

CUSU's Guide to Personal Statements and Wider Reading



Shadab Ahmed
CUSU Access and Funding Officer
2018/19



Contents

- 3** Introduction
- 4** Wider Reading and Super-Curricular Engagement
- 5** Arts and Humanities
- 8** Physical Sciences and Mathematics
- 10** Biological Sciences and Medicine
- 12** Applying for a course that only exists in Cambridge
- 13** Extended Project Qualification (EPQ)
- 14** Extracurriculars
- 15** Work Experience
- 16** Resources





Introduction

Personal statements play varying roles in the admissions process at Cambridge, and we know that the level of support in writing these varies massively across the country. As such, the personal statement is not used to make decisions about applications, but can be used as a stepping stone or basis for interviews in some subjects. Your teachers may also tell you to do some “wider reading”, then not explain what that actually means. This guide intends to help you write a personal statement that will help show your passion for the subject and that you have a genuine interest, as well as how to start the wider reading you always hear about. So let’s get to it.

Wider Reading and Super-Curricular Engagement

This is just a way of saying that you are going further than simply what you are taught in school, because you enjoy learning more about a particular area. Subject immersion is key! What this actually means however, varies across subjects. This guide should help you find a starting point, and engage with the subject in a useful way.

Choosing the right degree is the most important thing, before choosing a university. You can then look at the differences between individual courses at different institutions, and choose universities based on factors like the curriculum and assessment methods. Through writing a personal statement and doing some reading around the subject, you will more likely than not find the subject you really have a passion for.



top tip!

Make sure you are confident talking about absolutely anything you write in your personal statement! It's all fair game for the interviewers to quiz you on anything you've written.

Arts and Humanities

During your time at Cambridge you will find yourself doing a lot of reading. As such, reading books outside of your school curriculum is a good way to begin the process of transitioning to university life, as well as giving you content for your personal statement. For many arts and humanities subjects, the personal statement can be used to include your observations on any reading you have done outside the classroom.



top tip!

Show, don't tell! It is much better to choose a handful of books you have read and how you engaged with them, rather than listing a multitude of books with no information about what you have learnt from them.

You should generally talk about your opinions of the literature, which parts particularly interested you, whether you had any critiques and if this led you to explore the topic further. It's key to talk about the way in which you engaged with the material, and how this might have changed your perceptions on the topic.

Bad: "I read about multiculturalism, social cohesion and whether they were directly conflicting concepts. I also read about how different ethnic minorities behave in the UK. The intersection of gender and race within this was also something I read about and found interesting."



Good: "When considering multiculturalism, it is important to define what this actually means and the word's origin. An article argued that the concept is deeply rooted in classical liberalism ideologies, emphasising individual freedom and equality. This interested me, as it led me to think about government policy to improve social cohesion; whether policy sought to genuinely promote multiculturalism, so that people were tolerant and accepting of differences or a system in which assimilation was the norm, and minority groups were absorbed into the mainstream way of behaving."



This doesn't mean you should just read for the sake of it. You should pick some topics you find interesting, and delve further into it. If you find yourself bored by this extra reading, stop! Reassess the situation. Is it just the book itself? Is it the topic? Or is the subject as a whole? It is important to choose the right subject, and you should always enjoy this "super-curricular" engagement to some extent.

If you are applying for a subject you haven't studied before, or with modules that you have never heard of before, start with a small introduction primer (Oxford Very Short Introductions offer a great range). This may then give you a starting point for further reading into a particular aspect. Don't feel like you need to have an in-depth understanding of all this new content, but try to form an opinion based on what you've read so you can explain your reasoning, defend it, and then be able to adapt and change when presented new information.



top tip!

Don't be afraid of listening to podcasts and watching documentary series. This can be used to spark an interest in a topic you may not normally come across, and let you explore it further with some reading.

Another more active way of demonstrating interest in a particular area is to enter essay competitions. Different colleges run these, and they give you the chance to write about a topic you find interesting. You can then talk about this in your personal statement; what new things you learnt whilst researching the area, how your opinions may have evolved, whether it led to something else that you are interested in. Lots of these also have cash prizes! So get writing.

