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Elizabeth's 10 Top Tips for Sculpting an Outstanding Personal Statement

In 2022 24,080 people applied to Oxford University. Only 3,300 got in. More shocking is that, in the same year, 77,730 students fought it out over just 6,680 places at Edinburgh University. That's 11.6 applicants per place. Pretty terrifying.



But this is where the personal statement comes in. Used wisely, it is a magical key to unlock stubborn doors, attract interviews and secure offers in a cutthroat, oversaturated arena.

I've seen the power of the personal statement firsthand. **One of my students missed badly his conditional offer (Warwick wanted AAA*; he got ABC), but they honoured his place. Why? The Admissions Office told him they still wanted him based on the strength of his personal statement.** I told you, those 4,000 characters are *powerful*.

I've been helping students craft dynamite personal statements since 2010. In that time I've helped applicants defy the odds and secure spots at prestigious universities, including at **Oxford and Cambridge** (where I was offered a place myself, but chose to study elsewhere... That's another story though!).

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Here are my top 10 tips on how to sculpt a truly outstanding personal statement.



1. Plan Ahead:

From initial research to final submission, the personal statement always takes longer than you think. So start the



process early. I would give yourself a good two to three months to craft something truly outstanding. Create a timeline that allows you to brainstorm, research, draft and revise your personal statement multiple times (at least three rounds to reflect feedback from a private tutor/teacher/headteacher etc.). The UCAS deadline is the end of January, but you want to try and submit earlier if you can. Remember Oxbridge candidates and those applying for Medicine/Dentistry/Veterinary Science must apply by mid-October.

Elizabeth's Top Tip: First Draft Feedback

Although it's always preferable to work with a tutor from the outset, first draft stage is a great chance to consult a specialist. At this point you have something tangible to work with. The clay is warm; an experienced advisor can help you sculpt and refine it to ensure you're making the strongest possible impression.

2. Understand the Purpose:

Before you start writing, it's essential you understand the purpose of the personal statement. This is your chance to



demonstrate your passion for the subject, your suitability for the course and your unique qualities that make you a valuable addition to the university community. It is *not* an academic essay, neither is it a CV.

Elizabeth's Top Tip: One Ring to Rule Them All

Remember, you write a single statement, which is sent to all five of your UCAS choices. Do NOT reference any specific university by name - it's a surefire way of being rejected by the other four!

2. Research Your Course:

Begin by researching the course you're applying for. Understand its structure, modules and any specific requirements. Highlight the aspects of the course that attracted you and explain why it aligns with your academic and career goals.

*Elizabeth's top tip: Use **Their** Words*



Build a bank of words/phrases used in official course descriptions and pepper your statement with these terms. Using the same vocabulary as your chosen universities helps build a subtle rapport and makes you seem more suitable for the programme. You never know, the person reading your statement might have actually written the course wording—speaking their language can't hurt!

3. Tell Your Story:

Your personal statement is all about you. As much as it might feel uncomfortable for some students, you need to put yourself firmly in the spotlight. It's not showing off, it's showing your compatibility with the course. Start with a compelling introduction that grabs the reader's attention. Share personal anecdotes, experiences, and challenges that have shaped your interest in this field. Yes, the subject is important but what's more important is *your* engagement with it—your opinions, questions and realisations.





Elizabeth's top tip: The Polaroid Moment

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In life we only get one chance to make a good first impression. Your personal statement is exactly the same. When I work privately with students we spend time discovering their 'polaroid moment' together: an authentic experience that ignited their love for the chosen subject. What's yours? Close your eyes and picture one activity/conversation/person that sparked your interest (don't overthink it; your first idea is usually your best). Open your statement by *showing* the reader what this was for you. Some students find this tricky; working with a specialist can help unlock your Polaroid moment and give your first paragraph some serious punch.

4. Showcase Academic Achievements:

Highlight your academic accomplishments, but don't merely list them. Explain the skills and knowledge you gained from each experience and relate them to your chosen course. Discuss any relevant coursework, projects, or research that demonstrates your academic prowess.





Elizabeth's Top Tip: The Domino Effect

The best academic-focused paragraphs demonstrate the Domino Effect, a chain reaction that shows you actively and independently deepening your inquiry. For example, you learned about cells in A Level Biology, which led you to read an article in New Scientist on cell mutations, which you later encountered firsthand during your work experience in a hospital. You want to show your thirst for knowledge building momentum.



5. Emphasise Relevant Skills and Qualities:

Identify the skills and qualities that are crucial for success in your chosen field. Whether it's analytical thinking, teamwork, or problem-solving, provide examples of how you've developed and demonstrated these skills in your academic and extracurricular activities.

Elizabeth's Top Tip: As Easy as A, B, C

Playing on a football team isn't impressive. Or particularly useful to an Admissions Officer. What is interesting is how you *benefited* from it. Frame your points using the ABC formula: Action (what you did) - Benefit (what you gained from it) - Connection (how it makes you a better candidate for this course). A specialist can help fine-tune your formula and identify your strongest benefits, to ensure a balanced profile of skills and subject knowledge.

6. Link Extracurricular Activities to Your Course:

Discuss your extracurricular activities and relate them to the skills required for your chosen course. Whether it's



volunteering, part-time work or involvement in clubs and societies, show how these experiences have shaped your character and prepared you for university life.



Elizabeth's Top Tip: Find the Connective Tissue

The most effective paragraphs find insightful links between the skills gained doing your extracurriculars and the ones required for your course or career. I.e., how does your



position on a basketball court mirror the environment of a fast-paced trading floor or high-pressure hospital? Skill-mapping is a great way to make your hobbies work harder for you.

