me to challenge and expand upon my perceptions of the subjects. The diversity of historical opinion I have discovered, in Kershaw's historiographical surveys for instance, has particularly interested me, and led me to explore texts on historical theory including Carr's 'What is History?' Peter Clarke's 'Hope and Glory' drew my attention to the historical roots of contemporary political problems, as well as the timeless themes of politics. The more explicitly human aspect of the disciplines similarly enthuses me, and I have enjoyed reading biographies such as Strachey's 'Queen Victoria' and Paul Routledge's 'Mandy', finding them insightful as well as enjoyable. University lecture days, talks from local politicians, and visits to Westminster and the Welsh Assembly have all been valuable and stimulating experiences, allowing me to engage in my proposed area of study guided by my growing curiosity.

My greater involvement in the school community has been a rewarding aspect of sixth form life. As well as being a prefect, I have been active in the Year 12 charity committee and have participated in the 'Toe-by-Toe' reading scheme. For the past year I have been editor of the school newspaper, requiring of me the ability to work in a team and to deal with pressures of time. This role, along with my position as secretary of the school council, has seen me develop greater flexibility in my written style. I have particularly enjoyed competing for my school's debating team at local and regional levels, which has taught me to research, structure and maintain a line of argument.

A highlight of the past year has been participating in a French exchange programme, developing my linguistic and communicative skills. I find experiencing different ways of life through travel fascinating, and hope to organise an independent trip to Paris with my French class later in the year. Outside school, my interests in art and literature are a helpful balance to my academic work. I have also been a member of Circus Eruption, a group working with able-bodied and disabled young people through the medium of circus skills, for six years.

I have a real passion for current affairs and it is my long term ambition to go into journalism; a career in which the unique insight into society provided by the combination of history and politics would be invaluable. I have already completed a week of work experience at a local newspaper, during which I had two independently researched articles published, and which I hope to follow-up with further placements during a gap year. This break would allow me to travel more widely, consolidate my skills in French, learn a further European language or work abroad, and would equip me with skills and experiences that could only enrich my time at university.

Comment [U1]: Overall, this is quite good. The structure seems about right, although a bit more detail on the academic side and fewer words devoted to personal interests would probably improve it for all universities. Individual suggestions for improvement are given below.

Comment [U2]: This a bit generic – I think it might be more compelling if a specific instance of a tradition and how the author explored it was given. Certainly, an indication of what the author means by 'my community' is needed – is this defined spatially (the people who live in my neighbourhood) or ethnically (e.g. the black community) or socially (e.g. the working class) or in some other way?

Comment [U3]: Currently, this is one sentence and the reader will struggle to make sense of it. My guess is that it's meant to be two sentences? It's a small thing but it should be picked up in proof reading.

Comment [U4]: The value of these comments will vary from university to university – Durham's public stance is that they value rounded individuals and prefer people with active extracurricular lives, even where there is no connection with the academic discipline. Oxbridge don't value anything that isn't directly related to the academic subject, although the applicant is not disadvantaged by mentioning it, since it is appreciated that there are four other universities that are going to get the application.

Comment [U5]: From an Oxbridge perspective, I would expect an applicant to at least attempt to relate the benefits of the gap year to the specific subject – what might be learned about the History and Politics of France? If the enthusiasm for these subjects expressed at the start is genuine, I would expect the applicant to be thinking about how this experience would contribute to an insight into European Politics etc. Referring to learning a language or working abroad suggests that the plans for the gap year aren't very clear, which isn't ideal.

History personal statement B

I have always been interested in the study of historical ideas and interpretations. I consider myself to be highly focused on the concept of history and believe that studying this at university would further both my knowledge and interest into the subject. I enjoy reading varying interpretations of significant events by historians such as Asa Briggs, Robert K Massie and Richard Pipes. It is for these reasons that I see myself as an ideal student for history at university.

Comment [U6]: It is possible to expand greatly on this by discussing at least one example of a disagreement between historians and indicating the author's preferred interpretation and why they prefer it.