You should use your personal statement to demonstrate the ways in which you have shown an interest in your subject. The areas you write about should be ones you are confident and excited about discussing as, particularly in arts and humanities subjects, they will often be used as a scaffold for the interview, or at least the beginning of it to ease you in. So make the most of the chance to write about some areas you really want to talk about!

Physical Sciences and Mathematics

You don't need to read books! Subject immersion is the way forward. In this case, this means practising maths problems, function sketching, and thinking about general physical concepts and their real world applications.

Isaac Physics is a fantastic website and source of support for those who wish to practice physics problems. You can learn new content, practice questions and receive online support:

isaacphysics.org



Reading books like "A Brief History of Time" will not benefit you in the interview, but if you do find a certain part of physical sciences interesting, do read about it. Just don't expect to fully understand the concepts, as they are quite complex, and ultimately it is your mathematical ability that will help you the most.

You can enter some science olympiads to show these academic skills. This way you can revise what you have learnt in the classroom, apply it to some new and unfamiliar scenarios (just like the interview at times!) and then have a tangible achievement to write about in your personal statement.

If you are considering applying for a heavily mathematical course, you should also prepare for STEP. This is a separate paper sat alongside A Levels at the end of Year 13, used as part of an offer for mathematical courses at certain universities. You should prepare for these as soon as you have learnt the content to be able to attempt some of the questions. If you need extra support with this, that your teachers can't offer, there are some organisation who can help with materials:

- **STEP Support Programme:** maths.org/step/welcome
- **NRICH:** nrich.maths.org
- **AMSP:** amsp.org.uk/teachers/university-admission-tests

are just a few!



So when writing your personal statement, you can talk about different topics you find interesting in maths, chemistry, physics etc but the key thing is to practice your mathematical skills and logical thinking, and be sure to try to demonstrate this in any way you can. The interviewers may briefly talk about anything you write but the core of the interview will be testing your mathematical ability and ability to apply it to other contexts.

Biological Sciences and Medicine

The medicine course at Cambridge starts off with a very scientifically rigorous and theoretical curriculum. So the best way to start is looking at some extension work, find a topic that you've been taught about that you find interesting or even just peculiar. You can then do some web searching and read some short science articles about the topic. It's important to note you will not understand a lot of the details, but it should give you a general insight into the world of science, and some experimental techniques you might want to learn about.



Videos are also a fantastic and easy way to engage with science further. These are especially helpful if you are a visual learner, as you can see animations of cellular processes in the body to really see what seems to be going on inside the body. Here is a video you might want to watch to start some further reading into biological processes: www.youtube.com/watch?v=PI7nzX-aVqak

From this, you could go on to learn about the different types of receptors, or how drugs are used to treat certain diseases by interacting with receptors. There are so many different areas you can go into from just this one short video!

A top-down view of a desk with a white keyboard, a white mouse, a black pen, and a notebook. The background is a light blue gradient.

top tip!

Chemistry does play an important role in biological sciences and medicine, so make sure you revise what you've learnt during your A-Levels or equivalent! Try to find the links between all the different areas of science.

The interview might discuss a particular topic you mentioned in your personal statement, so make sure you know what you've written about the topic. You may then be asked about some other biological processes, or look at some diagrams, some of which you may not have studied so don't worry about this. Just think out loud and explain any reasoning.

Applying for a course that only exists in Cambridge

You may be applying for a subject that only Cambridge offers. If this is the case, you should tailor your personal statement to the subject you are applying for at other universities. You should still be writing about the academic engagement with the subject, with the further reading or activities you have taken part in, but it can focus on the subject applied for elsewhere.



