



oxbridge personal statement guide

2021

joseph clarke



Contents

Introduction 3

My experience
Choosing your subject
Choosing your college
Just one part of your application

Getting personal 4

What makes a personal statement “personal”?
Intention

Super-curriculars 5-8

What are super-curriculars?
What can they be?
Recommendations
How they fit into a personal statement

Extras 8-10

Skills
Caveats
Being careful with language
Working with the word count
Extra-curriculars

Getting writing 11-14

Activities to get you started
Dos and don'ts
Extra resources to help you out

Copyright © 2021 Joseph Clarke
Design by Joseph Clarke



Introduction

My experience

I originally had no intention of going to university, let alone Oxford; I considered apprenticeships and the RAF when starting sixth form. However, part way into 2020, I realised that more than anything else, I wanted to pursue my subject - History - further, and university felt like the only option where I could do this, so I chose to aim high and applied for Oxford. I say this to show that it's *never too late* to consider applying to Oxbridge; aiming high is something to be proud of. Don't worry about starting from scratch, if you haven't read any books yet, if you don't truly "get" your subject; there is plenty of time to explore (plus, it's much better to discover a real passion and throw yourself at it than to think you know you have it set in stone and become too complacent).

Choosing your subject

In terms of the personal statement, being split over the subject you want to study can be tricky at first. For me, as much as I knew I wanted to study History, I was caught between all of its various strands. Since I wasn't sure, I spent my time early on keeping my options open and finding what interested me in each area, e.g. ancient history. In the end, while I went for the straight history option, my personal statement had been shaped by wider interests I had developed, so all it did was help take an interesting perspective on my interests and my motivations to study the course I eventually chose. And that's what I would recommend; your difficult decision will only help to contribute to interesting perspectives on the course you end up choosing. Therefore, if you feel split, explore both options early on; you will not only be guided towards a preference but you will also build up a repertoire of activities and interests that you can put on the PS once you finally decide.

Choosing your college

From a personal statement perspective, your college choice isn't going to affect your application. From a subject perspective, however, you might want to consider that some colleges may not run courses you want to study, and also how some colleges will have a wider community of students taking the subject than others. Do not make your decision based on tutors or academic rankings! Plus, whatever decision you make, your application may be moved to another college, and during interviews you are likely to be pooled once or twice. Therefore, since the focus here is on personal statements, you can relax about college choice for now.

"Just one of the many parts of your application"

A phrase which you will hear a lot, but one that's really important. Relax! In the grand scheme of things, any GCSE grades, admissions tests, written work and interviews will be much more important in the decisions that are made (so plenty of other things to worry about!). That said, personal statements are great in communicating your personal interest, experience, and drive to study the subject you are applying for.

Getting personal

But what does it mean to be personal? How do you put the personality into the personal statement?

What makes a personal statement personal is when it communicates how a student's personal experiences have encouraged them to apply for their chosen subject, how they have developed a unique interest in the subject, why they think they, as an individual, are worthy of spending at least 3 years of their life absorbed in their chosen course. Let's break that down:

- 1) How personal experiences have made you passionate to study your subject: in part of your PS you will want to reflect on something personal. The essential thing here is that you don't want to be telling your life story; it could be a visit somewhere, a heated debate you found yourself in – anything that involved you and made you think, wow, this is cool, I want to learn more. No eureka moments or catching one's pyjamas on fire – keep it realistic.
- 2) How you have developed a unique interest in the subject: what have you *done* that has developed both your interest in and your motivation to study your subject. The key here is linking it back to the *why* – why has this interest reinforced your desire to pursue the course at university
- 3) What makes you worthy of studying this at uni? "Worth" comes in many forms; everyone is worthy, but you need to communicate why you personally have the skills, interest, and drive to study this subject. This is done through your reflection on personal experiences and your discussion of super-curriculars.

Your personality is therefore the unique experiences that communicate your passion to study a subject. But where does this personality go?

Personal experiences (any trip, conversation, or moment that made you personally think why you wanted to study this subject): keep these short and sweet. The best tip I have heard is the "personal sandwich" (courtesy of Harry Twohig!); opening with something personal, and then including a final personal send off. Essentially, these personal experiences will show a uniqueness, but most of all they will be useful in showing how you have decided why you want to apply to your chosen course.

