



Lucy Cavendish College  
University of Cambridge

# Writing a Competitive Personal Statement

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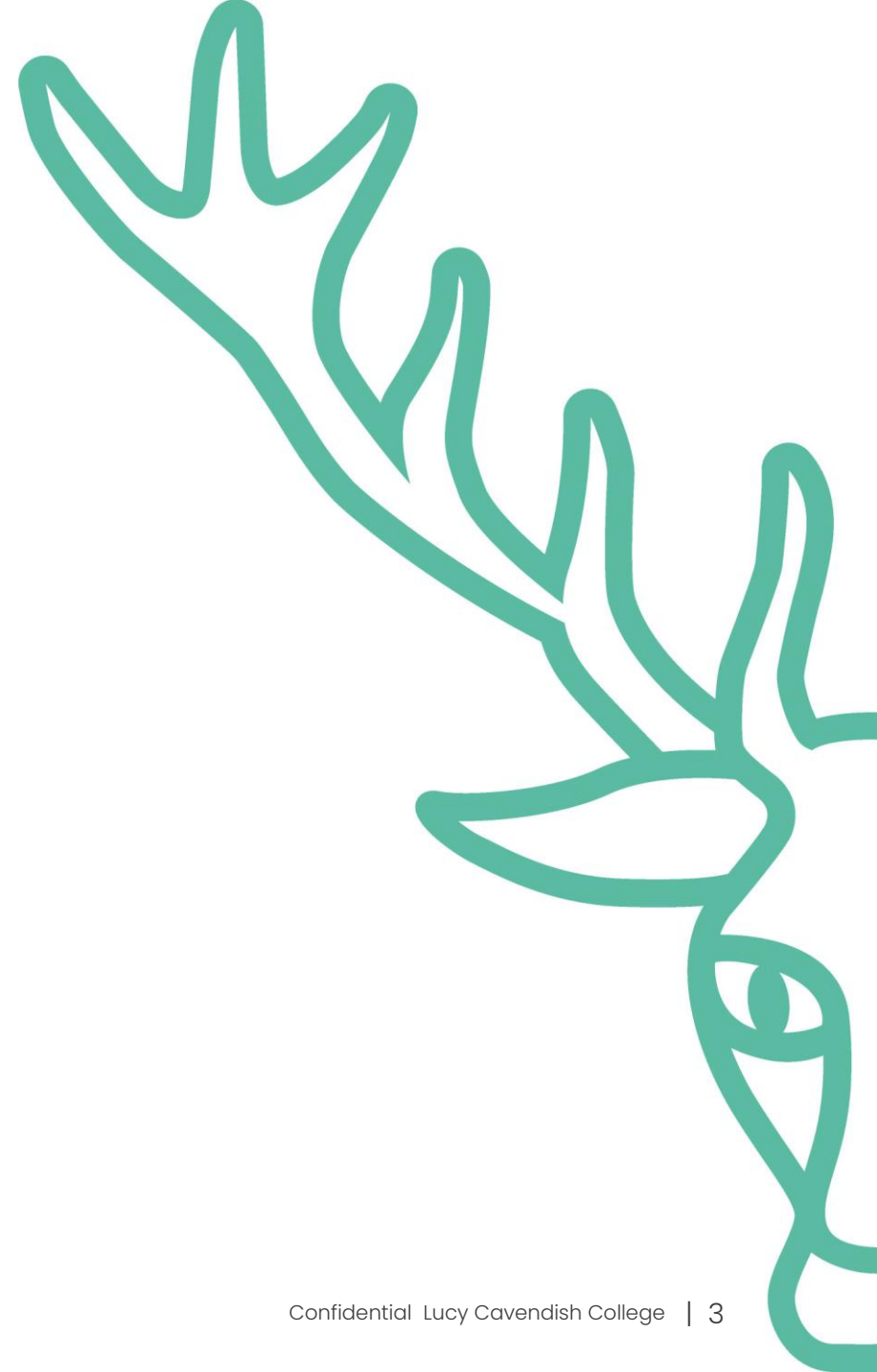
# Objectives

1. Understand where the personal statement fits in to the application process
2. Understand what makes a competitive personal statement.
3. Understand what you can be doing now to prepare to draft an application



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How are you feeling about  
writing your personal  
statement?



