

# The Ultimate Guide to UCAS Changes

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# WHAT'S INSIDE

The UK's University and College Admissions Service (UCAS) has recently launched big changes to the undergraduate admissions process for **2026 entry** and beyond.

Over the past decade, we've been running [academic summer schools in Oxford](#), as well as [online courses](#) and [internships](#), for students aged 12-18. We understand that applying to university can be a stressful time and navigating a new application process can feel difficult.

Our Ultimate Guide to UCAS Changes looks past the headlines to share what the changes really mean for students looking to apply to UK universities.

There isn't a magic formula to getting into your dream UK university, but we can help you to understand each step of the application process and give you some tips to maximise your chances of success. In this guide, you'll find:

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These articles include a comprehensive introduction to UCAS and a breakdown of the latest changes to undergraduate admissions in the UK, so you can feel a little more confident about the whole process.



# About the Authors

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Oxford Scholastica collaborates closely with university students and education professionals to offer relevant and accurate insights.

We've worked with two current undergraduate students studying at a top UK university and a former university admissions advisor to bring you everything you need to know about the latest UCAS changes.

Allow us to introduce you to...

## Jen

*Final-year undergraduate at the University of Oxford*

Jen is a finalist studying Classical Archaeology and Ancient History at the University of Oxford. Outside of her studies, Jen enjoys spending time in nature and is a strong advocate for the mental health benefits of walking.



## Ameal

*Second-year undergraduate at the University of Oxford*

Ameal is reading English Language and Literature at Somerville College, University of Oxford. They are passionate about access and outreach, volunteering as a student ambassador for their college. They particularly enjoy writing, reading and studying the literature of the fantastic.



## Jo

*Strategy consultant at the Oxford Scholastica Academy*

Jo's career in education includes a tenure as a teacher at one of the UK's leading schools, where she also served as a university admissions advisor. Having held senior leadership roles in various educational organisations, Jo is deeply committed to empowering young people to reach their full potential.





# UCAS: A Complete Introduction

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If you're planning to apply to a UK university, you've probably already heard the name 'UCAS'.

The Universities and College Admissions Service (UCAS) is the main application portal for UK higher education institutions. It's an online, centralised and non-specific admissions service for all UK universities and colleges. The majority of undergraduate applications are submitted through UCAS.

Before we jump into the UCAS changes, it's important to understand UCAS and its role in university admissions.



# What Is UCAS?



Most students applying to a UK higher education institution submit their university applications through [UCAS](#). This includes secondary school leavers from the UK and overseas, individuals who already have an undergraduate degree and are applying for a postgraduate course, and mature students.

In the UK, school-leavers typically first use UCAS during their final school year. During your penultimate year, you can start to prepare by:

- ✔ Thinking about the type of course and particular subject you want to study.
- ✔ Attending open days at universities and colleges to learn more about the institution and programme.
- ✔ Reading online guides and seeking out advice and guidance from current university students.
- ✔ Beginning to think about your personal statement and the types of wider reading you can engage in.

## A Brief History of UCAS

Before 1961, students would apply to each university individually. This was a tedious process which involved writing applications by hand or on a typewriter and sending them off by post.

In 1961, the Universities Central Council on Admissions (UCCA) was formed, making it the first centralised admissions service for UK higher education. In 1985, the Polytechnics Central Admissions System (PCAS) was created to provide the same service for polytechnics. In 1991, as the higher education space evolved, these two services merged to form what we now know as UCAS.

A unified admissions service like UCAS allows for a streamlined application process for all, making university and college applications more accessible. Today, applicants need only submit one online application via UCAS.



# The Application Process

## 1 Registration

Firstly, you need to register with UCAS. You must complete all mandatory questions before your application can be sent to any universities. Once you've registered, you'll receive your Personal ID and be able to access the application portal. Here, you'll be able to input your education and employment history (if applicable).

## 2 Course Selection

You can choose a maximum of five courses from five universities. There are three key things to remember:

- You can choose all five of your courses at the same time or leave some until later.
- Your university and course choices are not in order of preference.
- Universities won't be able to see where else you've applied until you've responded to your offers.