Your interest and your skills: These will be more based around your super-curriculars, but always bring it back to that drive of: why? These *indirectly* communicate your personality, rather than comment on deeply personal experiences. What makes this fit into the personal statement is how it relates to why you have the skills to study this subject, and most importantly, why you want to!

Super-curriculars

What are super-curriculars?

If your personal experiences are the two slices of bread that make your sandwich, then the super-curriculars are the butter (if we are taking proportionally however, the amount of butter you would need here would most likely result in serious long-term heart conditions).

Super-curriculars are activities which take you further than what you have been doing in lessons; they can be around the curriculum, but also, outside of them as well – anything that shows your engagement with the subject *outside* of what you have been doing at school. Feel free to reflect on something you have done in school, perhaps a certain topic or idea that you encountered, but that would look much better if you did a little reading into it (which would count as a super-curricular).

What you are currently studying:

This will be easier if you are studying the subject now that you want to take at university; but even if not, you may find overlap between what you have been currently studying and what you are applying for. Consider anything that caught your attention, a topic or idea which you wanted to explore. Have a look online for articles, podcasts, documentaries, lectures, courses; anything to discover more.

Super-curriculars outside of school:

It's really important that you branch out of the curriculum. You may already have some idea of what you want to explore more, you may have already started to dig in. The key is to keep developing your interest – keep trying to learn more – the earlier the better, as the longer you have to explore, the richer the interest you will develop.

Now, let's get onto what possibilities are out there, and some tips and how you approach these. (*note: to find out about what extra-curriculars are, turn to page 10*).


What can they be?

Reading

The most essential point to emphasise is this: *don't go out and buy 20 books just for the sake of it*. One, this will force you to list books which will mean that, two, you fail to reflect on them, and therefore, three, you fail to communicate your personal interest and instead submit a bibliography. The key to reading is *reading with purpose*. This means you treat your reading as a process (or a "journey" if you want to be fancy), rather than as a pile of books to get through. This really applies to all of your examples – you might have visited a museum, which made you really interested in one exhibit, you then consciously chose to read an article on that exhibit which you felt highlighted the importance of X, so then you maybe even chose to read a whole book on that (or maybe just as simply as reading another article, maybe listening to a podcast).

What I want to emphasise is that the value does not come from your reading, but rather from how you reflect on it. Citing a prestigious book you read will be nothing compared to someone who deeply analyses how reading an article on why windows are square challenged their conceptions or offered a new perspective and overall reinforced their desire to study their chosen subject at uni.

Additionally, watch that bank balance – scope your school and local library for books, and most importantly, make use of the millions of articles available on the internet! Articles are



one, normally free, and two, *so much shorter than books*. The short length of articles means that you can easily get to grips with an idea (and two, if you get an interview and decide you need a refresh, a much lighter load).

Here are some examples of where you can start reading – I purposefully have not recommended any specific books or articles (the last thing you want to do is go out and read something for the sake of it being critically acclaimed – eg “*SuperFreakonomics*” – if you are reading something just because you think you have to, you’re missing the point).

Where to look?

Your local library service

The Economist, the New Scientist, History Today, etc. – check the web for magazines and online journals relating to your subject

JSTOR - you can get 100 free articles per month at the moment

News opinion pieces – probably not from The Sun

Podcasts

These are great for jumping-off points, often helping to introduce topics and ideas, and will often feature more than one person, therefore potentially offering different perspectives – you might find they raise a real interesting point that you hadn’t thought before, you might want to read about something they have written.

Where to look?

Check Spotify, Acast, etc - eg on Spotify and BBC Sounds you can find: *In Our Time* which covers Science, History, Culture and Literature, and Philosophy

Documentaries

Like podcasts, documentaries can be good for providing broad overviews, but due to their diversity, they could be on anything, niche or broad. It’s absolutely fine to drop in a documentary (it doesn’t make you look lazy) – as long as you reflect on it and develop that further.

Where to look?

