

Same Story, New Questions: Making Sense of the New UCAS Personal Statement

What we've learned from the first cycle and how to guide students efficiently and authentically

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Agenda

- Clarify what's changed in the new UCAS personal statement and what remains the same
- Share admissions insights and lessons from the first cycle
- Address common challenges and misconceptions
- Equip counselors with practical strategies and activities to guide students effectively



Same Story, New Questions

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Changes to the UCAS Personal Statement


Free-form
Essay 

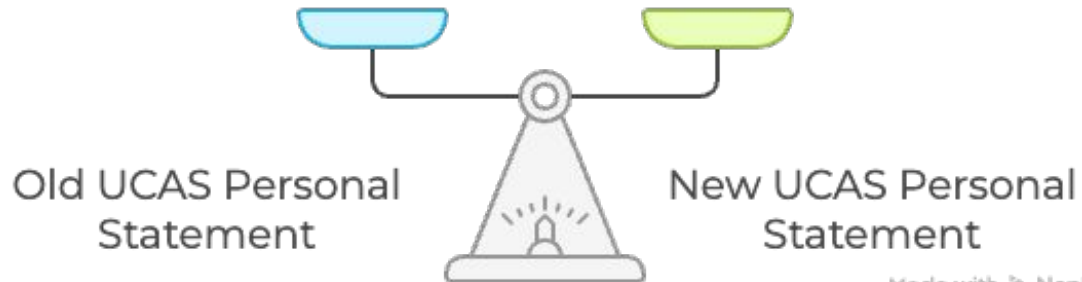
No Prompts 

4000
characters 

 Structured
Responses

 3 Guiding
Questions

 4000
characters



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Activity I

What else have you done to prepare outside of education?

Emphasizes extracurricular activities and personal growth.



How have your qualifications and studies prepared you?

Highlights academic achievements and relevant coursework.

Why do you want to study this course or subject?

Focuses on motivation and passion for the chosen field.

In groups of 3–4, sort the paragraphs based on which UCAS question they best answer.



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What Did You Notice?

- ★ Which paragraphs were easiest to match with a question and why?
- ★ Which paragraphs were harder to place? What made them unclear?



Answer Key

Old	New
Orange, Pink, Neon Yellow, Blue	Green, Purple, Salmon, Yellow
P1: top left corner	P1: top left corner
P2: top right corner	P2: top right corner
P3: whole	P3: whole

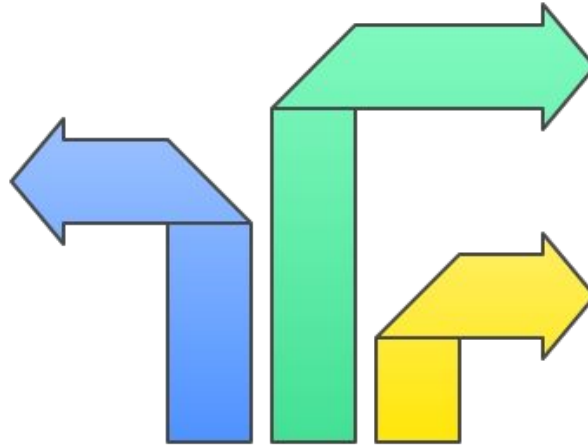


UCAS Changed the Structure, Not the Purpose

How to best answer UCAS questions?

Reflection

Explain what was learned from experiences to show personal growth.



Readiness

Show preparation through studies and activities.

Academic Fit

Demonstrate genuine interest and understanding of the chosen subject.

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★ ***The new format guides how you write – but universities are still looking for the same things.***



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University Perspective



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Laura: Introduction to my role at St Andrews

Assistant Director of Admissions

- 1) **Operational and Strategic Leadership:** Leads admissions operations and strategy to shape a positive applicant journey and manage recruitment teams effectively.
- 2) **Admissions Decision Oversight:** Ensures accuracy, fairness, and transparency in decision-making across undergraduate and postgraduate admissions.
- 3) **Collaboration and Communication:** Works with academic schools and leadership to coordinate recruitment, communications, and policy development.
- 4) **Data Analysis and Strategic Planning:** Analyzes admissions data and market trends to inform admissions strategies and improve processes.