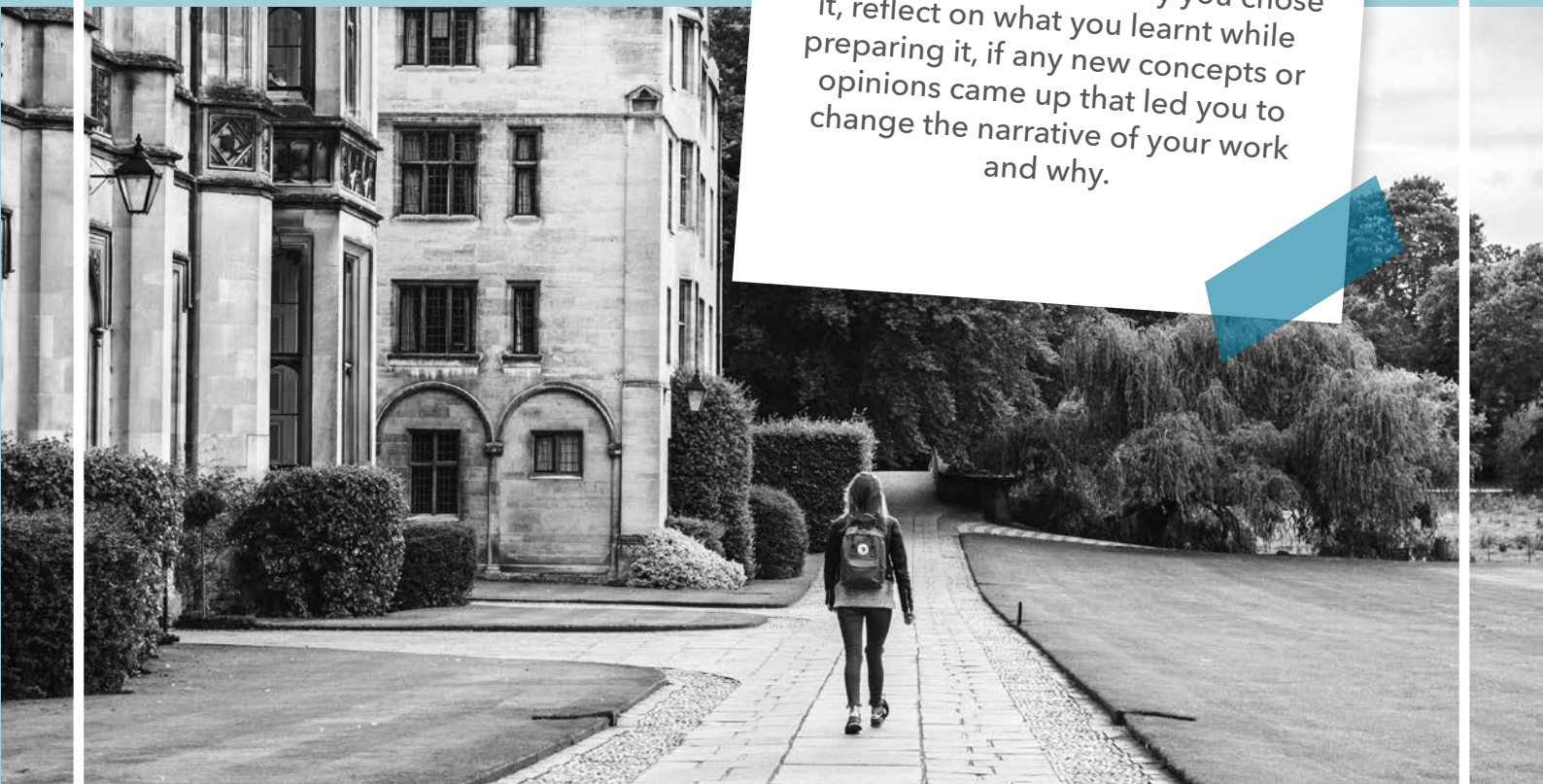
The Cambridge application process includes a short form called the Supplementary Application Questionnaire (SAQ), which gives you a chance to write about the Cambridge course specifically in this, so don't worry if your personal statement feels too focussed on non-Cambridge courses; Admissions Tutors are very used to this.

Extended Project Qualification (EPQ)

This is another great way of developing new academic skills in a topic you have an interest in if your school offers it. Although we don't include the EPQ in our standard offer, it is a very useful tool to demonstrate independent learning outside of a set course. This could also be a way in which to navigate a new topic that you won't necessarily have studied in class, especially if you are applying for a course that isn't offered at A-Level or equivalent.

top tip!

Don't just write about the content of your EPQ, write about why you chose it, reflect on what you learnt while preparing it, if any new concepts or opinions came up that led you to change the narrative of your work and why.