YouTube – packed with documentaries that have been uploaded since they were broadcast (a bit naughty, I know) – you can also find a lot of creator-made mini documentaries

iPlayer – big defender of the TV license over here, those of you in the UK can benefit massively from the BBC, they produce some of the highest quality documentaries around, hands down. Internationals, you should be able to find some on YouTube.

Courses

Courses will not only show that you have been developing your skills but will also help to give you new insights and perspectives – would recommend

Where to look?

Cambridge University’s HE Plus

Future Learn

Competitions

Competitions are another one to help show skills, commitment, engagement, and will help you reflect a lot on your subject. It’s not about winning!



Robinson College Essay Prize

Julia Wood Essay Prize

Look here for a full overview: <https://www.mindsunderground.com/oxbridge-competitions/overview>

This may not seem very specific, but since I'm having to be all-subject inclusive, I don't want to focus on one thing (I'm sure many of you want to keep your historical interest to Horrible Histories, so I won't natter).

Instead, I will recommend *some incredibly useful guides which outline many super-curriculars* (and loads of other useful stuff!) – this one from Magdalen is superb:

<https://www.magd.ox.ac.uk/wordpress/wp-content/uploads/2020/05/Preparing-for-Oxford-Resources-Pack-.docx>

Here's a great guide from Cambridge which offers super-curricular activities for each course:

https://www.undergraduate.study.cam.ac.uk/files/publications/super-curricular_suggestions.pdf

Great stuff from University College, Oxford:


<https://www.univ.ox.ac.uk/applying-to-univ/staircase12/>

What can I do with these examples? What do they look like in a personal statement?

Just as when you mention a personal experience, you reflect on it, the same goes for your super-curriculars. In each of your body paragraphs (i.e. the bit in between your opener and your final little personal send-off), you want to tell a story. I have also heard this as the "stepping stones" strategy, and it's *the most important thing* to understand for your PS. This means introducing inter-linking super-curriculars, ideas, and interests. If you have already begun to read with purpose, this will help, as you have already embarked on that kind of journey.

Let's escape the intangible phrases and get into the nitty gritty:

- 1) Begin with an example – any kind of super-curricular or discussion or experience
- 2) Reflect on this – what did it make you think? did this highlight the importance of something? Was there something in particular that caught your eye? It's really important you explain what it is that was so catching
- 3) Link this to another example – what did you DO once you found this interest? You want to show you are curious, inquisitive, and excited to learn more. Maybe you had watched a documentary about the Roman Empire, became fascinated by the role religion in its decline, and then wanted to read an article on this.
- 4) Reflect on this!!! Does this link to any relevant skills that your subject requires? What was exciting about this? Did this challenge what the first example had inspired within you? For example, you read Richard Evan's In Defence of History, and became captivated by his defence of historical fact, but then when listening to a podcast about how history is "made" you began to question objectivity and certainty in History. This



example might not have emerged from you “reading with purpose” but rather trying to find links with what you have encountered.

Please remember however that this is not the set structure for personal statement paragraphs – there isn’t one! You might spend a whole paragraph discussing how your thought process has changed over a single idea. The *key* to remember is that as long as you make it *flow*, show a kind of process, a kind of development. This doesn’t always have to be progressive – you may find that your preconceptions have been challenged – that’s great! Whatever you do, let it flow and you will be fine.

Check that in each paragraph you have shown an interest, explained why you find that interesting, and how that links to your desire to study this course at uni. Always try to bring it back to intention.

Your entire PS will hopefully link together nicely. Your opener and your send-off should hopefully show why you want to study your course and why that is – what has caught your interest? What is it that makes your subject so fascinating? You may find what you express in the body will link back to this, which is lovely.

Let’s do an example (exciting, I know!). Below is a paragraph from my personal statement.

For obvious reasons, please don’t plagiarise; when they find you out on the UCAS plagiarism checker you will look a right muppet. Even from a logical perspective, it’s quite possible you will get probed in the interview about it, so you wouldn’t look any better. You have been warned!


A visit to Rothenburg sparked my interest in medieval social history, encouraging me to read G. Rosser's "Towns in Medieval England". Although captivated by the need for historians to make assumptions when handling primary sources, the HE+ course "Historical Facts" made me question how an assumptive approach should be taken, especially regarding the power of words and translation. In spite of the enthralling debate this creates, perhaps the individual perspectives that archaeology presents are a way of combatting some of the problems with written sources, and their supremacy. Yet, with many oral accounts lost to time, I find myself unable to fill in all the gaps, but excited by the challenge to discover more.