Laura: Our Admissions process

- **Selective Admissions Model**

We operate a centralised process for overseas admissions, designed to ensure fairness, consistency, and academic excellence across all programmes, our academic Schools are still very much involved.

- **Subject Competitiveness Varies**

Some academic areas attract significantly higher demand, resulting in more competitive selection thresholds and deeper scrutiny of applicants.

- **Holistic Application Review**

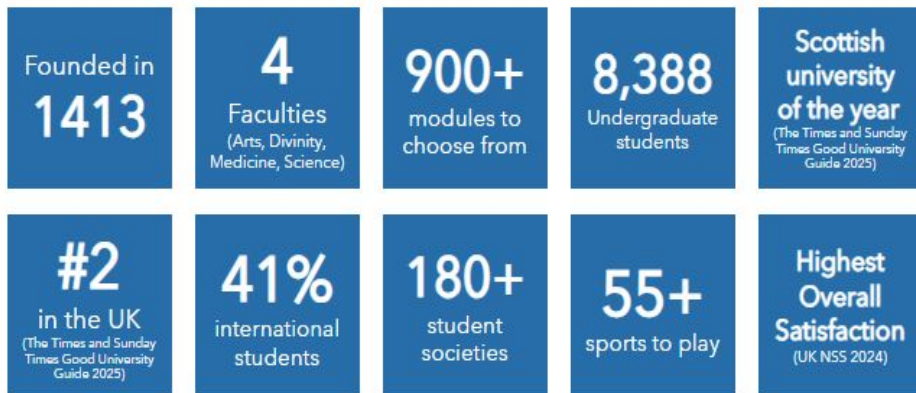
Every application is evaluated in context. We consider academic achievement, educational background, personal statement quality, and indicators of potential, rather than relying solely on grades.

- **Personal Statement as a Key Component**

The personal statement offers insight into motivation, subject engagement, and readiness for study. It plays an important role in differentiating strong applicants with similar academic profiles.

- **Advantages of Being a Small Institution**

Our size enables personalised evaluation, strong collaboration between Admissions and academic Schools, and a more applicant-centred experience throughout the applicant journey.



Laura: Practical Advice

Current developments:

Our module catalogue:

Code	Module name	Credits
Between 90 and 120 credits from Module List: IR3000 - IR3999 AND		
Between 0 and 30 credits from Module List: IR4100 - IR4999 (excluding IR4794 - IR4795), SD4223		
IR4401	Communication in International Relations	15
IR4514	Global Public Policy	30
IR4516	The International Relations of Sub-Saharan Africa	30
IR4519	Politics and Development in Southeast Asia	30
IR4522	Critical Approaches to International Security	30
IR4523	The Aftermath of the Wars: Liberal Dilemmas	30
IR4530	Genocide	30
IR4532	The Cultural Politics of Human Rights	30
IR4538	Identities, Belonging and Others	30
IR4540	The Changing Character of War	30
IR4542	Gender and Terrorism	30
IR4543	Activism and Resistance	30
IR4544	Wars and Peace in the Caucasus	30
IR4545	Indian Foreign Policy	30
IR4550	Art and War	30
IR4553	Europe, America and the Transatlantic	30
IR4555	Music, Politics and International Relations	30
IR4563	Rebels, Terrorists, Militias: The Comparative Analysis of Armed Groups	30
IR4566	Comparative regionalism	30
IR4570	Everyday Life and Global Politics	30
IR4571	Conflict and intervention in world politics	30
IR4574	Understanding Terrorism	30
IR4575	Queer IR, Queering Global Politics	30
IR4576	The Psychology of Motives in Foreign Policy Analysis	30
IR4577	Order and Crisis in World Politics	30
IR4601	Political Order and Violence in the Middle East	30
IR4602	International Relations of the Middle East	30
IR4604	Political Islam and International Relations	30
IR4607	Britain and Iraq 1914-2004	30