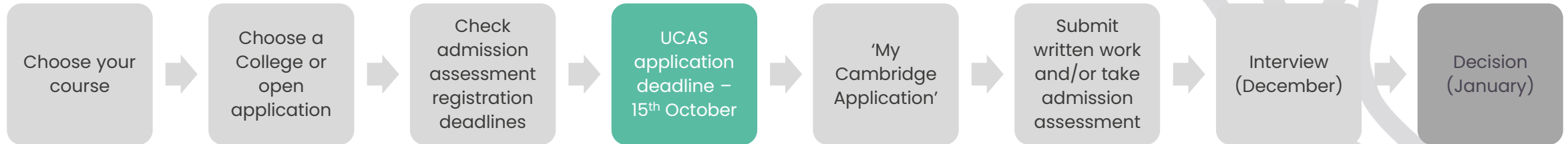


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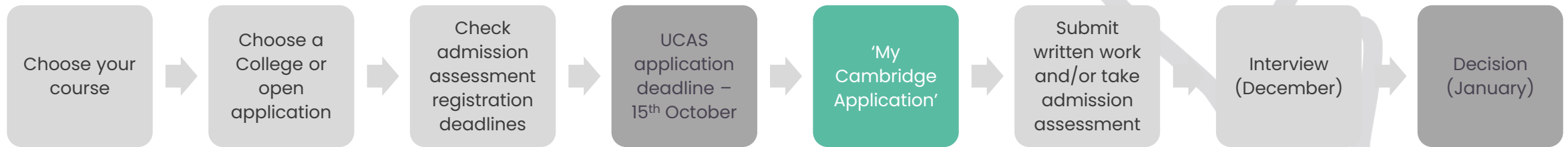
# What actually is a personal statement?



# What actually is a personal statement?



- **15<sup>th</sup> October** (6pm UK time) for Oxbridge (+ most courses in medicine, veterinary medicine and dentistry)
- 29<sup>th</sup> January (6pm UK time) for other applications
- One UCAS application for all universities
- Includes:
  - Personal details
  - Employment history
  - Course/university choices (up to 5)
  - Academic record
  - School/college reference and predictions
  - Personal statement



- Additional online form completed after submitting the UCAS application
- Link received within 48 hours of completing the UCAS form
- Deadline: Usually 22<sup>nd</sup> October (6pm)
- Asks for more detailed information that we do not receive on the UCAS form
  - Topics studied at school
  - Additional contextual information
  - Optional additional Cambridge-specific personal statement



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What should I include in my  
personal statement?



# What actually is a personal statement?

A opening paragraph explaining why you want to study the course	At least 80%
3-4 paragraphs analysing your supra-curricular exploration of your subject	
A short closing paragraph about your extra-curricular interests and career aspirations/future plans	Maximum 20%

- 47 lines or 4000 characters
- You send the same personal statement to every university you apply to, so it needs to be relevant to every course you are applying for
- Things to include in your personal statement:
  - Why this course?
  - A demonstration of your enthusiasm for and commitment to your chosen course
  - Areas of interest in your subject
  - Analysis of what you have done to learn/prepare
  - What you have gained from undertaking supracurricular activities



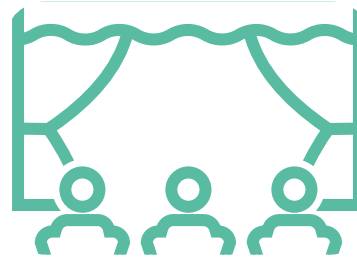
# What can I do to explore my subject?



Wider reading



University lectures  
and talks, MOOCs



Theatre



Academic taster  
sessions or  
workshops



Work experience



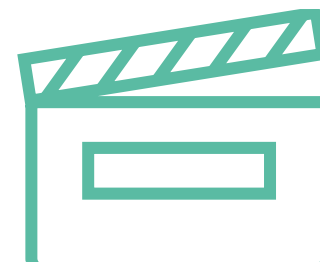
Visits to  
museums/exhibitions  
(also digital collections)



Keeping up-to-date  
with current events



Podcasts and radio  
shows



Films and  
documentaries



Practicing key  
subject-specific  
skills

[www.lucy.cam.ac.uk/study-us/prospective-applicants](http://www.lucy.cam.ac.uk/study-us/prospective-applicants)



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Where does it fit into the  
admissions process?



# What information do we use to assess applications?

- Academic record
- Personal statement
- Teacher reference
- Performance in any admission test/assessment (where required)
- Written work (where required)
- Contextual information
- Interview (if interviewed)

**No part of an application is considered in isolation** – all available information is looked at together before decisions are made. We consider every application individually, taking all aspects into account.

