

Writing effective UCAS references

What are Admissions Tutors looking for?

Admissions tutors are looking for the right students for their courses – those with the appropriate level of academic ability, the motivation and skills to thrive on the course and a genuine interest in the course.

The Personal Statement should include the student's proven interest in the course, relevant academic skills and awareness of the course content. The reference reveals more about the student including the all-important predicted grades, further information about the academic skills and good qualities and, in some cases, any identifiable disadvantage the student may be facing.

There needs to be a clear distinction between references for different students – all references will be positive but it should be clear when the school is talking about an exceptional applicant, a good applicant and an average applicant. This is particularly important when students are applying for similar courses at the same university with different entry requirements – the same Admissions Tutor may be responsible for both courses so it doesn't help if one requires BBC and the other requires ABB and both references talk about *'the best student we have taught at this school in the last ten years'*!

Predicted grades

Schools have the opportunity to build their reputation as accurate predictors of A level grades or totally destroy any credibility they may have had with the Admissions Tutors. Of course, it is down to each individual student and the amount of hard work they are prepared to do but Admissions Tutors tend to remember which schools have made accurate predictions on the whole and which ones have made over-inflated, unrealistic predictions in order to obtain offers for the students. Unlikely predications will stand out, of course - we all know that jumping from an E at AS to an A* at A2 goes far beyond the realms of probability!

With competition for places at an increasing high year on year, accurate predictions and appropriate applications are vital. These days, it is far less likely that students who miss their offer grades will still obtain a place at their first choice university (unless there are mitigating circumstances, but this is no guarantee). If staff are pressurised by students and parents to over-predict it can sometimes be useful to point out that the reputation of the school is at stake. Some schools now have a 'no negotiation' policy for predicted grades which may be extreme but at least it shows consistency of approach and supports staff decisions.

The process

In order for an application to reach the Admissions Tutor's desk, it must jump the hurdle of entry requirements. It will be read thoroughly by admissions staff who will be checking that the student:

- has predicted grades/UCAS points which match or exceed the published course requirements
- achieved appropriate GCSE grades where applicable
- sat the necessary additional entry test (eg BMAT, UKCAT, LSAT, HAT) and scored at or above the required level
- has relevant work experience when required (eg for healthcare and education degrees)

Admissions Tutors need to understand the full picture when considering any application. UCAS is now including some contextual data such as family history of HE or percentage of free school meals but the reference is particularly vital as admissions staff will highlight any relevant information for the Admissions Tutor. This is the reference writer's chance to explain that a student genuinely has the potential to succeed but has been held back due to a circumstance beyond their control. This is the time to talk about how well a student has done despite the issues impacting on his/her life at the time.

What to include

The Admissions Tutor wants to know about the academic ability and interests of each student and how their current skills will enable them to thrive at university. It helps when the interests expressed in the Personal Statement are reflected in the reference. It is always very interesting, if alarming, to read a Personal Statement which talks about a firm commitment to Medicine and then a reference which makes no mention of it at all!

It is useful to include a brief description of the school and how well the applicant has done:

'ABC College is a comprehensive school which has been in special measures for the past three years. The students come from a wide variety of backgrounds and many receive some form of income support. There is a high staff turnover and it is not uncommon for an A level student to have several replacement teachers during their courses. However, discipline is good and standards are improving year on year. We wholeheartedly recommend Fred who has achieved such impressive results despite all the barriers he has faced over the past few years'.

Or,

'XYZ School has exceptionally high standards and only accepts students who have passed the entrance examination with a minimum score of 80%. It is with delight and great pride that we bring Fred to your attention as without doubt the most

outstanding student we have ever had the pleasure of teaching in our long and distinguished history’.

Possible attributes to include:

- the ability to write well-structured essays and present a reasoned argument
- the ability to participate in class discussions
- excellent time management and organisational skills
- the ability to meet deadlines, reliability, good attendance and punctuality
- confidence, enthusiasm, effective communication skills, leadership potential, teamwork ability

Perhaps surprisingly, it is not necessary to tell an Admissions Tutor that *‘she is a charming, exceptionally polite and well-mannered young lady’* – far better to use more academic and relevant attributes where possible!

Possible disadvantages to mention (these include anything which could help to explain any disparity between predictions and results):

- Personal illness or disability, which will not impact on the student’s ability to successfully complete the degree course. For example the reference might say *‘She has had problems with mobility all her life but this has clearly increased her determination to succeed and as a result her attendance and punctuality have been 100% throughout her time in school’.*
Or *‘He broke his leg in a sporting accident just before the GCSE exams started but despite considerable pain and inconvenience, he managed to sit all his exams and achieved A or A* across the board’.*
- If the student is ill **during** the A level exams, it is better to contact the first and insurance choice universities **at the time** with a letter on headed school paper, including the student’s name and UCAS number, details of the problem and a doctor’s note if appropriate.
- Illness or death of a close family member. In addition, if students are acting as sole carers for an incapacitated relative or are themselves single parents; even with exceptional time management this can have a negative impact on their ability to cope while on a degree course. This is so that additional support could be provided for the student where possible.
- Current family problems – for example, if a student’s parents are going through an acrimonious divorce, there are problems with long-term unemployment or money or the student works part time to help their family.
- If the student or their family is in receipt of benefits or is attending an independent, fee-paying school on an academic scholarship this should be included.
- Parental pressure – this is difficult to include, particularly if students are given access to their references. On occasion and for various reasons, students resolutely stick to an inappropriate choice of course despite constant attempts by the school to persuade them to choose something more in line with their academic ability; this can be phrased carefully in the reference. For example, a student applying for Medicine

with predicted grades of BBC will not be successful but *'A pleasant, reliable and academically sound student, she has shown unwavering commitment to Medicine and her choice has been encouraged and firmly supported by her parents every step of the way'* speaks volumes.

- The student is the first in the family to attend to university – the parents may not be aware of deadlines, the standards required or what to expect and so may not be in a position to advise or, on occasion, even to encourage the student.
- Home learning environment – does the student have a quiet, private room to study at home with adequate computer facilities?
- Teaching and learning – for example, three French teachers over the A level course, unusually large A level class size, problems with timetabling leading to distance learning etc.

Consistency of teaching is very important for students but not always mentioned – it does not reflect badly on the school to say how incredibly well a student has done despite the lack of continuity in Physics teaching over the past two years.

If school policy is for the brightest and best students to take entire A levels a year early, this needs to be mentioned. For example, for a course which has a high Maths content some academics may prefer students who have been studying Maths recently rather than those who have had a year off and may have forgotten what they learned a year before. Students should check before applying!

A final sentence could wholeheartedly recommend/ warmly support/ support an outstanding/ good/ average student's application and urge the Admissions Tutors to take everything into consideration.