Specialism options

International Relations MA (Hons) 2021 entry

The MA (Hons) in International Relations will teach you to explore issues such as the origins of war and peace, the making of foreign policy, trade regimes, international terrorism, human rights, international law, and the interaction of political and economic development.

Students will develop the skills to:

- assess developments in the international system and specific geographical regions
- analyse the ways in which states relate to other international actors
- develop normative theories that relate the world as it is to the world as it might be.

Find the common themes:

International Terrorism

Human Rights

War and Peace

Foreign Policy

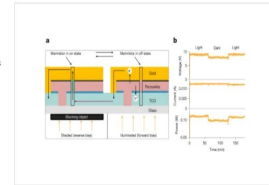
International Law

Latest Reviews & Analysis >

Redirecting current solves a shadowy problem faced by perovskite solar cells

Solar modules made from perovskite materials have a stability issue that arises when they are placed in partial shade. This long-standing problem has now been addressed by integrating an electronic component called a memristor into the solar cell.

Research Briefing 25 Mar 2026



Long-distance quantum link generates entanglement faster than it is lost

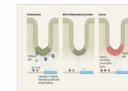
Ronald Hanson & Tracy Northup
News & Views 25 Mar 2026

Dogs have deep genetic roots in ice-age Europe

Lauren M. Henneley & Mikkel-Holger S. Sinding
News & Views 25 Mar 2026

Pilot project paves way to storing CO₂ underground as minerals in arid countries

Juliane Weber
News & Views 25 Mar 2026



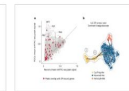
Remembrance of inflammations past

Chronic inflammation increases the risk of colon cancer. This inflammation drives epigenetic changes in the nucleus of stem cells that promote tumour formation.



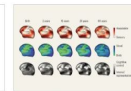
Anticancer antibodies can evolve to cause autoimmune brain disease

A model of breast cancer that expresses NMDA receptors — combine that with a vaccination



A cancer-promoting fusion protein acts during embryonic brain development

ZFTA-BEHA is the cancer-promoting protein product of a gene fusion. Analysis of accessible chromatin in the



Charting the human brain's lifelong functional organization

Neuroscientists have created a continuous atlas showing how patterns of functional connectivity between brain regions change from



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Laura: What to include and what to avoid



- Reading – as part of current study and anything outside of that



- Any independent study to expand knowledge – short online courses, Ted Talks etc



- Summer Schools/Projects run by HE institutions



- Work Experience and Internships



- School Projects and Competitions



- Volunteering and Community Work
- Field trips and school visits

AVOID!

- Lack of in-depth awareness or lack of focus on subject
- Over commitment to one institution
- Referencing by name or use of subject title not used by all course choices.
- Ignoring one subject if joint application.
 - You need two decisions not just one!
- Unsubstantiated claims!
- Jokes or irrelevant stories
- Don't repeat material elsewhere on the application form
- Padding the text to fill the space
- Not using all the space
- Avoid lists (e.g. of unrelated hobbies or achievements)
- Think of it as just a formality before starting university

Laura: Reflections on the new statement

- New format functions much like the old version; we continue to assess it in the same holistic, academically focused way.
- Although the questions are more targeted, most statements contain the same core information as before.
- Quality remains exceptionally high, with applicants still demonstrating strong motivation and academic readiness.
- **Strengths:** Responses can be more directly aligned to what we're looking for, due to clearer prompts guiding students toward academic motivation and preparation.
- **Challenges:**
 - **Question 2** sometimes encourages students to describe current school subjects, often without linking them to the subject they want to study.
 - **Question 3** leads students to focus on extra-curricular activities, again with limited relevance to their chosen degree. THINK skills relevant to chosen degree.