# What are we looking for?

- Academic ability and potential
- Satisfy any subject requirements
- Ability to think critically and independently
- Genuine subject interest – motivation and enthusiasm
- Vocational commitment (where appropriate)

**You can demonstrate many of these things in your personal statement**



<b>Course selection criteria</b>	<b>What supracurricular activities have I done which demonstrate this?</b>
Academic ability and potential	<ul style="list-style-type: none"><li>•</li><li>•</li><li>•</li></ul>
Subject requirements	<ul style="list-style-type: none"><li>•</li><li>•</li><li>•</li></ul>
Ability to think critically and independently	<ul style="list-style-type: none"><li>•</li><li>•</li><li>•</li></ul>
Genuine subject interest – motivation and enthusiasm	<ul style="list-style-type: none"><li>•</li><li>•</li><li>•</li></ul>
Vocational commitment (where appropriate)	<ul style="list-style-type: none"><li>•</li><li>•</li><li>•</li></ul>



# In the personal statement, we want to see

- An explanation of why a student has chosen the course
- A demonstration of the students' enthusiasm for and commitment to their chosen course
- Particular areas of interest in the subject
- Analysis of what a student has done to learn/prepare
- Supracurricular activities
- Honesty!



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# Getting started



# Start writing!

- A blank page can be intimidating!
- It's much easier to perfect a rough draft than to write from scratch
- Write what feels easiest
  - You don't need to start with the first paragraph
  - Write what you can now, and the rest will come to you later



# Look over your supracurricular bank

- Refresh your memory about all the great supracurricular exploration you've been doing
- If you haven't been keeping a supracurricular 'log', thank back and make notes about everything you've done

# Compare and contrast

- Look for links or differences between supracurricular activities to find talking points

# Linking it all together

In our Time: 'Time'

Black and British: A  
Forgotten History

Women in my  
village research  
project

Global Economic  
History: A Very Short  
Introduction

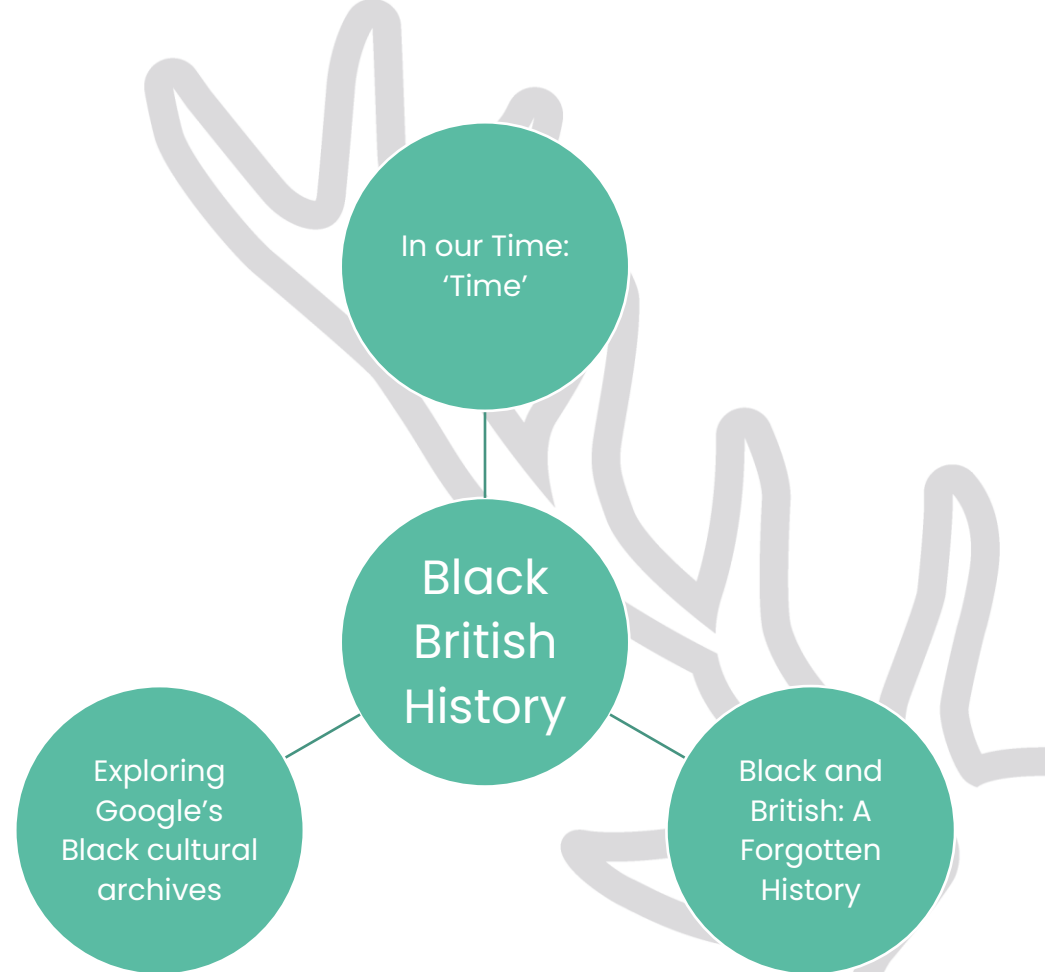
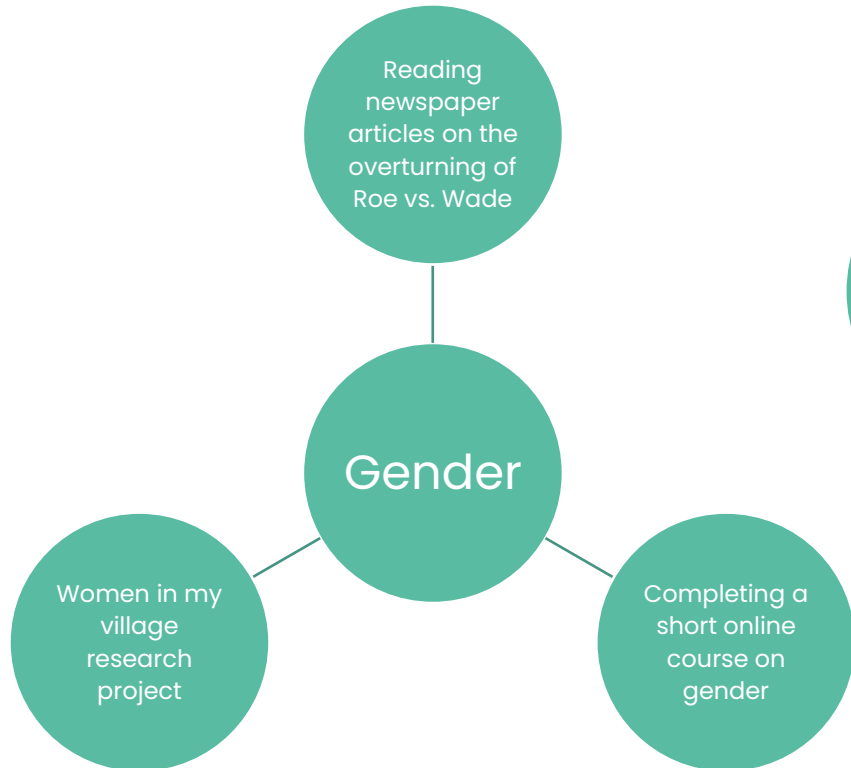
Completing a short  
online course on  
gender