This is great in demonstrating the stepping-stones example; I have shown how an experience of mine fostered an interest in an area of my subject, and then how this encouraged me to read further about it. I have then reflected what this showed me, but then the way in which a further activity of mine challenged my perspective, and *why* – the rest of the paragraph gets detailed into what is so interesting but what I find challenging. It draws direct links between the different examples and showing what impression that has made on my own interest and motivation to get engaged with the subject – as well as a certain intellectual flexibility.

The great thing is that since writing this over 6 months ago, my ideas and opinions on this topic have continued to develop and change (which is always great for the interview) – for example, if writing this again I would not make the same argument about “individual perspectives” (from a historical point of view that’s rather challenging...). The point is that what you write in your personal statement doesn’t need to be perfect or extremely refined and deeply considered – if you can show how your opinion has changed in an interview, that’s a benefit, not a drawback.

However, here’s what it **doesn’t do so well**:

Firstly, there is a bit of over-synonym-ing action, but it’s not sufficient to warrant any real concerns.



Secondly, however, the main issue with this paragraph is that it's much more about interest rather than motivation. It communicates a real engagement with the subject at hand, it would be better to get a little more motivation across; it's not just about what interests you, but why does this interest make you want to study your chosen course. The part at the end deals with this a little, but a bit more of a clear drive would be nice.

Extras

Skills

The personal statement is partly about demonstrating skills, but in my opinion, it's best not to continue to repeat how something may have strengthened your reading skills when you could be discussing a fascinating development of interest, and reflecting on how this has encouraged you to apply. Often times, the skills will speak for themselves.

Applying to "university", not "Oxford" or "Cambridge"

Remember, your personal statement will go to all the universities you applied to (at least two). Don't make the other ones feel bad – write why you want to apply to university, not Oxford. Your actions will speak louder than your words.

Communicating passion without "passion": showing, not telling

As much as you may have a passion for your subject, a lot of admissions tutors aren't too keen on hearing how many times you can cram "passion" into your personal statement. You need to *show* passion without actually saying the word "passion". How? Those personal experiences and those super-curriculars – communicate your passion by showing how your various experiences have made you reflect on why you want to study this subject.


Being careful with language

On that note, make sure you get your spelling right! Word will catch most of the slip-ups, but it's always good to double check (I'm sure I have a couple of errors here that I haven't spotted). Additionally, on language, be careful with what you say!

Firstly, you don't want to be repeating the same words over and over again; saying you were "interested" in this, then "interested" in that, etc., isn't going to look too good. However! Secondly, watch out for what you could call "oversynonym-ing"; this is where you might try to find the most exquisite and academic sounding synonyms for some of the words you have on your personal statement. Here's an example of what this can sound like:

"After studying the riveting subversion of contemporary tenets of gender in Shakespeare's 'A Midsummer Night's Dream', I became fundamentally encapsulated by the extraordinary manner in which literary genre could be used to defy societal norms."

It's a little much. However, you may write in this style, so the key thing to remember is when you read over what you have written, ask yourself: does this sound like me? If not, then tone down the "oversynonym-ing".



So what?

When looking over what you have written, ask yourself if you have explained yourself sufficiently. Whilst limited by characters, have a look at every sentence and paragraph you have written and ask yourself: so what? why? This may help you expand on ideas which to may seem clear in your head, but on paper might not reveal your true potential. You may find that adding another sentence may intrude into something else you had written there, but I have learnt that if you think you have a good idea, don't be afraid to run with it! If you need to cut a bit elsewhere, it won't matter.

Working with that word count: how to reduce the fluff

It's very common to go over the word count when trying to fill that space – I managed to get to over 5,500 characters on my first draft. The most important thing to do is not attempt to cut characters at the start, especially if you are starting early. Let it sit for a while – keep going back to it and reflecting on how you can improve: have you wanted to read anything else? Have you considered a different perspective? As said, the earlier you start, the better, as you will have more time to reflect on what it is that makes you love your subject, and why you want to study it at university.

