

UC PERSONAL STATEMENT: A GUIDE FOR STUDENTS

OBJECTIVES OF THIS GUIDE:

This is a self-guided lesson for students that will help you , also found at (www.ucgateways.org)
<https://www.ucgateways.org/index.cfm?fuseaction=content.showpage&MN=262&level1=4&level2=2&level3=0>

- Comprehend and capitalize upon the relationship between the information contained in the UC application and the content of the personal statement;
- Interact, in writing, with an audience comprised of strangers;
- Construct essays that are persuasive and strategic; and
- Obtain feedback on early drafts that will be useful to you as you revise.

The sections of this guide are as follows:

1. [What you need to know](#)
2. [Purpose of the personal statement](#)
3. [Understanding the task](#)
4. [Preparing to write](#)
5. [Writing your statement](#)
6. [Getting useful feedback and conclusion](#)

LESSON ONE: WHAT YOU NEED TO KNOW

What do you think are the information and skills you need to have in order to write a strong personal statement? In high school you learned to write in a certain way and you probably got some good grades for that writing. But the expectations for your UC personal statement may be quite different than you are used to.

This is a list of the writing skills you should focus on during these exercises:

- **Critical thinking**
Be prepared to think critically about the information you want to present in your personal statement. Even though you will be writing about yourself, you need to step back and look at your life from the outside.
- **Analytical writing**
Analytical writing seeks to go deeper than simply describing events and facts. Writing analytically means answering the question "why".
- **Following a writing process**
By now you probably have your own process that you use when you're writing for school. We'll suggest some tips for improving that process.
- **Getting useful feedback**
For possibly the first time, you will be writing for an audience you don't know. The more feedback you get from people around you, the better prepared you will be to expect how the admission readers will read your statement.

This guide also offers advice specific to the personal statement. We will cover the following topics:

- **How to think like an admissions reader**
Admissions readers are looking for certain aspects of writing. Once you learn to read like them, you can criticize your own writing.
- **How to choose the extended response prompt strategically**
Which prompt (personal statement topic) you choose is an important part of writing a successful statement.
- **Writing strategies for short answer and extended responses**
You will write differently depending on whether you choose to do short answers or extended responses.

ACTIVITY: PERSONAL STATEMENT TIMELINE

Activity	Time/Days Alloted	Date Started	Date Completed	Notes
Complete the UC Application				
Brainstorm using Levels of Questions				
Make decisions on 200-word and 600-word prompts				
Prompt 1 Draft				
Prompt 2 Draft				
Prompt 3 Draft				
Feedback Questions Written				
Reader 1: Application, Feedback Questions, Drafts Distributed				
Reader 2: Application, Feedback Questions, Drafts Distributed				
Reader 3: Application, Feedback Questions, Drafts Distributed				
Organize Feedback by Pattern				
Revise				
Proofread				
Submit Application Packet				

LESSON TWO: What is the Personal Statement?

The personal statement is an important part of your application package. Depending on the topic you choose, the essay you write provides additional evidence of your intellectual and creative achievement. The essay is also the only opportunity for the readers of your application to get a feel for you as a person as well as for you as a student. The essay is also the place where you can put your academic record into the context of your opportunities and obstacles.

- **Part of UC's Comprehensive Review application process**
You will not get admitted on the basis of one part of your application, so you need to apply equal attention to all of it.
- **Opportunity to provide information that supports and augments the review process**
The personal statement allows you to add information that you couldn't work into the other parts of the application.
- **Enables the applicant to make the best case possible for admission**
This is where you are your own advocate!

Remember these points concerning the Personal Statement:

- Adds clarity, depth and meaning to information collected in other parts of the UC application
- Completes the application for admission
- An admissions decision will never be based on the content of a personal statement alone

A Message from UC Faculty

- While it is acceptable to receive feedback or helpful suggestions, applicants' personal statements should reflect their own ideas and be written by them alone.

We must emphasize this: We do encourage that you get feedback and ask for help. But the personal statement *must* contain your own ideas, your own writing, and your own work!

For a detailed presentation on personal statements go to:

http://www.universityofcalifornia.edu/educators/counselors/resources/materials/UCCC2005/HighSchool/Personal_Statement_FINAL0910.ppt

Before you start writing your personal statement, it is important that you organize your information and see what the admissions readers will see. Download and print a copy of this year's application [[download here](#) http://www.universityofcalifornia.edu/admissions/undergrad_adm/apply/download.html]. Consider this a rough draft -- don't worry about crossing things out. Consider what sort of picture someone might get of you when reading it. What areas seem weakest? Strongest? Unique?