Documentary on  
the British Industrial  
Revolution

Exploring Google's  
Black cultural  
archives

Reading newspaper  
articles on the  
overturning of Roe  
vs. Wade

# Linking it all together



# Linking it all together

Strong personal statements often show **how a student's ideas and understanding have developed over time**

- Identify themes and patterns within the subject that the you have become aware of and started to explore
- Connect supracurricular activities to demonstrate how your ideas are evolving
- Tell a story of academic development that began with an interest and culminates in the student applying for that course at university

This is not easy, but it can be very effective.

# Integrating supracurricular activities into your personal statement

**[Super-curricular activity]** made me think a lot about the impact of **[item]** on **[subject]**. **[Resource]** sparked my interest in **[topic]**, and I did further research by looking into **[topic]** in **[resource]**. I think **[discuss resources critically]**.

# Reflect and engage

How is this text shaped by its context?

How does this compare to other ideas/theories you've come across?

What are the supporting arguments? Do you think they're convincing?

Did you enjoy this? Why?

Did this challenge or confirm your prior knowledge and views?

What questions do you have now? How could they be answered?

# Adding depth

- Don't just list all the things you've done
- Show us you've thought about your experiences and learned things from them
- In turn, you still demonstrate the qualities we're looking for without actually having to state that you have them



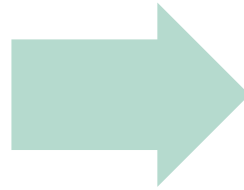
# Adding depth

When studying the conflicting themes of security and freedom in Tennyson's 'The Lady of Shalott', I was struck by how the Lady's death in the pursuit of freedom seems pointlessly tragic. I explored Tennyson's works further, and discovered 'Ulysses', in which the persona's death seems more heroic. One potential hypothesis for this difference is the use of a third-person narrator and a female character in the former poem, whereas the latter is first-person and male. I came to this by contrasting Tennyson's stylistic choices to reveal different interpretations of the same theme. The joy I get from analysing the presentation of complex themes excites me for my future study of English Literature.