Begin to chip away and remove the fluff, but remember that you are unlikely to hand in your first draft (unless you have begun in October... then there's trouble!). Once you have let it sit a while, and you want to remove a lot of characters, here are my tips:

- 1) Sentences: long sentences are normally a sign you are waffling – ask yourself on each sentence; is this 155th clause really necessary?!
- 2) Semi-colons are your friend: considering joining clauses with semi-colons to remove too many "ands", "furthermores", etc.
- 3) Qualifiers and adjectives: check for every adjective and qualifier you have used – are they necessary?
- 4) Cutting the big stuff: sometimes, you might want to remove a whole paragraph. The earlier you start, the clearer this might become. Removing whole paragraphs later down the line is not the best idea if it means you will have to re-jig everything.
- 5) Chill with the books: it's much better to have reflected on one book than two have listed 5. If you find yourself trying to cram loads of books/super-curriculars into a paragraph, ask if they are all necessary
- 6) Priorities: what communicates your personal strengths the most? What communicates your skills and interests best? Are you showing your motive to study the subject, or just trying to show you have read widely? Understanding your priorities will allow you to remove the unnecessary.

Extra-curriculars

The activities you have done outside of your subject – sports, hobbies, etc. Oxbridge aren't too fussed; what you can do to spice up the extra-curriculars is to link them with a skill that might be useful at university or for studying your subject. Keep extracurricular discussion to 10-20% of the personal statement (other universities like extra-curriculars a little more).

Getting writing

Activities to help you get writing

1) Create a table split into 3 or 4 columns like below. Fill it out with everything you have done so far.

Personal experiences	Super-curriculars around subject(s) studying at school	Super-curriculars beyond your subject	Extra-curriculars

2a) This is the first of two scenarios. You may find at this stage that you're looking a little light in terms of super-curriculars – don't, worry, we'll come onto that. Right now, try to recognise themes already from what you have listed under your super-curriculars. Some of these might be simpler than others – you may already have visited somewhere, that inspired you to read something, that made you enter a competition etc.

To help you with this, here's what I did: make a spider diagram. Each arrow will contain one of your super-curricular activities; colour code activities that fit together, draw links explaining why they fit together – often we can find an interest has developed somewhere without realising.


2b) In this scenario you have read with purpose right from the start (impressive) and feel like you have an overflowing list of super-curriculars. Unfortunately, I have tricked you! Go to step 2a – remember, you can never not explore things enough!

3) Now its time to fill in the gaps. You may have some nicely linked activities, but consider having a further explore of them. Can you find any articles which present a different perspective? Are there any podcasts on the topic? Have a gander, each time considering how this links to what you have done, what interests you about it, and why it makes you want to study your chosen subject.

4) So you have filled in the gaps. Now its time to cut down on the examples. *What?! – I hear you cry – But you just said go out and do more?! Correct.* But as we have covered, you can't go and list everything you have done – you haven't got enough characters to try to cram in loads of examples. From each of you reading, listening, watching, and "doing" experiences you will have learnt a lot, but the key now is selecting a few and making them flow nicely by linking them together. In between/after each, reflect on the experience – why did it lead you to do something else? Why was it fascinating? What have you taken away from it? Why has it made you apply to study your chosen subject?

5) By now what you will have is a few paragraphs, but just not actually written out yet (see, I told you it was for a purpose) – they will consist of different areas of the subject that have interested you, linked together nicely, showing how your interest has developed and why that has encouraged you to apply to take the course at university.

6) Now let's get personal. Go to any personal experiences you have recorded; are there any that made you realise how much you want to study this subject? That could nicely serve as



your opener. Think really hard about what is it that really wants to make you spend a minimum of 3 years of your life studying this subject – what is it about the subject that gets you going? You should find that some personal experiences of yours have opened this up for you – a conversation with your Grandad might have helped you to discover why you want to engage with History, for example, maybe you found personally connecting with the past something incredibly rewarding. This is almost like establishing a thesis – go back to some of the paragraph blocs sketched out above and see if you can link this drive to the examples, skills, interests, and motivations you have discussed. The same for the opener goes for the sign-off – get that personal sandwich – get another personal experience in there and reflect on it like you did in your opener: what was it about this that made you want to study your chosen subject (you’ve already shown off all your skills etc. – this is time to give one last punchy goodbye to the reader).