LESSON THREE: UNDERSTANDING THE TASKS

The Prompts

The three prompts (topics) allow you to explore three different areas of your education and goals:

- **Academic Achievement**
- **Potential to Contribute**
- **Open-ended**

You will write three short essays in response to the prompts:

- **Two 200-word responses**
- **One 600-word extended response**

Prompts are the topics that you are offered for your Personal Statement. Each prompt is organized in two sections:

- **Rationale statement:**
provides the context for the response
- **Question:**
provides the direction of the response

Below are this year's prompts, and some pointers to what the prompts are asking. Read through the prompts and consider how the information on your application relates to them. Remember, you will choose to answer two of the prompts with shorter responses, and choose the extended response for the question which you feel needs more elaboration.

PROMPT #1 FOCUS ON ACADEMIC ACHIEVEMENT

- **Rationale:**
The University seeks to enroll students who take initiative in pursuing their education (for example, developing a special interest in science, language or the performing arts; or becoming involved in special programs such as EAOP, MESA, Puente, COSMOS or other similar programs). This question seeks to understand a student's motivation and dedication to learning.
- **Question:** (Freshman Applicants)
How have you taken advantage of the educational opportunities you have had to prepare for college?

Preparation Questions:

- What opportunities have been available to me?
- Why did I choose to do what I did?
- How have I grown as a result of these opportunities?

PROMPT #2 POTENTIAL TO CONTRIBUTE

- **Rationale:**
The University welcomes the contributions each student brings to the campus learning community. This question seeks to determine an applicant's academic or creative interests and potential to contribute to the vitality of the University.
- **Question:**
Tell us about a talent, experience, contribution or personal quality you will bring to the University of California.

Preparation Questions:

- What talent, experience, contribution or personal quality best expresses my character?
- How does it define my ability to contribute?

PROMPT #3 OPEN-ENDED

- **Rationale:**
This question seeks to give students the opportunity to share important aspects of their schooling or their lives -- such as their personal circumstances, family experiences and opportunities that were or were not available at their school or college -- which may have not been sufficiently addressed elsewhere in the application.
- **Question:**
Is there anything you would like us to know about you or your academic record that you have not had the opportunity to describe elsewhere in this application?

Preparation Questions:

What in my application deserves explaining?
What about ME deserves further explanation?

Look at Prompt #1. Choose one of the Preparation Questions and write some ideas for one minute. Repeat for one question for Prompts 2 and 3. When you are done, read and consider your responses. What was the most compelling information you came up with in your answers? Which questions led you to offer important information that was not covered in your application?

LESSON FOUR: PREPARING TO WRITE

In this section we will work on a critical reading of the application prior to writing the personal statement. We asked you to fill out the application before starting this section because there is a relationship between the application and the personal statement. Creating a strong personal statement involves both critical reading of your application *and* analytical writing.

From High School to College Writing

The UC Personal Statement has a lot in common with the writing that you will do in college and on college placement exams.

- **Flexible structures:** your essay's format will be determined by your ideas and topic
- **Audience unknown:** you will be writing for a community of strangers
- **Writer-determined topic:** you determine the topic of your response
- **Thoughtfulness is better:** analysis and reflection are key

Next we will go through three steps to prepare for writing the personal statement. At the end of each step you will find an exercise. These exercises will help you take necessary first steps in your writing.

STEP ONE: ASK GOOD QUESTIONS

Why is asking questions of the application important?

- It is important to **think critically** about the application's content. Your life story is so familiar to you, it is hard to have perspective on it without analyzing it.
- Asking questions can help you see your personal and academic experiences as **worthy of reflection and analysis**.
- It is important to **connect the issues** raised by the application to the responses provided in the personal statement
- Finding the questions that your readers might ask will help you **fulfill the reader/writer pact** -- you as the writer have the responsibility to try to answer the reader's questions.

Level One Questions (L1):	Answers are evident in the text (What does the text say?) Answers to L1 questions provide <u>details</u>
Level Two Questions (L2):	Answers are open to interpretation using the text (What does it mean?) Answers to L2 questions are <u>topic sentences</u>
Level Three Questions (L3):	Address larger issues not evident in the text but are supported by the text (Why does it matter?) Answers to L3 questions are <u>thesis statements</u>

Take out the application that you filled out. Reading through the application, write down as many questions as you can think of about yourself. Try to find a variety of questions of all levels, for example:

- **What sorts of classes do I get the best grades in? (Level 1)**
- **Why am I interested in history? (Level 2)**
- **How can I use my interest in history to make a contribution to society? (Level 3)**

Consider whether you asked deep enough questions. Are there interesting things about your record that you missed because they are too familiar to you?

look back at the prompts we discussed in Lesson 3. How are you going to choose how to answer each prompt? How are you going to choose which prompt should get the 600-word extended response?