Laura: A Personal Statement Walkthrough

Personal statement

✕ Highlight

Why do you want to study this course or subject?

My fascination for Chemistry was catalysed by an exothermic event in my kitchen. The explosion caused the organic acids from the tomatoes and onions to combine, driving a cascade of reactions, from the Maillard browning of sugars and amino acids to the chaotic entropy that coated my kitchen walls. What began as a messy accident has grown into a deep desire to understand the chemistry underpinning the world around me. I am fascinated by how chemical principles explain everything from the food we cook to the materials we use. As my curiosity deepened, I became captivated by how these principles are applied beyond the lab. Reading Solen and Harb's Introduction to Chemical Engineering, was instrumental in this pivot. I was intrigued by the problem-solving approach that covered mass and energy balances across a multi-unit system, such as a distillation column linked to a reactor. Chemistry was no longer just about reactions, but an engineering discipline focused on systems thinking, where creative mathematical modelling is applied to optimise complex processes and achieve maximum output under economic and safety constraints.

How have your qualifications and studies helped you to prepare for this course or subject?

My Chemistry IA investigated how varying the molar ratio of ethanol to ethanoic acid affects equilibrium yield. While collecting data, everything appeared to go smoothly, but when analysing my results, the calculated yield exceeded 100%. This forced a rigorous re-evaluation of my volumetric precision, the assumptions regarding equilibrium time, and the underlying theoretical method. By challenging my reasoning, I learnt that experimental error is an inevitable part of scientific investigations, as in engineering, and that setbacks can be transformed into learning opportunities. What could have been a failed experiment instead gave me confidence to tackle unexpected results. In my Maths IA I modelled a rollercoaster's curvature and acceleration to assess passenger safety, introducing me to the type of mathematical thinking used in engineering design. Calculus and differential equations illuminated the precision of Maths in systems where precise parameter adjustment is critical for safety. Understanding that a deep mathematical understanding is critical in engineering, I am completing a Maths Boot Camp for Engineers for incoming graduate students. By mastering multivariable calculus, differential equations and algebra, I have not only solidified my Maths skills but equipped myself to apply these tools to model the engineering problems that I will encounter at university.

What else have you done to prepare outside of education, and why are these experiences useful?

As leader of WinSTEM, I helped create a space for girls to bond over science. This has developed my public speaking and organisational skills through our TechTalks, while also deepening my appreciation for global scientific collaboration by interviewing experts from CERN and WIPO. Our fund-raising is paying for the education of six female engineers in Sierra Leone. Joining a student innovation programme run by the Institute for Accessible Technology, I devised the idea of a low-cost ultrasound gel and diagnostic system which was selected for development and later recognised for its impact in accessible healthcare. I evaluated image quality using phantoms to test resolution and depth and helped implement an AI-based tool to analyse echo signals in clinics in Ghana and Kenya. During an internship at Industria Chimica Valenzana, I shadowed engineers specialising in producing tartaric acid sustainably from winemaking by-products. By collaborating and applying my knowledge of solubility and recrystallization, I gained firsthand exposure to the factors that govern industrial production. This experience cemented my desire to study Chemical Engineering. Tying the microscopic world of Chemistry to the macroscopic world we live in enables me to understand the molecular logic that dictates the way things occur. What began as sparks of curiosity in my kitchen has evolved into an ambition to apply chemical engineering principles to effect real-world change.

Bsc (Hons) Chemistry
offer holder.