# Adding depth

Things that show my interest in the course (i.e. supracurricular activities)

- 
- 
- 
- 
- 



Adding depth (e.g. what did you learn? what did you think about it?)

- 
- 
- 
- 
-

# Writing the personal statement

- Once you've got some ideas down, try sorting them by what they're about and which are most important
- You can treat it just like an essay, with an introduction and conclusion
- Then edit it down to 4000 characters/47 lines (this is probably the trickiest bit!)
- Not everything you've done will fit in your personal statement

## Tip #1:

*“As a science based student I approach all of my work as logically as I can. I am neat, thorough and pay great attention to detail. This has been especially useful in mathematics as it has enabled me to show my reasoning in clearly thought out steps. I have good self-motivation and work well independently.”*

## Tip #1: **Show, don't tell**

*"As a science based student I approach all of my work as logically as I can. I am neat, thorough and pay great attention to detail. This has been especially useful in mathematics as it has enabled me to show my reasoning in clearly thought out steps. I have good self-motivation and work well independently."*

## Tip #2:

*“The medical profession combines knowledge and wisdom from just about every aspect of life which is directed towards helping humanity. A physician is not just part of the health care team but the leader of the health care team. He is free to practice broadly or to acquire a specialty of his own choosing. Thus medicine offers the challenges and fulfilment that I am seeking in a career.”*

## Tip #2: **Keep it personal**

*“The medical profession combines knowledge and wisdom from just about every aspect of life which is directed towards helping humanity. A physician is not just part of the health care team but the leader of the health care team. He is free to practice broadly or to acquire a specialty of his own choosing. Thus medicine offers the challenges and fulfilment that I am seeking in a career.”*

## Tip #3:

*A local hospital placement gave me the opportunity to visit A&E, Radiology and Obstetrics and Gynaecology.*



## Tip #3: **Discuss, don't list**

*A local hospital placement gave me the opportunity to visit A&E, Radiology and Obstetrics and Gynaecology. These visits to the departments highlighted the variety and diversity of the fascinating specialities medicine encompasses. A placement shadowing a clinic staff was hugely informative regarding daily life as a doctor. During the day I sat in on consultations ranging from routine post natal checkups to discussions of treatment for young people with diabetes and overactive thyroid glands.*

## Tip #3: **Discuss, don't list**

*...Throughout my time there the doctor's genuine interest in his cases and unfaltering motivation highlighted to me the privilege of having such a stimulating profession. This, together with the ever advancing nature of a career in medicine, was brought to the fore by an infant who was having a check up as a result of her being put on an ECMO machine after her birth with Meconium Aspiration Syndrome. The ease with which the doctor broached and dealt with sensitive subject matter also emphasised the importance of a warm, approachable manner and an ability to communicate to a person on their level of understanding.*

## Tip #4:

- *“From a young age I have been interested in studying Psychology at university. My interest first came about when I was 11 years old. I was sitting on a Sunday evening watching the Psychologists on Big Brother discuss the contestants' behaviours. I am passionate about studying Psychology in more depth.”*
- *“Ever since I was a baby, I knew I wanted to study Medicine.”*
- *“George Santayana said “Those who forget the past are condemned to repeat it.” This is why I want to study History at university.”*

## Tip #4: **Try to avoid clichés**

- *“From a young age...”*
- *“I am passionate about...”*
- Be wary of quotes
- Avoid rhetorical questions – e.g., *“Where would we be without science?”* (But you can include real questions that you’ve thought about whilst exploring your subject!)

## Tip #5:

- *“I am doing A Level English, History and Geography.”*
- *“I got 5 8s and 3 7s in my GCSEs.”*

## Tip #5: **Avoid repetition**

- *“I am doing A Level English, History and Geography.”*
- *“I got 5 8s and 3 7s in my GCSEs.”*

If you have extenuating circumstances, ask your referee to include this in their teacher reference.

