Writing the perfect UCAS Reference

Lucy Wade
Senior Student Recruitment Officer
School and College Services
University of Leicester
Writing the perfect UCAS Reference

• Background
• Recap: your role in the UCAS process
• The process of writing a reference
• Predicted grades
• More top tips
• Case studies
The role of the UCAS Reference

- Critical at the point of application for some courses at some universities
  - e.g. Medicine at Leicester – integral part of the selection process
- Critical at confirmation (A-level results day).
  - Can make the difference for students who have narrowly missed their offer or who have gone into clearing.
Unconditional offers

• Starting to become slightly more common

• Universities need to be absolutely sure about applicants to make them an unconditional offer

• The reference can help to paint this picture, and to confirm that predicted grades are accurate
Teacher’s role in the UCAS process

- Understanding of the UCAS process
- Encourage research and timely applications among students
- Provide advice and guidance about university choices (HE institutions can help with this!)
- Advise on what and what NOT to write
- Provide a Reference
- **Not** expected to re-write every statement
Deadlines

• The importance of starting early – tougher competition

• Application deadlines
  – Oxbridge, Medicine, Dentistry, Vets : 15 October 2015
  – Most courses : 15 January 2016

• Make students aware of your school deadline

• Entrance tests? – LNAT / UKCAT / BMAT

• Gap year – apply for deferred entry
Apply by 15th Oct
- Cambridge
- Dentistry
- Medicine
- Oxford
- Vet. Science

Apply by 15th Jan

Decide by 6th May

Results/Clearing/Adjustment

Interviews/offers & Visit Days

Start

March – Sept

October

January

May

August

October
The UCAS Reference

- What is it?
- The process
- Predicted grades
- What to put in the reference
- Top tips – do’s and don’ts
The Reference: What is it? (1/2)

An informed and academic assessment of:

- their academic performance in their post-16 education
- their potential for academic success in higher education
The Reference: What is it? (2/2)

- Why the course they have chosen is suited to them
- Any personal qualities which will benefit them at university, such as skills, aptitude, enthusiasm
- what they can bring to the university, such as extra-curricular activities and interests

- 4000 character limit or 47 lines of text

https://www.ucas.com/advisers/references/how-write-ucas-undergraduate-references
The Process

This will be different at different schools, but we suggest...

- **Students**
  Ask them to provide information about themselves (pro forma and/or discussion) and to compile grade predictions

- **Subject teachers**
  Provide specific comments and predicted grades

- **Personal Tutor**
  May provide statement on personal qualities and assemble the reference, editing it to include introduction and conclusion, ensure consistency and that it ‘reads well’

- Completed reference added to online application for final checking and submission by senior ‘authorised’ UCAS contact
Predicted grades

• Predicted grades should be clear and unambiguous, and need to consider:
  – Do they match the entrance requirements of the courses chosen?
  – Are they consistent with the past academic performance of the student?
  – Do they match the reference?
• If ‘No’ to any of the above, need to provide an explanation in the reference.
How to write the reference

Structure is not set in stone, but should include:

- Background information on the applicant and the school
- Academic performance post-16
- Extra Curricular activities / Personality
- Suitability for the course
Background/context of school

- Relevant info about school:
  - Size / type of school
  - Number of students & proportion going to HE
  - Range and number of A-levels studied by students
  - Contextual info about the catchment area

- Corresponding relevant info about the student:
  - Participation in special programmes e.g. WP / G&T / Compacts
  - Individual circumstances that may merit special consideration
Academic performance post-16

- Current / past achievement in the subject(s)
- Motivation, attitude and commitment
- Supplementary course / study information
- Curriculum enrichment
- Underperformance / Extenuating circumstances?
- Note/explain deviations from standard programme
- Link to predicted grades
Extra Curricular activities/ Personality

• Complement the Personal Statement
• Personal qualities that will benefit them at university
• Skills, aptitude and enthusiasm
• What they can contribute to university
• Work experience, volunteering, sport, music
• Any mitigating circumstances/additional needs related to health/disabilities - you do need permission from student to disclose.
Suitability for the course

• Has the student got the ability to succeed academically?
• What are their career aspirations?
• What type of student would they be?
• Clearly indicate if you would recommend the student
Top tips: Don’t

- Use stock phrases
- Repeat yourself
- Write as a report (e.g. ‘John should concentrate on...’)
- Refer to resits, unless it seems positive in the circumstances
- Be specific about universities
- Exaggerate
- Raise weaknesses unless documented, evidenced and communicated to/discussed with student/parents
- Be negative – omit things you can’t be positive about
Genuine examples...

- “In Maths he has demonstrated a good interest and some natural ability. However he is something of an enigma...”

- “If working alone, he could be focused and produce promising work. However he comes as part of a package along with his mates and this was counterproductive”
Top tips: Do

• Use subject-specific guidelines as applicable
• Add comment where predicted grades are not a true reflection of potential or are inconsistent with achievement so far
• Focus on academic skills, enthusiasm, ICT skills
• Be concise
• Clearly indicate if you are supporting / recommending the student
Further advice

• UCAS website
  www.ucas.com

• University of Leicester’s teacher resources page
  www2.le.ac.uk/offices/scs/resources

• Contact outreach@le.ac.uk to book information
  session or a workshop in school/college.
Case studies

• In your group discuss what you would want to focus on in the UCAS reference for your case study student
• Discuss any of the potential problem areas for your student and how you might address this in your reference
• What else would you like to know about your student?
• Group discussion about the case studies...
Case study 1: Emily (17)

- Studying BTEC Diploma in Computing & IT
- Predicted DDM
- Applying for Computing
- Motivated student, popular with staff and students, hard working, though does struggle a little bit with some of the course content at times. Excellent attendance record.
Case study 2: Felix (17)

- Studying A-Level History, Psychology and Law
- Predicted ABB
- Applying for Criminology
- Bright student, popular with staff and students, but not particularly self-motivated. Easily distracted by his friends, but when he does put his mind to it, gets excellent results. Occasionally hands in assignments late. Good attendance record.
Case study 3: Moira (28)

- Studying Access to Nursing
- Applying for Midwifery
- Mature student with young family, has been out of learning for over 5 years, before achieving a GCSE in Maths part time last year (grade B achieved), and starting on Access programme this year.

Motivated to become a nurse. Hard working, though does struggle a little bit to keep up. Is progressing well despite this, and does ask for additional help when needed. Quite quiet in class. Good attendance record.
Case study 4: Mustafa (20)

- Studying Access to Engineering
- Applying for Mechanical Engineering
- An average student, there have been no problems with his assignments and he is generally motivated when at college. There have been some problems with his attendance in the past due to his family commitments and he has had a meeting with the head of programme to discuss this. Mustafa moved to the UK three years ago, and is not confident with his English language ability, which means he sometimes withdraws from class discussions.
Thank you!

• Any questions?