Some exceptions are:

- You can only apply to the University of Oxford or the University of Cambridge, not both.
- You can apply for a maximum of four courses in medicine, dentistry or veterinary medicine/science.
- You can choose up to six conservatoires.

## 3 Personal Statement

Your personal statement is where you can explain why you want to study your chosen course by showcasing your motivations, passions and experiences. Your statement will need to be structured as answers to three free-text questions and can be no longer than 4,000 characters including spaces and punctuation. This is roughly two sides of A4.

## 4 References

Your application will need to be supplemented by an academic reference. If you're applying through a school, college or UCAS-registered centre, this will be completed by your institution after you've submitted your application. If you're applying as an individual, you'll need to attach the reference before you submit your UCAS application.

## 5 Predicted Grades

If you're still in school, you'll be prompted to share your predicted grades. For UK students attending sixth form, these are usually the grades you achieved in your year 12 mock examinations.

## 6 Submission

After reviewing your application, you'll need to submit it to UCAS for processing so it can be forwarded to your chosen institutions. Some universities or courses have additional steps as part of their application process, including entrance exams, such as the [LNAT for law](#) or the [UCAT for medicine](#), and/or interviews. Check the course page on each university's website for more information on potential next steps.



# Key Terms



## UCAS Tariff Points

The UCAS tariff points system assigns a certain number of points to your qualifications based on the level and the grade you achieved.

For instance, an A-level achieved at grade C earns 32 tariff points, while a merit in a BTEC Level 3 Diploma will earn 16 points.

Some institutions will set specific UCAS tariff point requirements for courses and some will instead focus on specific grades or qualifications. It's best to have a look at the specific course pages on the university websites before you apply.

Various qualifications are included in the UCAS tariff points system, including A-levels, BTECs and the IB. If you can't find your qualification on the list, it doesn't necessarily mean that your chosen universities and colleges won't consider it. Look at the course page for your chosen subject and, if you're still not sure, drop the admissions team an email – that's what they're there for!

## UCAS Extra

If you apply to five universities but don't receive any offers, you can UCAS Extra from late February to early July. With Extra, you can add another choice to your initial application.

## UCAS Clearing

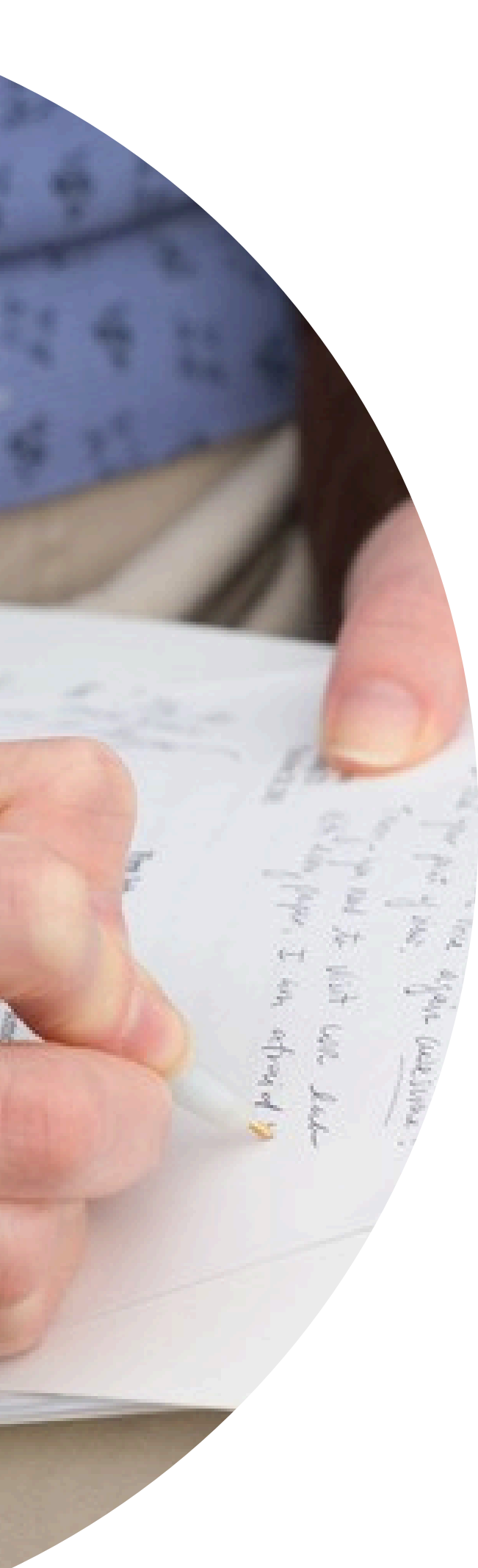
UCAS Clearing is the process used by universities to fill any places they still have open. Clearing generally takes place from July to September/October. You can use this option if you didn't receive any offers (or don't want to accept those you have) or you didn't meet the conditions of your offer.

