



**St Anne's  
College**  
University of Oxford

## For Teachers: new-format UCAS References

Dr Jackie Watson  
Outreach Officer, St Anne's College, Oxford



# Teacher Reference

## Aims for today's session

1. to know about the UCAS changes to the format of the teacher reference for the 2023-24 entry round
2. to know what contextual information to include in the teacher reference
3. to know what tutors find most helpful about the teacher reference and how this information is used generally and at Oxford

# UCAS References

In the past, references:

- were free text of up to 4000 characters
- had no “one” particular way of being structured
- have been too difficult for providers to meaningfully use it to compare applicant references
- were too subjective and descriptive with little comparison to the applicant pool
- often included long irrelevant descriptions of the school/college achievements

# Old Suggested Structure

school or college information (can include a hyperlink to school website)

10%

80%

- subject specific information and aptitude for degree
- focus on subject choice
- contextual achievement
- areas of particular strength / evidence

- any mitigating circumstances (including nature and length of impact)
- concluding statement

10%

# UCAS

- To try and make the reference a more effective tool for providers, UCAS have introduced some changes to the structure and information required.
- From 2023-24 entry cycle UCAS will replace the free text reference with three structured questions.
- More information can be found by following [this link](#) directly to the UCAS Website

# New three section approach



Enter a general statement about your school/college/centre.



If applicable, enter any information about extenuating circumstances which may have impacted the applicant's education and achievement.



Outline any other supportive information specific to the applicant and relevant to the course(s) applied for that you think universities/colleges should be aware of.


Still a total of 4000 characters for all three sections



## Section 1: Enter a general statement about your school/college/centre.

### Information could include:

- context of your school, college or centre, e.g. performance, intake demographics, progression rates to higher education etc.
- your portfolio of qualification provision and any restrictions on options students may have
- information about your school, college or centre which may affect performance, such as significant staff changes, or damage to buildings
- any policies or processes used for predicting grades (e.g. internal assessments). This is an opportunity to articulate any policy about not predicting grades for qualifications where the school or college feels the assessment method or qualification structure is not suited to predictions



Section 2: If applicable, enter any information about extenuating circumstances which may have impacted the applicant's education and achievement.

Include relevant information that **contextualises** the educational journey, for example:

- individual circumstances – e.g. mature student, disability, serious, acute, or chronic illness, bereavement, significant adverse personal circumstances (with applicant consent)
- context as to why there is a disparity between an individual's grades achieved throughout the school or college (e.g. at GCSE/Scottish National 4/5 equivalent and predicted grades, where applicable)
- factors which have limited the individual's choice of subjects or load of study at UK Level 3 or equivalent (factors which have affected the whole centre rather than the individual should be included in section 1)
- support the university or college should consider putting in place to ensure the applicant can thrive on their course (with applicant's consent) – e.g. highlight the measures the school, college or centre put in place to ensure the student's inclusion/experience

You must be clear whether any of the circumstances outlined in section 2 have already been considered by the student's examination boards or awarding organisations for the qualifications taken





Section 3 : Outline any other supportive information specific to the applicant and relevant to the course(s) applied for that you think universities/colleges should be aware of.

It is not necessary to craft the perfect paragraph here; providing short, clear, factual statements helps universities and colleges digest the information.

Useful information could include:

- evidence of suitability for the course(s) applied for which may include performance and academic ability in relevant UK Level 3 or equivalent qualifications, relevant work experience, cases where an applicant is the strongest performer in their cohort, or extracurricular achievements
- any barriers the applicant has faced in accessing work experience opportunities, only where relevant to the course applied to

# Additional informational and guidance

**This information and guidance applies to all references.**





# Characters and format

- Total character count for the reference remains 4,000 characters. Please note, **this includes spaces, line breaks and the new section headings.**
- The total count is for the whole reference, there are **no individual characters limits for individual sections.**
- Character counts may differ if your input has been pasted from another electronic source and/or you have entered non-English characters and/or symbols such as £, €, among others.
- Bold, italics and underlining cannot be used in the reference.
- **All references must be written in English**, unless the applicant is applying to Welsh universities or colleges and the rest of their application is completed in Welsh, in which case the reference can be written in Welsh.

