Preparing and writing a personal statement for further study

This document explains why you might need to write a personal statement, how to prepare your statement and some examples for postgraduate courses.

When will you be asked to submit a personal statement?
You will usually be asked to prepare and submit a personal statement as part of an application for a taught postgraduate course such as a masters or Postgraduate Certificate in Education (PGCE) as well as for a research degree such as an MRes, MPhil or PhD.

What is a personal statement?
It is one of the ways in which those offering the course will begin to judge your commitment to your chosen area of study. For some courses it will be one of the main methods used, while others may use it as a preliminary assessment of suitability and will then ask you to attend an interview or other assessment activity.

Most application forms will indicate what they would like you to concentrate on, for example, The University of Nottingham postgraduate application states “Please use this space to summarise your academic interests and reasons for choosing your intended course of study.”

For research applicants: “Please provide a brief outline of your proposed research topic or interests. If you have a detailed research proposal (not more than two pages) this may be attached.”

Some courses, particularly ones in teaching, will set out specific ways in which they want you to complete the statement. To begin your research and to find out more about teaching personal statements, use our website: www.nottingham.ac.uk/careers/students/furtherstudy

A personal statement is one of the ways in which those offering a course will begin to judge your commitment to your chosen area of study.

Preparing to write a personal statement
Before writing any personal statement you must consider and research:
• Why you want to undertake postgraduate study
• Your reasons for wanting to study at a particular university
• The courses available to you and decide which you are most interested in and why
• The elements of the course which are of particular interest to you, for example, a placement opportunity offering employment-related or practical experience, specialist modules or a specific research opportunity
• The previous practical or academic experience you may have already undertaken which either indicates your interest in the area of study and/or the career it may lead to
• The differences there will be between undergraduate and postgraduate study. This is particularly important if you are considering a professional training course, research masters or PhD
• What skills you have that will enable you to make this transition and be successful in your chosen course or research area

Before writing your personal statement, use the points above as a checklist. Try to have at least two or three comments or points for each question. For teaching statements specific tips are available from the Department for Education https://getintoteaching.education.gov.uk/plan-my-application
Other useful points to remember

**Length**
This may vary from one page of A4 to a text box in an application form with an instruction which allows you to continue on a separate sheet or a word limit of between 300 to 500 words. Or, for teacher training applications, a specific number of characters.

**Audience**
A course or admissions tutor will probably read your statement to check that you meet any eligibility criteria and also to assess whether or not you will be awarded a place or called for an interview, if there are more applicants than places available. Make sure the vocabulary and language style you use are appropriate for this audience.

**Rules and guidelines**
Some courses will set out areas they wish you to address in the statement, the number of words or pages allowed. They may also state whether or not you can include other supporting documents, for example, a CV.

Make sure you clearly address all the areas they want you to cover.

Stick to any rules on length and word limits, as well as supporting documents. Your application may be rejected because of your inability to follow the limits set or the assessors may discard the additional text or documents you have included.

**Time**
Preparing and writing a good personal statement takes time. You will probably need to allow time to prepare a first draft, ideally receive some feedback on it and then finalise your statement. A rushed statement stands less chance of being successful.

If you are applying to several different courses, then you will need to prepare a separate statement for each course, except where your application is made via a central portal such as for teaching or law, etc.

**Written style**
Be factual, concise and positive. Make sure your grammar and spelling are accurate. Remember to focus on the experiences and interests that you bring to the course and how they will help you to study successfully. Avoid a simple repetition of statements made in the course publicity as this gives no indication of your capacity to think critically; a skill you will need to use in any postgraduate programme.

Good and bad examples – taught masters courses

**Application for a marketing course**
“I am really interested in doing a postgraduate marketing course as I hope to make this my career. I think your course offers me the opportunity to learn a great deal about marketing and will help me to get a good job in this field.”

This example is far too vague and only states what the applicant will gain from the course. It shows no evidence of research into the course or potential career. Now read a more focused and better researched statement:

“I am very committed to a career in marketing and have been to several presentations on this career area and have undertaken a period of work experience in a small marketing agency. As a result, I have decided that undertaking a postgraduate marketing course would be an essential next step towards my career ambition. I am particularly interested in the course offered at Littleton University as it combines practical placements in both marketing agencies and company departments with the theoretical study of the principles of marketing. I would also value being able to begin to work towards the Chartered Institute of Marketing qualification offered by the course.”

If you are applying to several different courses then you will need to prepare a separate statement for each course.
Application for an engineering masters

I am currently studying for a BEng in Electrical and Electronic Engineering and would like to continue onto a masters course. I have enjoyed my undergraduate course and want to specialise further in the areas of my course that I have enjoyed the most. I have looked at a number of different courses and have made applications for several different ones as I am not yet totally sure of which area of electronic engineering I would like to follow more closely…"

Although the first sentence reads reasonably well as a general opening statement, the remainder of this example is poor. It would read to the course tutor as a potential risk to offer a place to someone who had not even decided which area of study they wanted to specialise in and why.

"I am currently studying for a BEng Electrical and Electronic Engineering. I have particularly enjoyed my final year module in electronic communications technology and am about to begin my final year research project in this area. My interest has also been stimulated by attending lectures delivered by industrialists, for example, Richard Smith, a design and development engineer, working for MobPhones Worldwide Ltd. From listening to these lectures, I realised that I would like to study communications technology in more depth and to be able to eventually undertake research in this fascinating field..."

PhD applications

The requirements for PhD applications may vary and are dependent on the academic discipline but at some stage you will need to complete an application form and to make some statement about your proposed research area, for some this will mean submitting an in-depth research proposal. For all PhD applications, you should contact potential supervisors. Dependent on the number of applicants and the research area, the application process can be very competitive. You should always research the options available to you, consider what a PhD is really like and why you want to embark on one. What relevant interests, skills and experiences underpin your application?

You will find useful information about the application process and examples of research proposals in the following books.

Ebook: www.jobs.ac.uk/careers-advice/ebooks-and-toolkits/should-i-do-a- phd

The Postgraduate’s Companion, Chapter 7, “Writing a Research Proposal, Securing an Offer and Applying for Funding” – Edited by Gerard Hall and Jo Longman.

The PhD Application Handbook, Chapter 6, “Finding the Right Research Project” – Peter J. Bentley

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International applications

If you are making an application to study outside the UK, make sure you take time to understand the application process. The documents and forms you may need to supply will vary. For example, a student applying for a course in France needs to prepare a three page statement addressing a series of questions relating to academic and intellectual ability as well as personal reasons and understanding of the nature of the course.

If you are applying to study in the USA, you should ideally begin the process at least 18 months prior to the course starting. A good place for information is www.fullbright.org.uk/study-in-the-usa/postgraduate-study

Course providers will always follow the same underlying principles with applications by reviewing what you have written to see if you are suitable for the programme of study you have chosen.

For more information on applying for courses overseas, use the following resources:

• Prospects website - provides country specific information on postgraduate study www.prospects.ac.uk click on ‘postgraduate study’ and then ‘studying abroad’.
• The Careers and Employability Service webpages: www.nottingham.ac.uk/careers/students/furtherstudy/findingcourses.aspx

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