UCAS Extra and Clearing are both valuable options for students who wish to:

- Explore different choices and/or institutions
- Change their academic direction
- Secure a place when their initial choices haven't worked out

It's important to remember that it's not the end of the world if you don't get the offer(s) that you originally wanted. Sometimes, this is just the beginning of a new path to success.





# The New Personal Statement

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Perhaps one of the biggest changes to the UCAS application system is the new format for the personal statement.

Previously, applicants were required to submit one long, freely-written essay; the new system offers a more supportive framework by including a set of guiding questions that applicants must frame their statement around.

In this section, you'll find a breakdown of these questions, alongside some tips on how to submit a personal statement you're truly proud of.



# The New Format

## What Is the Personal Statement?

The personal statement is your chance to tell universities why you'd like to study a particular course with them, and showcase the skills and experience that make you a good candidate. Generally, your personal statement should aim to include:

- ✔ An engaging introduction
- ✔ An account of your academic and personal experiences that demonstrate your suitability and passion for your chosen course
- ✔ An account of any relevant extracurricular experiences
- ✔ Your future goals for your studies and career
- ✔ A brief conclusion reiterating your points

The current guidelines for the personal statement is limited to **4,000 characters** (roughly two sides of A4), including spaces and punctuation.

## Why Is the Personal Statement Changing?

In 2021, in [a survey conducted by UCAS](#), it was discovered that 83% of applicants found writing their personal statement stressful. Many students were unsure if they had covered the correct information and felt they needed the support of others to get their personal statement right.

Therefore, UCAS has split the personal statement into sections, reflecting key themes, to clearly demonstrate what information should be included. This means that students can be sure they've provided the same details as other applicants and will be judged on an even field.

The three key themes are motivation for course, preparedness for course and preparation through other experiences.

## The New Questions

Students applying for **2026 entry** and beyond will be asked to structure the personal statement as answers to the following questions:

1. Why do you want to study this course or subject?
2. How have your qualifications and studies helped you to prepare for this course?
3. What else have you done to prepare outside of education and why are these experiences helpful?



# How to Prepare



## Work Experience

Gaining work experience or volunteering in a field related to your chosen course is a brilliant addition to your UCAS personal statement. It demonstrates that you're eager to learn and able to apply practical skills related to your subject. You can write about what you did, what you learnt and how the experience has helped you gain more insight into your field. To find work experience opportunities:

- **Ask family, friends, teachers and past employers** whether they know of any relevant opportunities.
- **Keep a lookout on social media.** Companies regularly post opportunities online and LinkedIn allows you to contact employers directly.
- **Attend careers fairs** to speak with employers in person.
- **Email companies directly** and ask whether they offer work experience.



## Mentorship

Don't be afraid to seek out guidance from teachers, career counsellors and experts in your chosen field. They have experience and knowledge that will be invaluable when writing your personal statement. Some teachers might also be able to help arrange mock interviews or suggest relevant extracurricular activities for you to try.



## Extracurricular Activities

Writing about extracurricular activities in your UCAS personal statement is a great way to show that you are a well-rounded person. It can also demonstrate a relevant skill or a long-standing interest in your field that's outside of academics.

For example, if you're applying for a literature-related subject, taking part in a club or activity related to visual arts could show your interest in storytelling across a range of media. Similarly, if you're applying for a maths-related subject, regularly participating in chess matches could demonstrate your ability to apply logic in different situations.



## Reading & Research

An important part of writing an excellent personal statement is wider reading and research around your subject.

