What should I put on my personal statement?

Wendy Heydorn shows you how to make the most of your IB experiences and skills in your personal statement or essay

As an IB student, universities will know that you have a unique and distinctive academic, co-curricular and personal profile, but you still need to make this clear when you write your personal statement. This column focuses on how you can articulate the ways in which you are well suited to your future course of study.

Personal statements are part of the application process for UK universities, and are not required by universities in most other countries. However, US universities may require you to write a personal essay, take admissions tests and submit other supplements. The personal essay is an opportunity to write authentically about yourself in response to one of the five essay prompts published by the Common App.

Whereas the personal statement is your opportunity to demonstrate your suitability for a particular university course, the personal essay is your own unique, self-revealing response to a particular essay title. In the personal essay you can still draw on your IB experience and some of the advice here may be useful.

What is a personal statement?

Simply put, the personal statement is your sales pitch. Whether you are applying for a degree in engineering, economics or English, it needs to spell out the ways in which you are suited to the course you are applying for. It is part of your application and it sits alongside your school academic reference and predicted or achieved grades.

Imagine two identically qualified candidates with the same academic profile, excellent school references and identical predicted grades. Many universities will use the personal statement as a way to decide between equally capable candidates. This is why producing an outstanding personal statement is important: it may be the final piece of the puzzle that convinces the university admissions tutor to offer you the place.

As a rule, around three-quarters of the personal statement for UK universities should focus on your academic suitability and interest in your chosen course, and the remaining quarter on other aspects.

IB subjects

Studying six subjects, with three at higher level, gives you a breadth and depth of knowledge, and your particular combination of subjects makes you distinctive and unique. Use this to your advantage. You might reflect on the links between the university course you are applying for and your IB subjects. You could identify how your approach in particular subjects is linked to your interest in your future degree.

Universities will be interested in the connections you have made to their courses and this is especially relevant if you are applying for an interdisciplinary course, such as liberal arts, combined honours or arts and sciences.

References and resources

UCAS sites

How to write a personal statement: www.thinyl.edu/ucas-howto
Frequently asked questions: www.thinyl.edu/ucas-faq
Ten places to get help with your personal statement: www.thinyl.edu/ucas-10
TOK blog
www.theoryofknowledgestudent.com

Books and periodicals that you have read outside the classroom during your research could also be used to demonstrate your interest in your chosen degree course.

Theory of knowledge

Universities want students who can think for themselves. Use what you have learnt in TOK to show your independence of mind and your critical-thinking skills. You can also use TOK as an example of your essay-writing and presentation skills, and analysis of knowledge questions.

If you have done a practice presentation or essay on a relevant topic, you might mention it as a way of demonstrating your suitability for your chosen course. If you are applying for science and technology, for example, you might briefly discuss a knowledge question about scientific knowledge. If you are applying for medicine, you might choose to do a presentation on medical ethics and mention your title and explain why thinking about these issues has made you a better candidate.

Learner profile and CAS

Most of your personal statement will focus on your academic ability and potential for your chosen course. Roughly a quarter of it can focus on other things. Here you could mention your personal strengths, qualities and virtues. What is the distinctive skill set that only you can bring? For example, in medicine, admissions tutors want to know why you as an individual are suited to being a doctor. They are not interested in general reasons that anyone could give for becoming a medical professional. Universities want to know about the unique attributes that you possess that make you a strong candidate.

This is true of other degree subjects. You might reflect on which aspects of the learner profile you have in abundance. Having identified your strengths, such as leadership or communication skills, you need examples to substantiate this. Here you can draw on your CAS and any other co-curricular activities.

In conclusion, universities will look on your application favourably if you can show them that you are the ideal candidate for the specific course you are applying for. As an IB student you have much to offer universities, and your task in the personal statement is to articulate the ways in which you are the ideal candidate for your chosen course.

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