During my comprehensive education I have worked hard both in and out of school to achieve grades set by my teachers and myself. I have also taken a keen interest in activities to help and promote my school; this has resulted in me being appointed as a senior prefect. My duties within this role are to organise fundraisers for both sixth form funds and charitable purposes. I thoroughly enjoy this role within the school and try to exceed the expectations of my duties at all times. For the end of this academic year I have organised a 'Big Brother' style event in aid of several charities. Through this work I feel that I have gained invaluable inter-personal skills which will undoubtedly help me throughout higher education.

Comment [U7]: Ouch! This reads rather arrogantly. It's for the school to make this assessment and for the applicant to express their eagerness to learn rather than suggesting they think they have a right to be admitted. There's also a failure in logic here – enjoying reading history implies the applicant is keen to study but not that they would make an ideal student since that requires other qualities in addition.

For my work experience, I undertook a placement with the local branch of Nationwide Building Society. I was required to complete tasks that included general administrative work along with customer service. Throughout this time I had to be motivated, reliable, and confident when dealing with customers and their queries. Consequently I was awarded the Ewart Prior cup for my achievement during this placement.

Outside of school I also have a part time job in a local supermarket. For the last three years I have been dedicated to the job and worked hard for the various levels of further training set by the company. My role within the company requires me to be a highly motivated team player; I believe I fulfil this role to the best of my ability. I enjoy providing a high level of customer service in which customers can rely on. I Believe my experiences in the workplace to have taught me valuable organisational skills, and has given me the ability to relate well with people, which I believe would be of benefit in the world of work and university.

Comment [U8]: Too much focus on non-academic issues, even for Durham!

In my spare time I enjoy visiting places of interest such as museums and exhibitions on various Historical periods. I have a keen interest in reading about both British and European history. Along with this I try to broaden my knowledge on the 19th century to get a copious overview of the political situation during this period. Additionally I use my spare time to look at new methods and practices for my sixth form such as fundraisers and other social events. I believe that my pastimes have helped to confirm my aspirations for the future.

Comment [U9]: This is way more important than the previous three paragraphs to an admissions tutor – it should appear earlier and be more detailed.

This statement shows that I am a dedicated, strong minded individual which I believe makes me suitable for an undergraduate course in history.

History personal statement C

Arthur Marwick wrote that "because everything has a history, history as a body of knowledge and as a discipline covers everything." The mental conditioning one undergoes throughout a history degree is what sets it apart. The skills developed, particularly in selecting, harmonising and presenting information, are valuable throughout one's career, whether it be a continued involvement in academia or in law, the latter being a career path which I have researched extensively.

My A Level courses on post-WWI Germany, Britain in the early 1900s, modern Russia and the Korean and Vietnam Wars have truly encapsulated the history I wished to study. The after-effects of these periods are still visible in society today and the understanding I have gained during the course has allowed me to fully appreciate why society is shaped the way it is. Although this is applicable to all history, the wealth of contemporary sources at hand and relative modernity meant that I felt I had a clearer picture of the world in which they lived, and could associate with the values of those I studied.

My initial interest in history arose as a result of a series of circumstances. Living very near to England's oldest recorded town, Colchester, I have been able to visit the castle, built by William the Conqueror and the Roman temple it was built over. My birthplace, Dachau, in Bavaria, allowed me to visit places such as Neuschwanstein Castle built by Ludwig II. The richness of the history I grew up in furthered my desire to learn more about it. Dachau also has the unfavourable reputation of having one of the first Nazi concentration camps. I visited them as a child, not fully understanding what they represented; my return visit two years ago deeply chilled me. I asked myself 'How could people let this happen?' It is conundrums such as these which sparked my interest in History.

A truly hands-on appreciation of history is often a feature of my family holidays. I have visited many places of historical interest including Chichen Itza in Mexico, where I was awed by the ruins of the fabulously preserved Mayan city with its grimly fabulous tales. In France I visited the Palace at Versailles and stood in the Hall of Mirrors, a place where the First World War was formally ended. It was a profound experience that helped me to fully appreciate the history I was studying.