Extracurriculars

Sports, music, drama etc are all great things to do! You should definitely carry on taking part in these activities to round yourself as a person, or just because they're pretty fun. Cambridge however will not take these into account when assessing your application, so don't feel the need to learn to play twelve instruments and play sport for Team GB... All that matters in admissions is your academic ability and potential.

Other universities however, do place some emphasis, to varying degrees, on extracurriculars. As such, you may want to write a couple of sentences about anything non-academic you do, so that you can strengthen your application to your other universities.

Work Experience

The only course you will really need to have some sort of work experience for is (Veterinary) Medicine. This is to give you a small insight into the workings of the healthcare system as well as hopefully show you have the ability to empathise with people. It is most important for you being able to confirm that this is the right career for you, having experienced the reality of it. It isn't always easy to get work experience in an actual hospital, so volunteering in other places also works. This could be in a care home, schools, anywhere where you can show compassion, patience and the ability to work in a multidisciplinary team.



top tip!

It's better to do an online course in a subject you find really interesting than finding a temporary part time job that you are only doing to say you have done work experience!

For everything else, you don't need to do work experience for your personal statement. This doesn't mean you shouldn't do it if it's relevant! If you get the opportunity to do some real engineering in a university or company, then do it. You can then write about what you learnt from the experience and how you think it interacts with the theory of what you would be studying at Cambridge, or use it as a bridge to further reading about a topic.

Resources

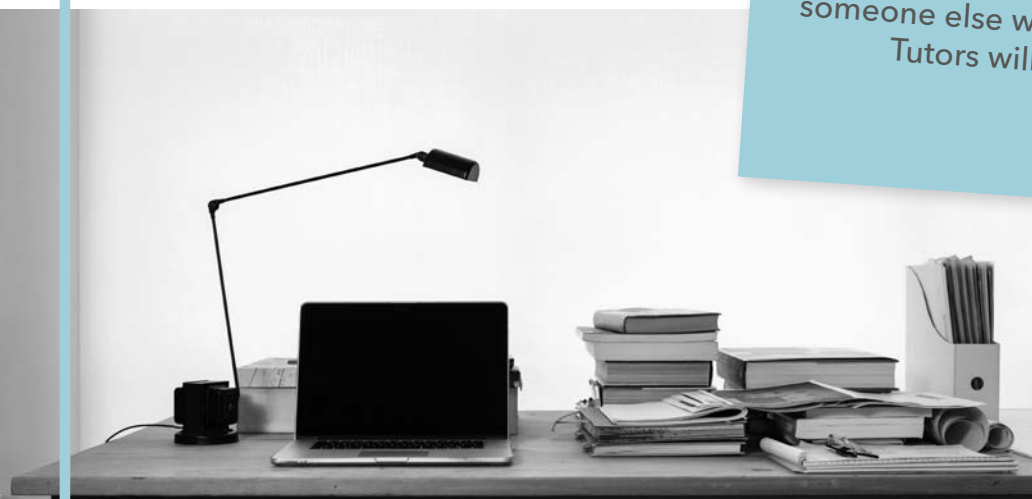
HE+ is another great resource created by the university to help introduce you to some different topics within a subject. If you enjoy reading about them, there are some links to further reading that you can explore to find out more about the topics: www.myheplus.com

If you want to spend a small amount of time doing an online course, **edX** is an amazing resource to allow you to watch real lectures from universities as well as complete online courses for free! These come in a variety of different subjects and levels so you should always be able to find something of interest: www.edx.org

TED Talks can also be an easier way to start engaging with different areas. This will mean you can just sit and watch some videos until something peaks an interest and leads you to read further around the topic: www.ted.com/talks

top tip!

Don't let others shape your personal statement, it really is for you to show your interest in the subject you are applying for. Make sure it sounds like you, there's no point having someone else write it as Admissions Tutors will soon realise!



Good luck!



Shadab Ahmed
CUSU Access and Funding Officer
2018/19

Check out the **Alternative Prospectus** for honest information about what it's like to be a student at Cambridge:

www.applytocambridge.com