Ask your teacher for relevant reading, browse university reading lists or take the free Oxford Scholastica [University Preparation Report](#) quiz for tailored recommendations.

If an interview is part of your application process, you'll likely be asked how your additional reading has helped shape your interest in the subject.

### Personal Statement Key Facts

- ✓ No more than 4,000 characters, including spaces
- ✓ You can only write one statement, not different ones for each course or university
- ✓ Divided into three separate questions (minimum 350 characters per question)
- ✓ It's all about you, so let your personality shine through!





# Other Changes to UCAS

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The adjustments to the personal statement will have the most direct impact on the student application experience, but there are some other changes to be aware of as well.

In this section, we cover changes to application fees, updated demographic questions and additional resources now available to students. We also offer an overview of the changes to the academic reference section.



# Changes for Students

In addition to the personal statement changes, there have been an additional two important tweaks to the application process that students may notice.

## A Simpler Application Fee

In 2024, UCAS removed the single application fee for selecting just one course choice. Every application now costs the same amount.

For the 2025 entry cycle, this fee was **£28.50** and it's expected to remain the same for 2026 entry.

This change now means that all undergraduate UCAS applications will allow you to add five course choices.

## More Gender Options

Additionally, UCAS has added two extra answer options for its application question about gender. Alongside 'man' and 'woman', students can now select 'I use another term' or 'I prefer not to say'.

## Additional Resources

In a move that should prove very useful for prospective students, UCAS has improved student access to entry grades data. Course pages now display the advertised and actual grades of accepted students based on five years of historical data.

The aim of this change is to show applicants the range of grade profiles accepted for entry on to each course to encourage students to apply for courses they may not have initially considered.

By seeing the actual range of grades accepted by universities and colleges, students can make aspirational but realistic decisions about which courses to apply to.



# Changes for Referees

The changes that UCAS has made to academic references will not directly affect the application experience as a student. However, it's helpful to understand why these changes are significant.

## What Is an Academic Reference?

An academic reference is a piece of writing from a teacher, mentor or past employer that supports your UCAS application. It provides context to universities about you, your achievements and your education.

The academic reference not only helps admissions officers in the selection process, but the information provided can also allow universities to provide targeted support if applicable.