History-based activities have taken up a large amount of my free time. As an avid reader, many of the books I read are based on historical events. Works such as 'Tyrant' by Manfredi, detailing the life of Dionysius of Syracuse are fascinating. When I have finished them, I find myself compelled to research the subjects more thoroughly. The case of Dionysius was particularly gripping as the portrayal of him is wholly subjective, many, including Dante in his divine comedy, saw him as a cruel and vindictive tyrant whereas Manfredi sees him as a 'great protagonist'. Historiography of any sort, whether it be the debates on the Duke of Somerset in the reign of Edward VI between historians such as A. F. Pollard and M.L. Bush, or the views on Stalin's Russia, has become of particular interesting to me and something which has been developed during my A Levels.

Besides reading, I enjoy playing guitar and whilst I have not yet played in a band, I hope to find likeminded individuals at university. Of my hobbies, I am most interested in cricket, playing all matches for one of the school teams. This has led to me joining a club for the upcoming season and I hope that I will be able to continue this passion at university. I have also been an avid member of the Air Training Corps, quickly attaining the rank of Cadet Sergeant. Soon I became the most senior NCO on the squadron, allowing me to represent my wing at an overseas camp at in Germany. My experiences were manifold, it brought my drive and determination to the fore and the discipline of the ATC has stood me in good stead during my GCSE and A Level revision!

Comment [U10]: Personally, I think this needs a definition of the word history before the statement can be considered.

Comment [U11]: Is that really the case? Is there any specific skill needed for History that is unique to History and not needed for , say, Classics, or Philosophy or Literary Criticism or Politics etc?

Comment [U12]: It's not clear how this reference contributes to persuading an admissions tutor of the applicant's suitability to study History. Anything not contributing should be removed. It may be possible to make it contribute if, for instance, the applicant is thinking that they will probably pursue a legal career but would find studying Law at undergraduate level less personally rewarding than continuing their love affair with History so they're applying for History now, aware that a Law conversion course provides an opportunity to enter that career subsequently. Having said that, for Oxbridge, it might be better to avoid any suggestion that the applicant is open to the idea of not doing their chosen subject for the rest of their life.

Comment [U13]: "Wished to study" suggests the applicant no longer wishes to do so – I'm sure this is unintentional and should be corrected in proof reading. Also if these topics 'encapsulate' the applicant's interest in history, it sounds like they wouldn't be interested in other periods and yet they will struggle to entirely avoid them in any History syllabus. This needs rephrasing to indicate that this is what currently most fascinates the applicant but with no suggestion that any other period is excluded from some level of interest.

Comment [U14]: This is good, powerful stuff. The statement should form a logical narrative so I would suggest this ought to be the first or second paragraph but no later than that.

Comment [U15]: Avoid close repetition if possible – no need for 'fabulous' and 'fabulously' so close together. This should be picked up in proof reading.

Comment [U16]: It's just a personal thing (and remember I am a physicist) but I'm surprised that you can visit Versailles and only associate it with WW1 and make no reference to the French Revolution. The treaty could have been signed anywhere but the opulence of the palace and gardens was fundamentally symptomatic of the spur to revolution, not only in France but across Europe in the 18th and 19th centuries.

Comment [U17]: This is about the right balance between academic and non-academic stuff. Oxbridge tutors won't be bothered by it but it will be a positive for some other universities.

Chemistry personal statement A

I am currently studying A Levels in Maths, Further Maths, Chemistry, Physics and General Studies, and studied Music to AS Level. The workload for 6 AS Levels has been quite high, and my ability to cope with this busy schedule shows I am able to cope well under pressure. This was also reflected in my achievement of 99% in my AS Physics results, 98% in AS Chemistry, full marks in General Studies and over 90% in what was effectively a Maths A Level course. Currently I am particularly interested in Chemistry, as I enjoy discovering more about the individual characteristics of each element, for example the extremely reactive nature of the gases fluorine and chlorine and the versatile nature of carbon, in the compounds it can form and the allotropes it exists in.

My achievement in these subjects has been marked by receiving certificates of achievement in Further Maths, Chemistry and Physics. In Maths I received a silver award in the UK Senior Maths Challenge shortly into the Maths course. I was also a member of my college team who competed in a national Maths contest in Birmingham.

While at school, my responsibility was shown by my position of steward, a post similar to a prefect, in my final year. At college I have acted as a guide on the college open evenings and at a Year 10 Sampling Day. For my work experience at high school I worked in a pharmacy. From this I was able to develop my inter-personal skills as well as having some opportunity to observe how a pharmacy operates.

