Personal Statements - Tips for Teachers

Lessons from the 25/26 cycle

We will cover:

- Common mistakes students make that weaken their responses
- What competitive responses need to include
- How the University of Bath's approach to researching, planning and writing a personal statement can support students in making a competitive personal statement

Core message:

Most weaker statements are not weak because students have nothing to say. They are weak because students:

- list experiences rather than interpret them
- use generic skills language
- describe rather than analyse
- fail to connect experiences to the course
- do not show how their thinking has developed

The stronger statements take similar raw material and turn it into **academic evidence, subject insight and intellectual progression**.

Core message:

Stronger Statements

- Create a ‘narrative of interest’
- Demonstrate how experience developed their thinking/challenged them/allowed them to understand something they previously did not.
- Make direct connections to the course to demonstrate why their experiences are valuable.

The stronger statements take similar raw material and turn it into **academic evidence, subject insight, intellectual progression and proof that they are ready to hit the ground running**

Problem 1 - listing

Firstly, I would like to study this subject because, in my final year of my BAC I have started philosophy, which is in the same domain as psychology. Even if it is early days, I find it interesting and I think it will serve as a good introduction to psychology.
Secondly, the course will provide an opportunity to understand other individuals and their behaviour, including my brother, which intrigues me. Living with a younger brother and a twin sister for the last 17 years frequently makes me reflect on why their reactions are so different from mine and each other.
Outside of the family, in the news, at school and through interacting in society generally, understanding human behaviour constantly fascinates me. Our brain is such an intricate and highly complex organ with so much to teach us.
Finally, my education in France has been quite broad, covering multiple subjects, so I am looking forward to specialising in a subject I am passionate about.

Solution – PEEL/Narrative of interest

My interest in psychology began with a desire to comprehend how the brain constructs a view of itself. This curiosity was first sparked through Oliver Sacks' 'Musicophilia', which illustrated how music and memory shape identity. While I was intrigued by the striking case studies, I found the tone romanticised neurological conditions by prioritising narrative over scientific explanation. Seeking further empirical insights, I turned to Dr Ramachandran's 'Phantoms in the Brain', which excited me by challenging my assumption that sensory experiences reflect reality. His work on the somatosensory cortex and mirror therapy showed me how perception can be deceptive, leading me to question pain, not as a purely nociceptive signal, but shaped by culture and language.

Problem 2 – Generality (especially in skills language)

I'm a cadet sergeant in the Royal Marine Cadets… it has taught me so much. I have learnt teamwork, leadership, skills in management and organisation.

I work as a chef in a restaurant. Thus it has greatly helped me develop my skills such as teamwork, time management, efficiency and working under pressure…

Question 2: How have your qualifications and studies prepared you?

“Maths has allowed me to develop my problem-solving skills. It has helped me to develop a methodical approach to every problem that I encounter…

Physics played perhaps the most important role… specifically thermodynamics and ideal gases.

Solution: Demonstrate application of skills and academic development.

My interest in the waves module of A-level Physics has driven me to explore the creative possibilities of sound. For the International Young Physicists' Tournament, I investigated energy transfer in acoustic fire suppression, gaining invaluable experience in presenting technical research while troubleshooting experiments challenged me to apply wave theory in practice. I am now building and programming a guitar effects pedal using a microcontroller..

Solution: Demonstrate application of skills and academic development.

Exploring different subjects has shaped how I approach psychology, encouraging me to draw on ideas across disciplines. In biology, studying the nervous system and synaptic transmission furthered my ability to consider thinking from a cause-and-effect perspective. I expanded on this by reading 'Thinking, Fast and Slow', which detailed the role of heuristics, biases and how system 1 vs 2 thinking reduces 'cognitive load'. I also developed my statistical understanding of the chi-squared test and the binomial test, applying these in the Caius Explore competition, planning a study on preference and ability to differentiate between milk-first and milk-second tea

Applied (course specific) skills language

While volunteering at a care home that specialises in dementia, I encountered many different people with unique needs. Many residents preferred individual conversations, while carers favoured group activities so they could interact with as many residents as possible. As found by Mehl et al, in Psychological Science (2010), substantive conversations were correlated with better well-being, so we adapted by doing more one-to-one's to deliver patient-specific care and improve their health. In addition, I enjoy applying research findings. In therapy, I have experienced the implications of research first-hand, using cognitive behavioural therapy to unlearn negative thinking patterns such as comparison, and replacing them with positive thoughts. This in turn had an impact on my behaviour, showing one of the differences psychology can make to people's lives. This has inspired me to pursue a career in counselling.

Question 3: What else have you done to prepare?

Common weakness: extracurricular listing

Playing for the Harlequins Academy for the last two years has meant I need to practise and execute certain skills well, like my ability to work in a team environment and focus on leadership. It also enhances my communication and listening skills. These skills are essential for success in rugby, but also beneficial in regular life, and will be useful in the workplace and at university

Outside of education, I have joined the Sea Cadets, with whom I was able to do my Basic, Intermediate, and hopefully Advanced* in Marine Engineering specialisations. While not formal qualifications, they have prepared me for this degree by developing my knowledge in an outdoor and workshop environment. As an example, I am now able to do an oil change and adjust the valve clearance, using the correct equipment.

Solution: PEEL – Narrative of interest

Question 3: What else have you done to prepare?

During work experience at Ramboll… my tasks spanned disciplines from urban planning to transport infrastructure. Visiting construction sites and working with peers to design and present drainage systems and underground tunnels assured me that engineering offers a perfect balance of scientific and creative thinking…

Many residents preferred individual conversations, while carers favoured group activities… substantive conversations were correlated with better well-being, so we adapted by doing more one-to-one's…

Solution: PEEL – Narrative of interest

My curiosity about emotion and social function led me to complete Harvard's 'Managing Happiness' MOOC, after which I presented on the limbic system and brain lateralisation to my biology class, exploring overstimulation and emotional regulation in PTSD. I was intrigued by the evolutionary function of the latter in social groups, drawing on Robert Trivers' ideas, such as reciprocal altruism, linking happiness and social presence, which I used in my shortlisted John Locke essay on self-deceit. This became practically valuable when I joined a youth advisory panel within the charity 'Listen to Act', acting as a medium between medical practitioners and teenagers, enhancing my understanding of emotional dynamics in adolescent healthcare. I also evaluated the value of research into happiness in my shortlisted Sidgwick prize essay, delving into informing public policy, while allowing for behavioural nuance. Exploring longer-term behaviour in fossilisation, I won the 'most entertaining' entry for the Cambridge Biology Challenge, portraying my interest in the creative light of a Billy Joel song, strengthening my research skills. Above all, I hope to pursue psychology where cognition, culture and identity converge.


Thank you for listening –
Any questions?