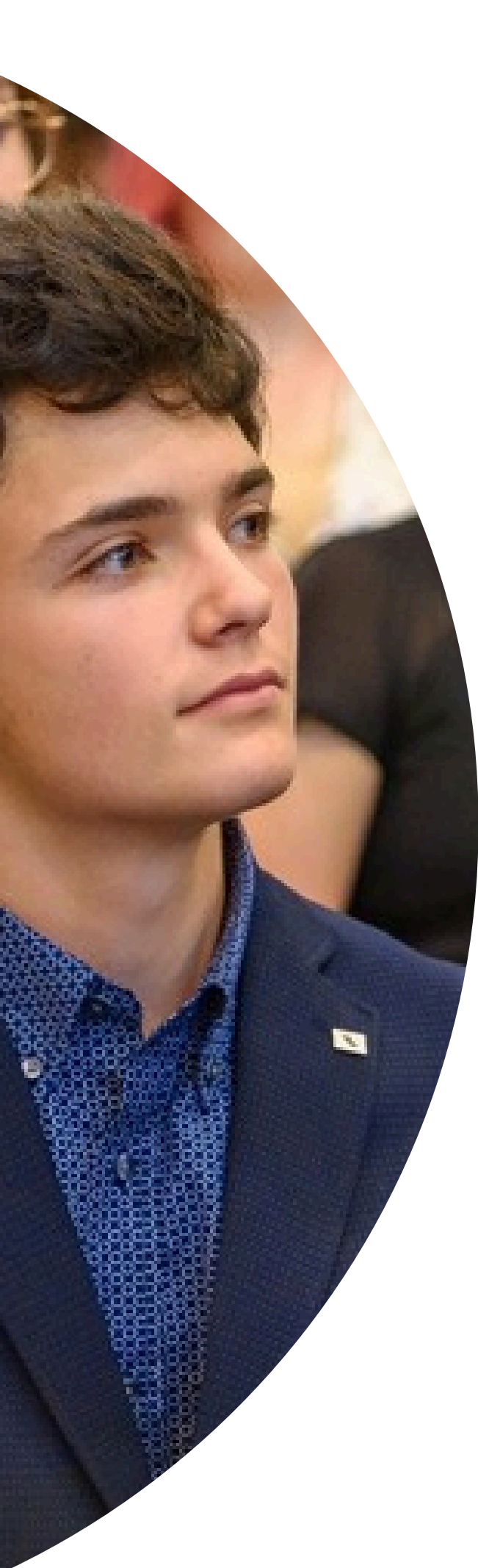
## Key Changes

Similar to the personal statement changes, the reference is no longer one freely-written recommendation. Instead, the academic reference is now structured around [the following three sections](#):

- 1 Provide an overview of your relationship with the applicant (mandatory).
- 2 If applicable, enter any information about extenuating circumstances which may have impacted the applicant's education and achievement.
- 3 Outline other supportive information specific to the applicant and relevant to the course(s) applied for that you think universities and colleges should be aware of.

With the previous structure, it was difficult for universities and colleges to directly compare academic references due to differences in content. The aim of the new framework is to help referees cover the information that institutions are most interested in, so they can be sure they're providing helpful and relevant information to best support students.





# Tips for UCAS Applications

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Although navigating a new application process can be difficult, the UCAS changes have been implemented in order to better support student success and level the playing field for all undergraduate applicants.

In this section, we've put together some of our top tips to help you submit the best possible application to UCAS and secure your place studying at your dream university.



# Planning & Research

You'll typically fill out your UCAS application in your final year of school, however there are several things you can do to get a head start on an outstanding application.

Whether you've always known what you'd like to study or you're still deciding, starting your research as early as possible will be incredibly helpful. The sooner you consider your options, the more time you'll have to explore different possibilities, ask questions and feel confident in your final decisions.

Perhaps most importantly, be sure to find the specific deadline dates for your year of application and entry. Also, check for any special deadlines your application may be subject to: e.g. the Universities of Oxford and Cambridge have an earlier application deadline.


## Visit Universities

Once you have a clearer idea of the degree you want to study, you can attend university open days to find out how your subject is taught at different institutions. You'll have the opportunity to talk to staff and students, with some universities offering taster talks and subject lectures!

## Talk to Friends & Family

During your research, be sure to make use of any relevant connections you already have. If your friend's step-dad is a lawyer and you're thinking about studying law, organise a chat with him. If your sister's a creative writing graduate and you're considering following in her footsteps, ask her about her experience studying the subject.

We know this isn't an option for everyone, but it's always worth putting feelers out in your personal network. There's also plenty of guidance online in the form of articles, blog posts, videos and podcasts that can help you in your research. [Our blog](#) is an excellent starting point!

 [www.oxfordscholastica.com/blog](http://www.oxfordscholastica.com/blog)



## Gain Experience

In the lead up to your UCAS application, it's a good idea to begin building experiences that demonstrate your interest in the field you're hoping to study. Not only will this help you when it comes to writing your personal statement, but it'll also help you develop a well-rounded understanding of your subject.

Taking an extracurricular course, either in person or online, is a great way to delve into your subject beyond the school curriculum. Based in Oxford, our [summer school programmes](#) combine in-depth theory with hands-on practical experience to help inform your decision to study your subject at university.

If you're able to gain relevant work experience, this is an excellent way to test drive what a future in your field might look like before committing to a degree. This could involve voluntary work, shadowing a professional, attending one of our [online internships](#) or taking up part-time paid work.



# Your Personal Statement

An effective personal statement demonstrates your interest in your chosen course and your motivation to study the subject at university. It should impress admissions officers with all of your passion and potential! So, how can you write a personal statement you're proud of?

## Craft a Unique Narrative

Just because the personal statement has changed to a questions-based format doesn't mean you can't create a compelling narrative to help you focus on the most important bits of your academic journey.

It can also demonstrate your ability to construct an effective, argumentative piece of prose, which is a necessary skills for writing university essays.

Don't fall into the trap of writing a personal statement in the old format and attempting to copy and paste it across to the new sections. It's unlikely you'll be able to answer the questions effectively.