- Strengths
- Room for improvement
- Holistic assessment is key



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Sorcha: Skills

Personal skills	Transferable skills	Knowledge based
Independence	Communication	Computer programming
Leadership	Teamwork	Playing a musical instrument
Integrity	Organisation	Driving
Patience	Numeracy	Playing a sport
Flexibility	Literacy	Chemical analysis
Compassion	Critical thinking	Speaking a language
Loyalty	Reflection	Graphic design tools
Resilience	Problem solving	First aid
Initiative	Computer literacy	Statistical analysis
Motivation	Attention to detail	Budgeting



Sorcha: What Are We Looking For?



ABLE TO STUDY
INDEPENDENTLY



MOTIVATED AND
HIGH ACHIEVING



INTELLECTUALLY
CAPABLE



CAN CONTRIBUTE TO
UNIVERSITY LIFE



SIGNIFICANT SUBJECT
KNOWLEDGE



POTENTIAL TO
SUCCEED



INTEREST IN
STUDYING
SUBJECT



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Sorcha: From Our Experience

Benefits:

- Allows students to be more concise and not lose characters or time trying to put together an essay
- Gives students a structure to follow so they aren't so overwhelmed by the process
- We've seen quality improvement from students without an essay writing background
- We've seen a reduction of badly selected quotes :D
- Increased efficiency in assessing the statements and drawing out key skills due to reduce waffling

A common misconception:

Many saw the personal statement as a persuasive essay and some feel this opportunity has been taken away, but we were always looking for what the new questions draw out, most of the rest was ignored anyway so wasted characters



Sorcha: A Method Example: ABCs

A ctivity - what did you do?

B enefit –what skills or experience did you gain?

C ourse – how does it relate to your course?

S pecifics – numbers, names and titles



Sorcha: A Method Example: ABCs

A

I led on a fundraising campaign raising £2800 for the rugby team, of which I am an active member, to travel to Scotland to compete in a tournament.

B

This improved my communication and leadership skills, as I gained experience of leading a team of 11 volunteers for 2 weeks.

C

When completing group projects within Business Management I will be able to communicate clearly with a range of people to complete the given task.

S

£2800, rugby, Scotland, 11 volunteers, 2 weeks



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Sorcha: Useful Sentence Starters

- My Fascination with... (if they have a long-standing interest)
- This research demonstrates my... (to show they have done further reading and highlight what they know/have learnt)
- In response I ... (to show how they have overcome a challenge)
- Applying my practical experience ... (utilising any relevant experience in the industry)
- To better prepare for this application... (showing they have worked hard for their application)
- The opportunity to explore...: (If they're excited about a specific aspect of the course)
- Attending... (mentioning any extra learning opportunities they have attended)



Part 2: Student Activities



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Helping Students Write Strong UCAS Responses

★ UCAS Question 1: Why do you want to study this subject?

Focus on **academic motivation (35%)**

- What sparked their interest in the subject? Super-curricular experiences

★ UCAS Question 2: How have your studies prepared you?

Focus on **academic engagement (35%)**

- IB subjects, EE and IA, AP and A-level context specific examples connected to the degree

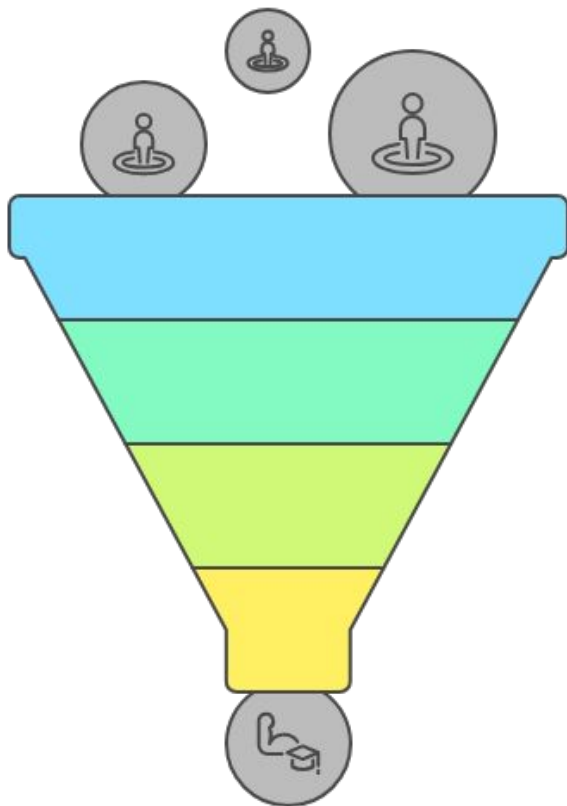
★ UCAS Question 3: What have you done outside school?