## Tip #5: **Avoid repetition**

### What everyone sees

- Personal statement
- School reference
- A-Level subjects
- Predicted grades
- GCSE grades and subjects

### What Oxbridge sees

- Admissions assessment performance
- Interview performance
- Contextual information about school and local area
- Educational disruption
- Additional questionnaire information

## Tip #6:

*“As a member of the school science club I always look forward to the opportunity to discuss relevant current issues. For example, we had a lively debate about the recent MSRA problems and what might be done to improve the situation; recently, I gave a short presentation on human stem cell cloning. I am really looking forward to, learning more about the ethical issues relating to medical advances during my degree course.”*



## Tip #6: **Get it checked!**

*“As a member of the school science club I always look forward to the **opportunity** to discuss **relevant** current issues. For example, we had a lively debate about the recent MSRA problems and what might be done to improve the situation; **recently**, I gave a short presentation on human stem cell **clonning**. I am really looking forward to, learning more about the ethical issues relating to medical advances during **my my** degree course.”*

## Tip #7:

*“Sure, lots of kids like to start fires, but how many of them have a propane torch, gallons of accelerants and a basket of dry rags. I was intrigued by the way different materials react to being set alight, and that’s how I ended up deciding to study Chemistry at university.”*

## Tip #7: **Don't try to be quirky or whacky**

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## Tip #8: **Don't plagiarise!**

*'Ever since I accidentally burnt holes in my pyjamas after experimenting with a chemistry set on my eighth birthday, I have always had a passion for science.'*

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# 234

## Tip #9:

- From a young age I have always wanted to study psychology. My parents are both psychologists and every evening we discuss psychologists over the dinner table.
- I want to study psychology because I find it interesting. I have read lots of books about psychology.
- When I finish my degree, I want to be a psychologist.

## Tip #9: **Be specific**

- From a young age I have always wanted to study psychology. My parents are both psychologists and every evening we discuss psychologists over the dinner table.
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## Tip #9: **Be specific**

- From a young age I have always wanted to study **beatboxing**. My parents are both **beatboxers** and every evening we discuss **beatboxing** over the dinner table.
- I want to study **beatboxing** because I find it interesting. I have read lots of books about **beatboxing**.
- When I finish my degree, I want to be a **beatboxer**.



## Tip #10:

- My interest in Cambridge's Land Economy course was sparked by...

## Tip #10: ...**but not too specific!**

- My interest in **Economics** was sparked by...



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# Activity



# Let's strengthen this paragraph

I am interested in Human, Social, and Political Sciences because they help us to understand the views of different communities. In my role as a School Councillor, I wanted to ensure that I was accurately representing pupils' views, so I conducted a survey to investigate them. This project helped me to develop my skills and knowledge of how to design surveys in order to collect data reliably and ethically. I also learned how to apply my knowledge of statistics in order to interpret the data and notice patterns. I found that views on issues such as uniform differed across year groups. I was able to present these findings to my school's Senior Leadership to influence policy choices.



What to keep?

What to get rid of?

What to add?

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## What to add?

Sociology because they help us to **understand the views of different communities**. As a **School Councillor**, I wanted to ensure I was accurately representing pupils' views. In designing a **survey** to investigate them, I developed my skills and understanding of how to **collect data reliably and ethically**. I learned to apply my knowledge of **statistics** to **interpret the data and notice patterns**, such as how views on issues such as **uniform** differed across year groups. I was able to **present these findings to my school's Senior Leadership to influence policy choices**.

## What to add? **More detail**

Sociology because they help us to **understand the views of different communities**. As a **School Councillor**, I wanted to ensure I was accurately representing pupils' views. In designing a **survey** to investigate them, I developed my skills and understanding of how to **collect data reliably and ethically**. I learned to apply my knowledge of **statistics from Maths A-Level** to **interpret the data and notice patterns**, such as how views on **discipline and uniform** differed across year groups. I was able to **present these findings to my school's Senior Leadership to influence policy choices**.

## What to add? **More dynamic language**

Sociology because they help us to **understand the views of different communities**. As a **School Councillor**, I wanted to ensure I was accurately representing pupils' views. In designing a **survey** to investigate them, I developed my skills and understanding of how to **collect data reliably and ethically**. I **utilised** my knowledge of **statistics** from Maths A-Level to **interpret the data and notice patterns**, such as how views on discipline and **uniform** differed across year groups. I was able to **present these findings to my school's Senior Leadership**, **and relished the opportunity to influence policy decisions**.