At school I was a member of several bands and at college I have joined the Brass Group and the band, where I play the trombone. I am also a member of the Eccleston Brass Band which rehearses twice weekly and Lancashire Students' Concert Band, a prestigious ensemble. These activities give me the chance to work as part of a team and to experience the enjoyment of making music, which I also was able to experience last year in an AS Music course, in which I achieved a B grade. For relaxation I play the piano, in which I have recently passed my Grade 7.

I aim to work hard in my degree course and consequently to discover which field of science I develop most flair and ability. Following this I aim to go into a job related to science, possibly in research. So far my chief interest is in theoretical work, although I am also keen to research through experiments and develop my practical skills.

Comment [U18]: This isn't very good – there is relatively little discussion of chemistry. Apart from the final statement that the applicant doesn't like practicals, there's almost no discussion of which aspects of chemistry most excite the applicant and what they have done to pursue their interest beyond the A Level syllabus.

Comment [U19]: This information is available elsewhere in the application so it should be omitted here.

Comment [U20]: This is potentially valid information to include, although it works better appearing in the school/college reference since that is a more reliable source.

Comment [U21]: Motivation should always come first, however keen the applicant may be to show off.

Comment [U22]: There is potential to relate this to chemistry. If possible, that should be done.

Comment [U23]: The applicant is applying for chemistry, which pretty much fixes the field of science they're going to develop in.

Chemistry personal statement B

Chemistry is in my opinion the most important of the sciences today. As a science of matter and its properties, Chemistry can be applied to almost any situation from forensics through medicine to environmental sustainability. It is this practical side of Chemistry that has made me want to study it at university. I am particularly interested in Organic Chemistry and I enjoy working out the outcomes of various reactions and naming the products with systematic nomenclature. Another aspect of Chemistry that I am interested in is Quantum Chemistry which has a strong overlap with some of my favourite modules of Physics. I am drawn to its often theoretical and experimental nature.

My studies in Geography and World Development have stimulated an interest in Green Chemistry. I feel that this is very important due to climate change and other environmental issues that affect us. Research in making processes more sustainable and less harmful to the environment is crucial to contributing to the future of the planet.

I have gained the position of subject ambassador for Chemistry; which involves representing the Chemistry department during open evenings and helping out fellow classmates with their work. Within the open days I have demonstrated experiments to future students and their parents, helping them to understand the content of the course and whether they should take Chemistry as an A Level subject. I have also been nominated by my school for the University of Oxford chemist of the year award, due to my attitude and achievements. During my ISAs I demonstrated a strong practical ability and achieved full marks for my practical skills. This reflects my ability to work independently and my competence at handling lab apparatus. I also volunteer to help out in a chemistry lesson once a week; this is an excellent opportunity to help others and put my knowledge to practical use.

I am reading "The Problems of Chemistry" by W. Graham Richards and "The Consumers Good Chemical Guide" by John Emsley both of which have stimulated my interest in practical applications of Chemistry. Another book "Chemistry: Facts, Patterns and Principles" by W.R. Kneen adds to my general knowledge of Chemistry. I have also joined the Royal Society of Chemistry. My studies in Maths and Physics both provide me with subject matter, problem solving and calculating skills that support my primary interest in Chemistry.

I have excelled at all of my chosen subjects and have demonstrated a commitment and ability to work above the average level in each one. For example during my GCSEs I was picked as one of the top ten geographers in my year to take an AS in World Development a year early. While taking my A2 in World Development last year I researched and wrote a report on a local wind farm. This project was a good opportunity to work on my own initiative and helped me develop important communication and analysis skills. I also represented Kenya in a Model UN General Assembly conference where I learned about other cultures and gained an insight into world politics.

Outside school I have an enthusiasm for the sport of dog agility. My dogs and I have won many competitions and we have competed at Crufts and other major events. I also train and work with dogs for other people. This is a considerable responsibility, but one that I enjoy. I also have experience caring for a disabled child which has made me more mature. In common with my friends, I enjoy music and travel. I have played the drums in several bands and have backpacked through a number of countries, including Brazil, Peru and Thailand. I hope to take advantage of the social opportunities at university as well as the academic ones.

