

Writing a UCAS reference

What is a UCAS reference?

It is an opportunity to provide universities and colleges with an informed and academic assessment of an applicant's suitability for further study.

How will the reference be used?

Universities and colleges will review the reference along with other information provided on the application, to decide whether to make an offer.

Admissions staff rely on the reference to provide an honest account of an applicant's potential, to help them distinguish between different applicants.

What should be included in the reference?

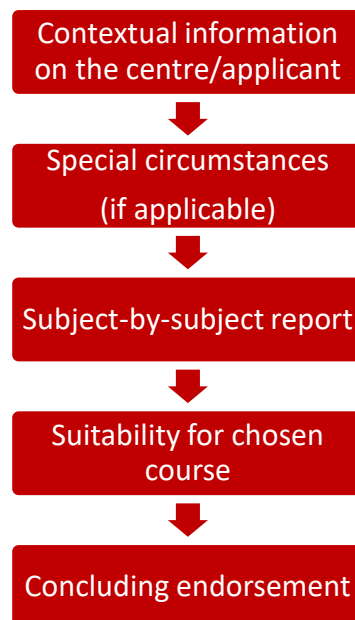
References, like personal statements, will vary depending on the applicant and their personal situation. However, references should include evidence of:

- academic performance – existing performance and overall potential
- suitability, motivation, or commitment towards the chosen course or profession
- specific and relevant skills and qualities
- current or past achievements in particular subject areas
- relevant work experience or enrichment activities
- any factors that may affect performance

The reference provides an opportunity to open dialogue to explore the applicant's profile further.

Find out more about references at www.ucas.com/advisers/references.

A successful reference model:



References and qualification reform

In the changing qualification landscape, the reference will play an increasingly important role in providing universities and colleges with contextual information on the applicant, including access qualification programmes. However, space in the reference is limited, and the focus should always be on the applicant's suitability for the course(s) to which they have applied.

In the report **Unpacking qualification reform**, UCAS recommended that schools and colleges create a web page that details their qualification offering. The URL to this page can be inserted into the reference, to give valuable additional information to providers about the school or college.

For more guidance on what to include, SPA's National Expert Think Tank (NETT) on curriculum and qualification reform has created **Guidance for school and college references – what HEPs would like to know**.

Brief contextual information

- Information may relate to the curriculum, environment, or policies that could affect learning and achievement.
- See the document **Guidance for school and college references – what HEPs would like to know** for more information.
- Universities and colleges would urge you to inform them of any changes to the applicant's profile or circumstances after they've applied.

Special circumstances

- Cover this early to contextualise the application, and prevent concerns.
- Explain anything that may affect performance, e.g. staffing problems, personal circumstances, or illness. Be specific about the nature and length of impact.
- Explain any discrepancies – for example, if predicted grades are higher than past academic performance might suggest.

Subject reports

- Ensure subject reports are a profile of performance and potential.
- Provide concrete evidence, refer to specific grades, assessments, or peer comparison.
- Use a separate paragraph for each subject.
- Cover the most relevant subject first and in the most detail. For BTECs, International Baccalaureate, etc., cover the most relevant units or subjects to the chosen course.
- Differentiate levels of achievement and potential – for example, exemplary versus high achiever.

Suitability for chosen course

- Give details of an applicant's preparedness for the chosen course or vocation.
- Evidence critical engagement with the course that goes further than curriculum study.
- Evidence qualities and skills demonstrated through relevant extracurricular study, work experience, or other achievements and interests – for example, their maturity, emotional intelligence, and independence.

Final endorsement

- Universities and colleges are looking for a professional assessment of the applicant's readiness for higher education.
- Try to bring the information together, to explain why you as a referee or centre are happy to support the application.
- Indicate how the applicant might benefit from higher education.
- Avoid trailing off or using generic recommendations.

Top tips

1. The reference should add value to the application, working in conjunction with the personal statement.
2. Use clear and concise plain English.
3. Ensure applicant details, such as name and gender, are consistent and correct.
4. Ensure a different person approves the reference, as they may spot mistakes – e.g. wrong reference, incorrect pronouns, or repeated endorsements.
5. Be as positive as you can without jeopardising credibility or professional integrity.
6. Provide a unified voice and style. If tutors all refer to the same qualities or skills, summarise these into one paragraph, to prevent repetition. For example, 'all Jane's tutors agree that...'
7. Do not repeat information covered in the personal statement. However, if an applicant has not given sufficient emphasis, you could expand on the point. For example, 'in his statement, John says xxxx, but I do not think he goes far enough and xxxx'.
8. Including specific evidence of achievement is always better than general comments.
9. Avoid ambiguity – for example, 'an experience she found challenging...' – does this mean a positive experience that stretched her, or one she found difficult to cope with?
10. Ensure enough time is scheduled to collect and collate references, to meet deadlines.