7. Unleash Your Fire:

Convey your passion for the subject and the course. Admissions tutors want to see genuine enthusiasm, so explain why you are excited about the prospect of studying this subject at university and how it fits into your longer-term goals.

Elizabeth's Top Tip: The Devil is in the Detail

Vagueness is the downfall of most personal statements. Admissions Officers are looking for sharp students who can evidence their enthusiasm. Broad, sweeping statements like “I am interested in the world of finance and economics” are pretty pointless. What *specific* topic/principle/theory interests you? If you don't offer details to prove your passion why should anyone believe you?



8. Be Concise and Well-Structured:

Admissions officers read thousands of personal statements, so it's essential to be concise and well-organised. Stick to the word limit: 4,000 characters and 47 lines (you can check if yours fits using the UCAS tool). Draft your statement using paragraphs to give it a clear structure, but remember that you may have to sacrifice line breaks to make your final statement fit.

Elizabeth's Top Tip: The Elephant Act

I often work with students who come to me with drafts 1,000-2,000 characters over the limit. Don't panic! Your first draft will always be too long. Re-read it (with fresh eyes) and ask yourself: what is really essential? Cut what's not. If you're really struggling to get it down to size then work with a specialist. If they're any good, they should be able to 'sit' on your statement and distill it down to its best 4,000 characters in a session or two.





9. Seek Feedback:

Once you've written your personal statement, seek feedback from trusted teachers, peers or a specialist tutor. They can offer an objective view and help you refine your statement to make it more compelling and focused.

Elizabeth's Top Tip: Three is a Magic Number



Beware of asking too many people for feedback. Everyone will have an opinion; some are more relevant than others. In general, I wouldn't suggest giving your draft to more than three people to read.

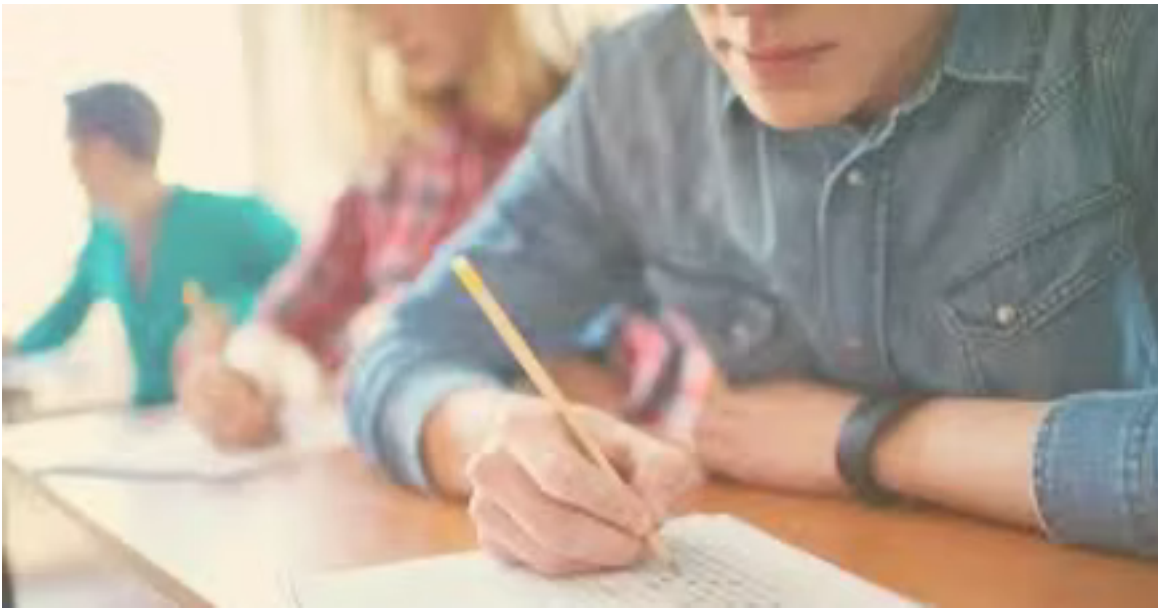
10. Review and Edit:

Editing is a crucial step in the writing process for clarity, coherence and grammatical accuracy. Consider the overall flow of your statement and make sure each sentence adds value to your narrative. Revise as needed to ensure your final draft is polished and professional.

Elizabeth's Top Tip: Like a Fine Wine

The strongest statements are the ones that have time to mellow and mature. Try to give yourself at least three days between editing sessions to allow your thoughts to percolate subconsciously between drafts.





With so many stressful deadlines in Sixth Form, it can be very tempting to just hash out a quick statement. I get it. There's a lot going on. But I'm not exaggerating when I say this could be most important document you ever write. It can open unyielding doors, edge you ahead of the competition and save your skin if you miss your conditional grades. Give it the time, care and respect it deserves and it will pay you back tenfold. I promise.

Good luck!



P.s. Still stuck? Drop me a line at info@myprivatetutoronline.com to discuss working on your statement together.

About Elizabeth Burrows:



Elizabeth was **offered a place to read English Literature and Education Studies at Cambridge**. She chose to study at the University of Bristol instead, before going on to complete her Masters. She has been tutoring internationally since 2010; her **clients include royalty and other VVIPs**. She also has a background in journalism and worked as an editor for Forbes magazine (amongst others).

Elizabeth is Founder and CEO of [My Private Tutor Online](#), a boutique e-learning company helping ambitious families achieve outstanding results. Tutors are handpicked for their expertise and world-class; Elizabeth worked alongside most of the team during her placements abroad. Many tutors are Oxbridge alumni, some teach at top UK schools and a handful are official GCSE/A Level examiners. Support extends from pre-school to post-graduate, covering entrance exams (7+, 11+, 13+ and 16+), academic assessments (GCSEs/A Levels/IB etc.), higher education applications and everything in between.



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