Step Two Activity: Organize

Write out the prompts on separate pieces of paper. Now look at the questions that you

generated and see which prompts they are related to. Write your questions below the related prompt. Below are some examples that may help you to see how you might sort your questions.

- **Prompt #1 Example:**
Why did I participate in Academic Decathlon?
- **Prompt #2 Example:**
How do my student government experiences reflect my personal qualities?
- **Prompt #3 Example:**
Why did I earn a D in Trigonometry?

DETERMINE RESPONSE TOPICS Now that you have organized the questions that your application raises according to the prompts they are related to, you can start to consider how you will answer each prompt. Consider the following questions:

- **What topic** will each prompt response focus on? Because these are short answers, you should focus on one topic per prompt.
- Is the topic you have chosen for each prompt **the most persuasive**? Does it answer the most pressing questions related to this prompt?
- The prompt with **the most questions** associated with it is likely to be the one that you have the most to write about. You should choose this prompt for your extended (600-word) response.

Step Three Activity: Decide on topics for your responses

Using the three bulleted questions above and your sheets with prompts and associated questions, decide on one topic for each prompt. Write that topic in the form of one descriptive sentence at the bottom of the sheet and circle it. Then note the response length (two 200-word responses and one 600-word response) on each sheet. Consider whether you have chosen the most persuasive and compelling topic for each prompt. Then make sure that you have designated the topic with the most questions associated with it for your extended response.

LESSON FIVE: WRITING YOUR STATEMENT

In previous lessons you have found the questions that your application raises, sorted them according to the prompts on the application, decided on topics for each prompt, and decided which answer will be your extended response. Next, you should write your responses. But before you do, read the following discussion about strategies for each of the responses.

SHORT ANSWER STRATEGIES

You can assume that your short responses (200 words) will be about two paragraphs long. When reading your short responses, readers will be looking for:

- **Responses that get right to the point**
In 200 words, there is no room for wandering!
- **Specific, concrete examples and language**
Avoid generalities like "being on the track team was fun" and go right for the details.
- **Adherence to word restrictions**
Count the number of words and do not go over.
- **Extent to which the responses complete the application**
Remember, the personal statement answers are meant to fill out your application, not to repeat what the admissions readers already know. If you find yourself repeating things that have already been said, go back to the previous lesson and redo the prompt topics.

Tips for Short-Answer Responses

Avoid irrelevant background information

Ensure that the response addresses what the prompt asks you to do

Avoid a collection of facts or examples

Use concrete details and make them clear, rich, and meaningful

Short-Answer Activity: Mine your questions for details

You should have two pages containing prompts, questions associated with those prompts

and topics that you have chosen for your two short responses. Underneath the topic or on another page, brainstorm a list of details that answer the questions you raised. Remember that each short response will need to contain the answers to a Level Three question (the main point you're trying to make), Level Two questions (the major arguments for that point), and Level One questions (the details that support your arguments).

EXTENDED RESPONSE STRATEGIES At 600 words, your extended response will be a short essay of about 6 paragraphs. When reading your extended responses, readers will be looking for:

- **Organization and clarity, provided by a persuasive thesis, analytical topic sentences, well-chosen examples**
You will need to return to your Levels of Questions exercise to map the information you have decided to include to your thesis (Level One question), topic sentences (Level Two questions), and examples or details (Level Three questions).
- **A response that supports -- by clarifying and contextualizing -- the information in the application**
Your extended response is where you can make a persuasive argument for yourself. Make sure that it directly supports the information on your application.

Extended Response Activity: Find thesis, topic sentences, and details

You should have a page containing the prompt, questions associated with that prompt, and the topic that you have chosen for your extended response. Underneath the topic or on another page, brainstorm a list of details that answer the questions you raised. Remember that your extended response will need to contain the answers to a Level Three question (your thesis, the main point you're trying to make), Level Two questions (the topic sentences for each paragraph), and Level One questions (the details in each paragraph that support your topic sentences).

THESIS STATEMENT The admissions readers will expect that your extended response will contain a thesis that you will argue in the body of the essay. Following is a table that shows the different parts of a thesis, and then some example theses for each prompt.

