SIMILARITY GUIDANCE FOR APPLICANTS

All UCAS Undergraduate and UCAS Conservatoire personal statements are screened by our similarity detection software.

To prevent similarity in personal statements, we warn you of the risks if you fail to provide a personal statement of your own work. We also inform you about what we do, and why we do it. Don't post your personal statement on the internet or on social media or share your personal statement with others, unless you're asking for feedback from people you trust.

There are some example personal statements on the internet that have been used by applicants, in some cases word for word. Our similarity detection software finds statements that show similarity, works out how much of the statement may have been copied, and reports the findings to the applicant and their chosen universities and colleges.

What does the Similarity Detection Service do?

Each personal statement is compared against a library of personal statements previously submitted to UCAS, and a library of sample statements collected from websites and other sources. Each personal statement received at UCAS is added to this library after it has been processed.

What happens if a personal statement has similarities?

Any statements showing a level of similarity of greater than 30% are reviewed by members of the UCAS Verification Team. The findings are reported to the applicant and their chosen universities and colleges. This helps admissions staff to consider the application, and it is they who decide what action, if any, to take.

The similarity detection process

- The software identifies sentences in a personal statement that are matched to other personal statements already held in the system.

- Levels of similarity are checked by trained staff who decide whether the applicant and their chosen universities and colleges need to be informed that similarity has been found.

- The chosen universities and colleges decide on the significance of the results and what action, if any, to take.

- A personal statement will not be compared to any supplied by the same applicant in previous applications.

Eliminated words

The process ignores commonly used words that many applicants use in their statements such as 'and', 'so' and 'with'.

The software also ignores a selection of commonly used words and phrases such as 'Duke of Edinburgh' and 'football'.

Similarity Detection Service report

A colour-coded transcript is created showing the areas of similarity.

For those personal statements considered to contain a sufficient degree of similarity to the matched source(s), automatic emails are generated to:

- the applicant – referring them to their application, where they will be able to view a copy of the colour-coded transcript of their personal statement

- the applicant's choice(s) – with a link to the colour-coded transcript

What the sentence colours mean in the colour-coded transcript

Red is used for the sentences from the most matched statement.

Blue is used for the next best match.

Pink is used for the third best match.

Brown is used for any other matches.

Grey is used for sentences for which no match has been found and for very short sentences, which don't get checked.

Words shown in black are words in a potentially copied sentence that are not contained in the library version of the sentence.

Words in black and underlined are words in a potentially copied sentence that are not identical to the library version of the sentence but are similar.

Examples:

I grew up in a city near the sea and have always been fascinated by marine life.

If an applicant had written this sentence and found it shown in red as above when they checked the Similarity Detection Service report, it would mean that it had been exactly matched to a personal statement stored in the personal statement library.

I grew up in a **town** near the sea and have always **found** marine life **fascinating**.

If the sentence the applicant had written was marked in the report like the one above, it would mean that:

- **town** and **found** were not in the matched sentence.

- **fascinating** was not found as an exact match but is similar enough to the equivalent word in the matched sentence to be identified by underlining.

The blue colour also indicates that the match was found in the second most matched statement.

The dates on the matched personal statements

At the bottom of the marked up personal statement, the number of sentences matched to library or internet sources is shown in the same colour as that used to mark up the sentences.

The date shows how long this personal statement has been in the UCAS collection. It does not mean that this particular statement was the one used as the source for the current personal statement.

Both may be taken from a source outside the library, or there may be other related files inside the library which have not been shown because there was no additional matched information.

The dates on the matching web sources

The number of web source sentences is shown in the same way, but here the date means either the date it was posted to the website, if known, or the date when the web source was identified by UCAS. Again, it does not necessarily mean that the file was the actual source.

As a feasibility study discovered, some web sources are very popular and may appear on more than one website or have been used in a modified form in a personal statement within the UCAS collection.

Why it works

- A personal statement of 4,000 characters will contain approximately 600 words, about half of which will be words that are eliminated from consideration (see above).

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- Usually, if two personal statements are randomly selected and compared, you would expect very little or no similarity. Most sentences will be significantly different.

- This means that if the software finds two sentences in different statements which have exactly the same words, it is very likely that one is a copy of the other, or that both have been copied from a third source. Of course, this can and does happen in essays if a quote from a text is included but is very unlikely to occur in a personal statement.

- If the software finds several identical or similar sentences in a personal statement and a file held in the library, then a similarity report is generated.

Can I replace my personal statement?

UCAS does not accept any amendments to personal statements after the application has been submitted. We advise you to contact your course providers directly if you have any additional information you wish to be considered.

Can I appeal against a similarity report?

The report highlights similarities to other data already available to us, and we do not expect any grounds for an appeal against this.

Personal statement reform from 2026 cycle

From 2026 cycle, the personal statement changes from one piece of text to three separate questions. The answer to each question will have a minimum character count of 350 characters. The overall limit of 4000 characters (including spaces) remains in place and the similarity detection software will continue to work as previously. This means that the reporting of similarity will not change.

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