## Keep it Personal

The personal statement has kept its name for a reason: it should be **personal**. This is the only point in the process which allows you to talk to universities in your own voice and emphasise what makes you unique.

Avoid impersonal touches like generic inspirational quotes. Instead, consider the following questions:

- Do you have a unique take on life or a unique set of experiences? How does it add to your interest in and motivation to study your subject?
- What sub-topic within your subject interests you the most?
- How do you want to use your degree once you graduate?

## Seek Feedback

Once you have your first draft, ask a variety of people to read through what you've written and provide some feedback. This could be family members, friends, teachers or mentors. If there's somebody you trust who's willing to give you constructive feedback, reach out to them!

That said, don't let anyone run away with your original ideas. This is your personal statement, so if a piece of feedback doesn't resonate with you after reflection, then you don't have to implement it.

## Draft & Redraft

Personal statements take time and effort, but the key thing is to get started. You won't get it exactly right first time, but once your first draft is ready, you can start gathering feedback and redrafting your ideas.

Most personal statements go through at least three drafts before the final version and many applicants go through ten or more!



# Interviews & Exams

As part of your application, some universities and colleges might ask you to attend an interview and/or assessment. These are particularly common for courses such as medicine and law.

It's crucial that you prepare for these ahead of time. Depending on the specific interview or assessment, this might involve practising past papers, researching [common interview questions](#) or participating in mock interviews.

If you're sitting an exam, make sure you're familiar with the format of the paper and the types of questions you'll be asked.

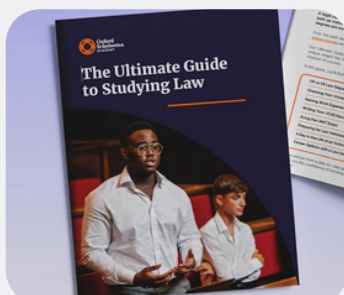
If you're attending an interview, find out where and when the interview is taking place, and read through your personal statement thoroughly beforehand. Interviewers often ask questions based on the content of your personal statement.



## Subject-Specific Advice

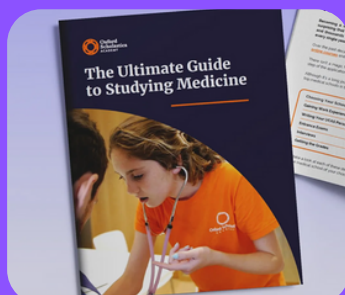
We have a range of [free resources on our website](#) to help you navigate your next steps with confidence. If you're looking for subject-specific advice, our collection of Ultimate Guides offers step-by-step guidance on applying to university and preparing for a career in your dream field.

### The Ultimate Guide to Studying Law



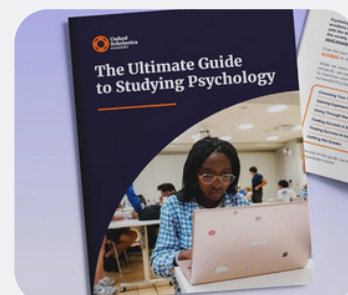
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### The Ultimate Guide to Studying Medicine



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# BEFORE YOU GO...

We hope you've found the Ultimate Guide to UCAS Changes both interesting and useful. You're now well prepared to take the next steps on your journey to university.

We've put together a checklist to help you stay on track and submit a standout UCAS application. You can print or save this page and tick off the steps as you complete them.

Best of luck with your applications!

Ameal, Jen, Jo and the whole Oxford Scholastica team

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## The Ultimate Checklist to Applying to University

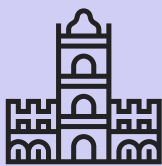
- Read Oxford Scholastica's Ultimate Guide to UCAS Changes
- Take the [Oxford Scholastica Career Test](#)
- Complete the [Oxford Scholastica University Preparation Report](#)
- Browse the [UCAS website](#) to see which courses pique your interest
- Participate in relevant work experience, extracurricular activities or wider reading
- Attend open days at universities you're interested in
- Write and perfect your UCAS personal statement
- Complete your UCAS application
- Prepare for any admissions interviews and/or examinations
- Accept (or decline) your university offers
- Study for and sit your A-level, IB or equivalent exams
- Accept your place and prepare for life as a university student. Congratulations!





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