In summary, my skills and experiences make me well suited to study Chemistry at university. I intend to tackle the course with the same determination and interest that I have shown to date and to make a significant contribution during my studies.

Comment [U24]: Overall, this looks like a very good personal statement – a strong emphasis on the subject and concrete examples given of specific interests and activities driven by and evidencing enthusiasm.

Comment [U25]: This is much better than the preceding statement and manages to include more useful information in the first paragraph than the previous one managed in the whole statement.

Comment [U26]: If the school are going to mention this in their reference then there's no need to include it here unless the applicant can add something to the basic information. Possibly, 'I was really pleased to be nominated by the school etc since the nominees get to visit a world-class research laboratory (or whatever)'

Comment [U27]: Not sure what these are but maybe chemistry tutors would.

Comment [U28]: Some admissions tutors might read this as a warning that the applicant could become a bit of a party animal to the detriment of their studies. If it doesn't contribute to the goal of explaining and evidencing why the application should be accepted, leave it out.

Chemistry personal statement C

Having been raised by a paramedic and a pharmaceutical rep, I think my interest in science was probably inevitable. It's a discipline that I've been exposed to all my life, and a natural thirst for knowledge drives me forward through it. My favourite branch of science has always been Chemistry. I've found it a subject that comes naturally to me, something that appeals to my sense of logic. I enjoy the subject so much that A Level Chemistry is as much for my own pleasure as it is relevant to what I want to do in later life.

Comment [U29]: The balance and structure here can be improved. The statement flits between chemistry and extra-curricular activities and back again, with too high a proportion given over to extra-curriculars even for places like Durham. It would be more coherent if all the discussion about chemistry came first, followed by the outline of the extracurricular activities.

That vision I have of what I want to do is broad, perhaps, but definite. A pharmaceutical lab seems to me the ideal environment to be practical, looking for the means to help what could be thousands of people in their daily lives.

Comment [U30]: Good but I immediately want to ask why the applicant isn't apply for Pharmacology as a degree subject. This could be anticipated by adding a sentence to the effect that Chemistry and is fundamental and leaves more options open.

I'd like to think that I'm dedicated, hard-working and capable while also staying friendly and fun. Being a Prefect for the school, as well as assisting in Chemistry classes lower down the school, is giving me an opportunity to be responsible for others as well as myself. I am a member of both the Charity and Treasury Committees, and these are also giving me a good understanding of team dynamics and how to work well with others, expanding on my experience with teams within the school. As captain of the Top of the Bench Chemistry team I was privileged to attend the regional final of the competition, in which our school team took second place. I have also been an active member of the Debating Club for five years now, and this year will compete in both the ESU Mace and Donald Dewar competitions. Although this year is proving to be an extremely busy one, I have been sure to make time for my friends also, because the important people in my life are the most valuable things I have.

I enjoy the performance arts, both on and off stage. I have attended the Perth Youth Theatre for three years and with them have performed several plays to a paying audience, as well as being a member of Auchterarder's highly successful Senior Choir. Out of the spotlight I've become interested in Lighting Design, having been introduced to it in Drama, and have taken on the role of providing lighting for the school's upcoming 'Battle Of The Bands' event.

Outside school I took a ten-week course in Forensic Science at Edinburgh University last year, largely as a matter of interest. As this is such popular subject matter on television programs I elected to see what really goes on. It was a valuable experience, giving me insight not only into the subject but the way that university courses and tutorials are taught.

Since picking up Art as a subject this year I've really started to get into it as a hobby. I enjoy drawing, and am gradually getting more comfortable with painting. My main passion in my free time, however, is creative writing. It only became a real hobby for me after I was awarded Second Prize in Scotland for the Pushkin Prizes, and has stuck with me ever since. The rest of my time I spend with friends or reading, I've never been keen on the old classics, but my taste in books is pretty eclectic. I enjoy the nineteenth and twentieth century Russian authors, but equally the writing of Steven King and Robin Cook.

Comment [U31]: For Oxbridge, this is a dangerous statement – the applicant's main passion in their free time should be chemistry.

The most important thing to me this year, however, hobbies aside, is completing my A Levels to a high standard. This is the challenge I have taken on, and one I intend to give my all.