Writing a UCAS personal statement

What is a UCAS personal statement?

This is the only part of the application an individual has complete control over. It is their chance to make themselves stand out and add value to their application.

How will universities and colleges use the personal statement?

Universities and colleges will review the personal statement along with other information on the application, to decide whether to make an offer.

Admissions staff rely on the personal statement as a differentiation tool to help them distinguish between different applicants who may have a similar academic profile.

'With many highly qualified students applying to university, the personal statement is crucial in helping us identify students with the greatest merit and aptitude for our courses.'

University of Manchester

What should be included in the personal statement?

When reviewing personal statements, admissions tutors are looking for:

- an understanding of the course
- good numeracy and literacy
- research skills
- time management skills
- enthusiasm beyond the syllabus
- extracurricular reading and research
- reflective thinking
- independent study skills
- self-awareness
- motivation and commitment

Key points to pass on

- A maximum of 4,000 characters or 47 lines can be used.
- The preview in Apply will show the statement as it will appear to the applicant's chosen universities or colleges.
- There is no spelling or grammar check. UCAS advises applicants to work on their statement outside Apply (e.g. in Word), then paste the final draft into Apply and preview it to see if any amendments are needed.
- Universities and colleges that interview may base their questions on what is written in the personal statement.

Preparing your personal statement

- Universities and colleges will provide details on their website of what they are looking for in the personal statement.
- Start research early, and keep notes on the desirable skills and qualities detailed in the course profile.
- Ensure the applicant uses their research to help structure the personal statement.
- Start the first draft of the personal statement early, at the end of Year 12 and/or across the summer holidays, to allow time for redrafts.

One personal statement for all choices

- Although applicants can have up to five different choices, there is only one personal statement.
- Having a diverse range of choices will make it difficult to write an effective personal statement, as there will not be enough commonalities.
- If applying for joint subject courses, an applicant must try to cover both subjects in the personal statement.

Find further information on personal statements at www.ucas.com/personalstatement.

The ABC rule

Ensure each point an applicant makes in their personal statement follows the ABC rule:

- **Activity or achievement** – provide specific evidence of what they've done.
- **Benefit** – what transferable skills have they gained?
- **Course** – how will this prepare them for the course?

The 'so what?' test

Could an admissions tutor say 'so what?' to anything written in the personal statement? If so, work on it more, or consider if it needs to be included.

- Sentences that are too convoluted should be avoided – use connectives to link sentences effectively.
- Avoid repetition of information or words, e.g. 'interesting' or 'passionate'.
- Applicants should demonstrate they have a good vocabulary. However, they should not try to use unfamiliar words or phrases.
- Do not start every sentence with 'I', and avoid bland generalities – e.g. 'I like football'.
- The statement shouldn't read like a list – ensure evidence is provided.
- Avoid inappropriate humour, the overuse of quotes, and non sequiturs.
- Have a powerful conclusion – try not to just drift off or end too abruptly.
- Applicants do not want to come across as arrogant. So, if there is boasting to be done, it would be better if it comes from the referee.

Similarity detection

- Remember, UCAS checks every single personal statement by using plagiarism software to try to prevent the use of copied material.
- The personal statement must be the applicant's own work.
- If copied material is detected, universities and colleges are advised.

Course choices and content

- Universities and colleges want to understand the connection and commitment to the subject chosen.
- For purely academic courses, they normally expect around 80% of the statement to relate to the course.
- For more vocationally aligned courses, applicants need to explain how they know the vocation is right for them, and what qualities they possess that will make them suitable for it.

Style

- Personal statements should be written in clear and concise English.
- Structure paragraphs to ensure the personal statement is easy to read.

The ten most common opening lines used in personal statements during the 2015 application cycle were:

1. From a young age, I have (always) been [interested in/fascinated by]...
2. For as long as I can remember, I have...
3. I am applying for this course because...
4. I have always been interested in...
5. Throughout my life, I have always enjoyed...
6. Reflecting on my educational experiences...
7. Nursing is a very challenging and demanding [career/course]...
8. Academically, I have always been...
9. I have always wanted to pursue a career in...
10. I have always been passionate about...