Focus on transferable skills **(30%)**

- Academic skills
- Subject-relevant thinking
- Evidence of readiness for university study



Turning Experiences into Strong UCAS answers



What did I do?

Briefly outline what happened



How did I do it?

Detail how it was handled



What did I learn?

State insights or skills gained



Why does it matter

Explain its relevance and impact



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Activity II

Outline Personal Statement

Paragraph 1: Introductory

Point 1: Oxford Royale Academy Law Course

How I did it: Looked at different areas of law such as Tort Law or Criminal Law including the case of Fagan v Metropolitan Police Commissioner and Donoghue v Stevenson

What did I learn: Learned about different principles in the UK system and how they are established through case law, e.g. neighbor principle or actus reus and mens rea

Why does it matter: Insight into law and the legal system which fascinated me; Showed how intricate the law and its application is which I found to be very interesting and inspired me to seek more information



Activity II: From Outline to Statement

Looking at criminal and tort law in a law course at Oxford Royale Academy enabled me to learn about different principles in the English legal system and their establishment through case law. Particularly, Fagan v Metropolitan Police Commissioner developed my comprehension of the intricacy of the law with the establishment of an omission being an actus reus itself. Blyth v Birmingham Waterworks Co and the reasonable man principle furthered this understanding. To gain a greater insight into the way it impacts and structures society and vice versa, due to their mutual relationship, I want to study law at university.



Activity III

What did you do?

How did you do it?

What did you learn?

Why does it matter?

Reading "Why Chemical Reactions Happen" (Keeler & Wothers) led me to further sources which then provided an enhanced understanding of the molecular orbital model. Developing an understanding of this allowed me to explore interesting theories regarding bonding and orbitals such as crystal-field theory. I also enjoy reading about the history and background behind great scientific discoveries. With Rutherford's investigation of the radius of the atom, I was surprised by the elegance and accessibility of his approach: firing alpha particles at the centre of an atom and measuring the distance they penetrated before being repelled by electromagnetic forces. I was so engaged by the brilliant simplicity of this method that I spent the rest of the day replicating his calculations, substituting experimental data with online references.



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Activity III

What did you do?

How did you do it?

What did you learn?

Why does it matter?

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Same, Same, but Different!



Same qualities

Universities are still looking for the same qualities in applicants.

Strong responses

Strong responses still rely on analysis, reflection, and clear course links.

Writing strategies

The same writing strategies (experience → insight → connection) still apply.



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In Sum

- Start with bullet-point reflections
- Use these guiding prompts
 - What did you do?
 - How did you do it?
 - What did you learn?
 - Why does it matter (for this course)?
- Ensure your writing shows
 - **analysis, not just participation**
 - **academic readiness**
 - clear connections between **experience, discipline, and motivation**

★ Remember: “Show don’t tell”



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Resources

- [Ten places to get help](#)
- [UCAS Advice](#)
- [Student-Student advice](#)
- [Personal Statement Lesson Plan](#)
- [Personal Statement Lesson Plan II](#)



Questions?



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Dank u wel

Tack!

ありがとうございます

Gracias

धन्यवाद

شكراً

Thank you

Danke

감사합니다

Dziękuję

Obrigado

Merci

谢谢

Terima kasih

Cảm ơn

ขอบคุณครับ

Go raibh maith agat

Grazie



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