7) Onto extra-curriculars – a much more relaxing one here. Go to your list of extra-curriculars, think about what kinds of skills they can show. If struggling, ask: has this helped with my time-management? Has this involved me working independently? Anything you think will be relevant to university always works a treat. Remember keep it short.

8) So you have something to open with, you should have a number of paragraphs to fill the body, a few extracurriculars, and a final line or two to close. Looks like you ought to get writing. Good luck! Hopefully the advice outlined above should help you.

To finish, a few dos and don'ts

Dos

Do start early

Starting early will give you time to articulate your ideas. Getting a draft done relatively early on will allow you to come back to it and reconsider things – you might have continued to read up on a topic and found something else interesting.

Do be personal

It can be easy to forget this – just remember what you are writing, a personal statement, where you discuss your personal ambition to study your chosen subject at university.

Do reflect on your experiences

Every time you bring in a super-curricular, make sure you have reflected on what it seemed to highlight, what you found interesting, why that reinforced your desire to study the subject.

Do be open and willing to challenge your opinions

You should find in your reading, watching, musing, etc, that different ideas pop up that challenge what you originally thought – showing this thought process is fantastic in a personal statement.

Do get other people to read it

Reading the same words on a page time and time again will drive you mad – get someone else's opinion – ask your friends, family, teachers – they will be able to offer some insightful feedback.



Do link

Presenting flow, presenting stepping stones of interest help show you're the journey of your interest and make a personal statement, at the very least, enjoyable to read.

Don'ts

Don't leave it to the last minute

You won't have time to let it sit, you will rush things. The first draft you write is never what you end up turning in – leaving it to the last week will give you less time to edit this.

Don't quote!

Beginning with a quote is not a good idea – why start with someone else's experience when you can start with your own? Similarly, quoting from books you've read will take up valuable space.

Don't start with "ever since I was X"

Try to be a little more inventive; a lot of admissions tutors don't like to read the same thing over and over again.

Don't go out and reach a load of books for the sake of it

This will make your personal statement look confused and lumped together; read with purpose, which means following the path that books take you down – pursuing what you find interesting.

Don't list

It can be tempting to try to display everything you have done and read. Don't! Choose a few things carefully and reflect on them – as discussed, reflection is key.

Don't plagiarise

Everyone knows the story of the pyjamas-on-fire-chemistry-love plagiarism. UCAS has a record of every personal statement submitted and flags any plagiarism to all the unis you have applied to – don't be a muppet.

Don't worry about extra-curriculars

Your extracurriculars should cover 10-20% (max) of your personal statement – Oxbridge don't really mind if you're a bit of a social hermit.

Don't get caught up in structure

There's no one way of writing a personal statement – something to open, something to fill the space, and something to finish off will be fine; the rest is up to you.

Don't overthink it

It's not the do all or end all. It's just a small part of the application that shows off a little bit about you.

Don't just take my word

Here are some great guides on writing a personal statement (I have opted not to promote any links featuring adverts for paid tuition services, which this guide is not affiliated with nor endorses).

Another gem from Magdalen College's outreach and access team: <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=fWNefPddcq8>

Dr Matt Williams spills the beans on personal statements: https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=955Z7n2L_C0

Molly at Oxford on writing a personal statement: <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=D4rXo6G2jUI>

Molly at Oxford walks you through her personal statement: <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=x181K-nHVrk>

A short and sweet article from Unifrog: <https://www.unifrog.org/know-how/oxbridge-personal-statement>

Useful instagram accounts

[@mertonjcraccess](#)

[@oxfordfromtheinside](#)

[@theville_access](#)

[@kebleatlarge](#)

[@oxfordacs](#)

FREE services for state-school and disadvantaged students for to take advantage of:

www.unipear.co.uk

www.unireach.co.uk

Feel free to contact me [@oxbridgingthegap](#) on Instagram or by email via oxbridgingthegap@gmail.com with any questions you may have.

Best of luck with the personal statement and remember not to fret; it's no biggie!