Structure of thesis statements	
Concession (optional)	The "but" to the "yes" <i>Although...</i>
Assertion	The argument <i>This...</i>
Reasons	The synthesis of supporting points <i>Because...</i>
Significance	The "so what" of the argument; implications <i>As a result...</i>

SAMPLE THESIS STATEMENT The sample theses below show each part of the thesis in the same color as in the table above. Look at these thesis statements to see how they are put together.

Sample Thesis -- Prompt 1 Extended

Although my school does not offer Advanced Placement Spanish, I wanted to master Spanish so that I could enrich my understanding of the literature of Latin America and prepare for my eventual career goal of becoming a diplomat. I prepared on my own for the Advanced Placement Spanish exam, and as a result have become a more disciplined and engaged student in all of my classes.

Sample Thesis -- Prompt 2 Extended

Although I do not plan to major in veterinary science, my experiences raising and caring for animals have helped me understand how important animals are to human well-being. Because I have seen the result of human disregard for other forms of life, I am better able to appreciate the importance of ethical treatment for all. As a result, I will be able to contribute my knowledge of animal preservation and my skill as an organizer to the campus environment.

Sample Thesis -- Prompt 3 Extended

Although my parents are now both employed, my family has had to struggle in order to survive. I am the oldest of six, and, because our family income does not support us adequately, I work part-time to provide food and shelter for us. Working has taught me to stay disciplined and to use my time appropriately. As a result, I have been able to maintain high academic achievement while supporting my family.

Activity: Write a thesis statement

Look at the prompt that you chose to use as your extended response. You should now have chosen a question you will answer as your thesis statement. Using the samples above as a guide, write a thesis statement for your topic. Reread and consider whether you followed the structure above.

WRITING PROCESSWe discussed earlier the importance of having a solid writing process. Whether you meant to or not, you have probably already developed a writing process that may or may not be a good one for you. Look at the process below and see whether you follow all these steps. If not, try to follow these steps as you're writing your personal statement.

1. **Brainstorm** using levels of questions
2. **Draft**
3. **Get feedback** -- give readers at least a week to respond
4. **Revise** for organization, clarity and meaning
5. **Proofread**

Activity: Write your responses

You are now ready to write drafts of your three responses. Start with the ones that you are most comfortable with (probably, but not necessarily, the short answers). Try to write quickly without worrying too much about spelling or grammar. Then go back and revise, following the guidelines above for creating a successful response. Cut out unnecessary or unrelated details, replace generalities with specific examples, and make sure that you have fully answered the question. Do a word count and cut if necessary. Do a quick proofreading to catch any obvious problems. The next section will cover getting feedback and responding to it.

GETTING FEEDBACK

Now that you have written your three responses, it is time to get some feedback on your work. This is extremely important -- others can see things about your work that you can't. You should focus on finding readers who resemble your target audience: strangers who are college-educated and interested in young people and their aspirations. Ask counselors and parents to help find readers who don't know you well (or at all) and who can provide objective feedback. Some tips:

- Give your readers the application and the personal statement, not just the statement
- Ask your readers to comment on ideas and the level of persuasiveness, not just grammar
- Provide your readers with a list of questions you would like them to answer
- Find readers who resemble your target audience -- ask your outreach coordinator for assistance

Activity: Feedback worksheet for first drafts

When you are done with the first writing process, it is time to get feedback. If you have started early enough, you should allow them a week to respond. Use the worksheet below to generate questions for your readers. Avoid questions that will result in yes/no answers. Use "how" or "why" questions to prompt more extensive responses.

1. **My questions to my readers about my topic:**
2. **My questions to my readers about my thesis:**
3. **My questions to my readers about overall organization:**
4. **My questions to my readers about evidence (support) for my thesis:**
5. **My questions to my readers about my decisions regarding choice of extended response prompt:**

Give your readers a copy of the application, the prompts, and your statement.

REVISIONWhile your readers have your statement, you will be able to gain distance from your work so that you can return to it with a fresh eye. Using the feedback you got, organize it by patterns so that you can see

the consistent problems with your writing. Revise your work according to the feedback, and do a final proofreading. Follow the instructions in the application for the presentation of your responses. Make sure to make it neat and easily readable.

CONCLUSION

In order to write a successful personal statement, you should:

- Think like an admissions reader
- Choose the prompt for the extended response carefully
- Know the difference between a short answer response and a persuasive extended response
- Go through a feedback process
- Start early!