# The finished product!

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# FAQs



# What if I'm applying for several slightly different courses?

- These are a bit trickier to write, but not impossible
- Try to make some reference to all aspects of each course you're applying for
- It's fine not to give equal weighting to each, as the universities will understand you might be in this situation.
- Cambridge: you may find it helpful to use the additional Cambridge-specific personal statement
- Other universities: for example, if you were applying for HSPS at Cambridge and Politics everywhere else, you could focus on Politics, but try to also talk about Sociology, International Relations and/or Social Anthropology too, otherwise it looks like you don't understand what's in HSPS
- You could talk about the crossovers between the subjects

# What if I'm applying for several slightly different courses?

Sparked by a study on the Cuban Missile Crisis as part of the history course, I fostered an interest in Cuba's history and culture and began watching documentaries and films that revealed the true nature of the country like "Chico and Rita", "Buena Vista Social Club" and "I am Cuba". This allowed me to see the pre-revolutionary Cuba which led me to read some astounding accounts of this time such as "The Red Umbrella" by Christina Diaz Gonzalez, "90 miles to Havana" and Che Guevara's Motorcycle Diaries. One of the most interesting aspects of Che's diaries was how his travels through Latin America transformed him from a relatively naïve young doctor to a future revolutionary icon. This is what I shall focus my advanced higher Spanish dissertation on and hope to continue studying his work in Cuba as part of my degree. Furthermore, upon studying the American Civil War, I started to look at the relationship between Cuba and The United States throughout history.

## How much should I say about extracurricular activities?

- Cambridge does not take extracurriculars into account in the admissions process
- You should use no more than 20% of the space for this
- Rather than just listing your hobbies, demonstrate transferable skills and other qualities universities might be looking for



“

I have been a committed and motivated student throughout my school life, becoming captain of the school hockey team and earning a sports leader award earlier this year. I have also completed Duke of Edinburgh Silver Award demonstrating my resilience and teamwork skills.



# Do I need a quote/anecdote/thesaurus?

- No!
- Only use a quote if there is something that's genuinely meaningful to you
- You don't need to start with a dazzling anecdote, or stating that you've *always* loved your subject
- The honest story is likely to be far more compelling, if less dramatic
- Try to avoid too much repetition of words, (e.g. 'fascinated') but avoid using a thesaurus to sort this out
- Telling us that you were mesmerised, enthralled, and fell off your chair with excitement doesn't tell us anything – you should demonstrate your fascination rather than state it

# Should I mention extenuating circumstances in my personal statement?

- e.g., physical/mental health condition, caring responsibilities, school not offering certain subjects/qualifications, financial hardship
- This will likely be more appropriate in your teacher reference than your personal statement – talk to your teachers and make sure they're aware
- For Cambridge, there is also a designated place to detail this in 'My Cambridge Application'

## Can I talk about other A-Levels?

*I enjoy political dramas, having seen *The Resistible Rise of Arturo Ui*, 1984, and *Great Britain*, all exploring abuse of state power. Plays I study in **Classical Civilisation** champion democracy, a pillar of Athenian society; Oedipus' hubris and torture of the herdsman show the corrupting effect of power, while he rules benevolently when counseled by others. Their political relevance continues with the pleasing irony of works written to support an existing patriarchy being cannibalised by suffragettes, who used speeches from *Medea* as inspiration in their fight for the vote.*

# Do I need work experience?

- Work experience is only really advised (but not required) for 'vocational courses' like Medicine and Veterinary Medicine
- Not so much whether you've done it in the first place, but what you learned from it and how you've reflected on it critically and carefully
- Lots of flexibility given the global health situation

*Following the cancellation of my work experience at a local hospital, I **joined a group of volunteers supporting residents in our community during lockdown.** I delivered essential shopping and prescriptions to those shielding, while paying careful attention to maintaining hygiene and social distance. This **highlighted the need for vigilant attention to detail when caring for vulnerable adults.** To develop my understanding of professional communication and empathy, I **watched videos of doctor-patient interactions.** I **noticed that** communication was more positive when the doctors employed an 'active listening' strategy, making eye contact and using verbal and non-verbal affirmations.*



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# Finishing your personal statement



# Finishing your personal statement

- Proofread aloud
- Get your teachers, advisors, friends, and family to check it
- Redraft it until you're happy and until the spelling, punctuation, and grammar are correct

## If you have an interview...

- Keep a copy of your Personal Statement! Re-read it before interview
- Anything in your Personal Statement could be discussed (so tell the truth!)
- Move on after submitting your UCAS application – build on what you've already done
- Follow through on any claims you've written

# Over the summer

- Read, watch, listen, engage
- Think, critique, analyse, evaluate
- Keep a log of what you're doing
- Start writing!





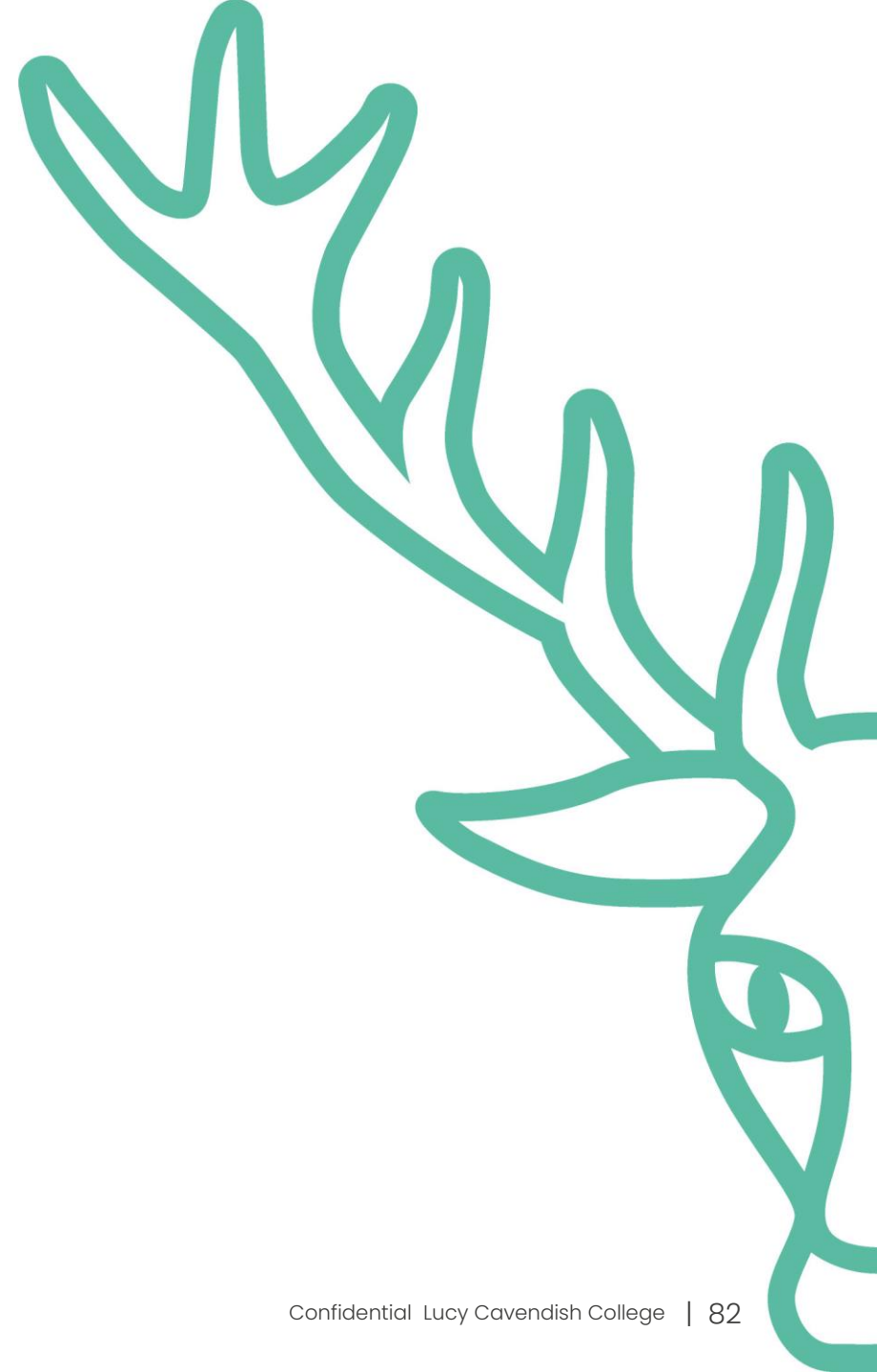
# Final points

- Your personal statement is just one part of a much larger application process
- Be yourself – don't feel like you have to 'stand out'
- We are looking for:
  - An explanation of why the student has chosen the course
  - A demonstration of the student's enthusiasm for and commitment to the chosen course
  - Particular areas of interest within the subject
  - Analysis of what the student has done to learn/prepare
  - An explanation of what the student has gained from undertaking supra-curricular activities
  - Honesty!



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How are you feeling now  
about writing your personal  
statement?





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# Any questions?

Or you can always email us at [outreach@lucy.cam.ac.uk](mailto:outreach@lucy.cam.ac.uk)

Find out more about Lucy Cavendish, sign-up to our newsletter and get involved with events:  
[www.lucy.cam.ac.uk/study-us/prospective-applicants](http://www.lucy.cam.ac.uk/study-us/prospective-applicants)