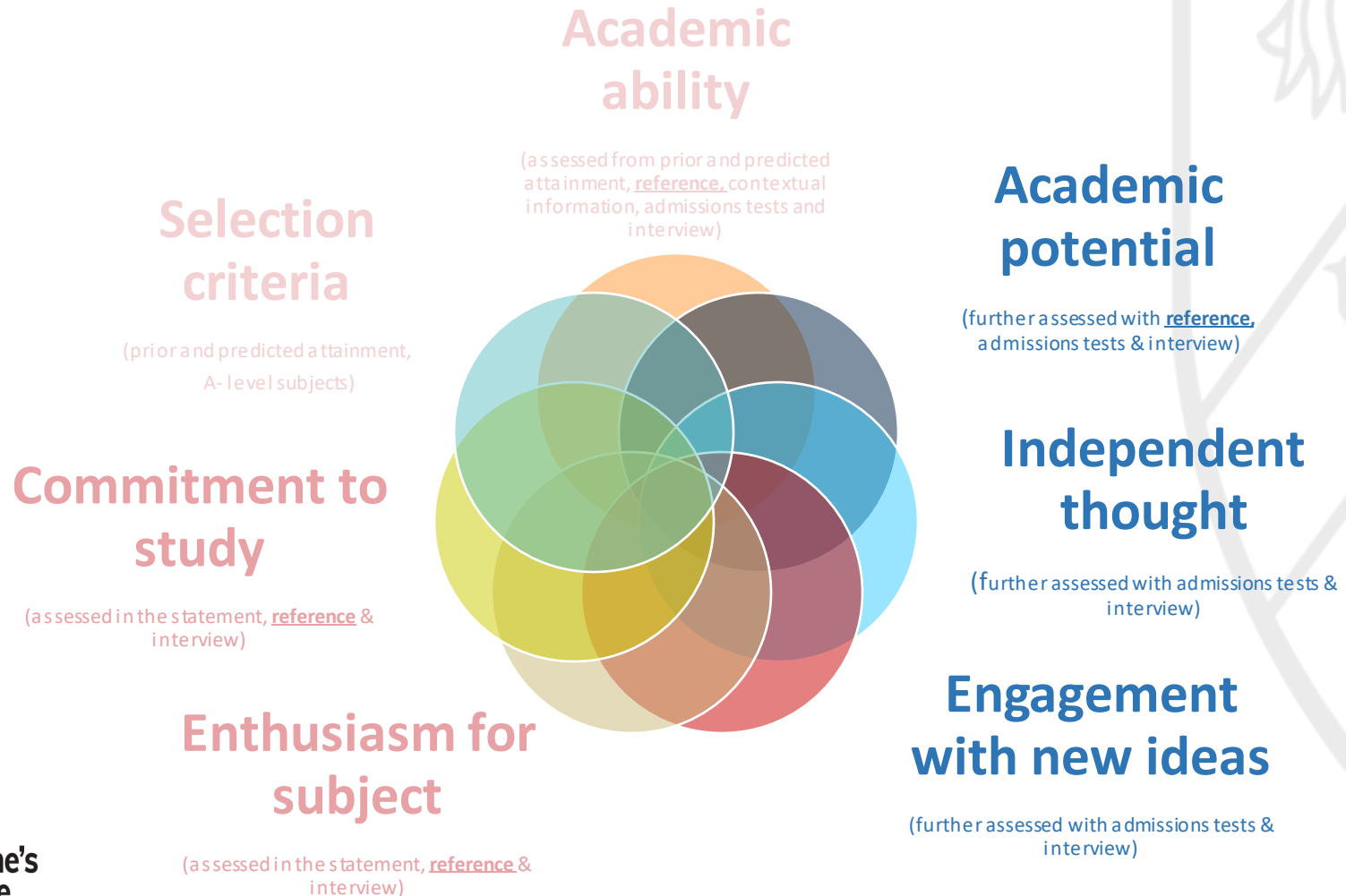
# Key information

- When writing a reference for any applicant, including those outside the UK, please remember that under the Data Protection Act 2018 **the applicant can ask for a copy of the reference and any other personal information we have about them.**
- Ticking 'no information to enter' for this section in the adviser portal will highlight to universities and colleges that no information has been supplied under these headings.
- Don't forget, the reference is not your only opportunity to provide information about your applicants. Universities and colleges welcome further dialogue with referees and would urge schools and colleges to inform them of any changes to the applicant's profile or circumstances that occur after the point of application.

# Information and guidance for advisers

-  **Monthly newsletters**  
Advisers can stay up-to-date with all the latest news and guidance by signing up at [ucas.com/adviser-updates](https://ucas.com/adviser-updates).
-  **Adviser Live sessions**  
Our regular live studio sessions feature expert speakers from different sectors exploring all student pathways. Take a look at our upcoming events on [ucas.com/adviser-lives](https://ucas.com/adviser-lives).
-  **Training and conferences**  
We host dedicated events, conferences, and professional development sessions for teachers and advisers right across the year – everything needed to help advisers help their students: [ucas.com/advisers/training](https://ucas.com/advisers/training).
-  **[ucas.com/advisers](https://ucas.com/advisers)**  
There is a dedicated area for advisers on [ucas.com](https://ucas.com). Here you'll find all our latest news, events, and a variety of guides and resources to help plan career guidance sessions and provide support throughout the whole application cycle: [ucas.com/advisers](https://ucas.com/advisers).

# What is Oxford looking for?



# Teachers' References

## Value

- Additional information on the academic suitability of a candidate
- Provided by a trusted educational professional who has known the candidate

## Academic

- Ideally should focus on **academic** ability of student
- Cover all aspects of current studies with focus on most relevant

## Context

- School context
- Individual academic context
- Personal context

## Oxford use

- Often read by more than one tutor
- Read in conjunction with Personal Statement
- May support nuance at interview

# Your role

- Who: the reference does not need to be written by the head teacher or head of sixth form; it is more important that it is written by someone who knows the student well enough to comment on any extenuating circumstances, their academic abilities and any personal qualities that will help them to succeed. Often the subject teacher in the most relevant field to the applicant's chosen course is best suited to write the reference. It may be a combination of contributors.
- Template (particularly for multiple contributors to Section 3): check if your school uses a standardised template and/or it is traditionally completed by the head teacher or head of sixth form. If so, it is still useful to receive comments from the most relevant subject teacher which can subsequently be included in the reference.
- Benefits of both approaches – if using the multi-author-collated model, don't worry too much about the 'blend'.



This section will be the same for all applicants so could be a standard paragraph to be copied and pasted



### **Section 1:** Enter a general statement about your school/college/centre.

#### **Information could include:**

- context of your school, college or centre, e.g. performance, intake demographics, progression rates to higher education etc.
- your portfolio of qualification provision and any restrictions on options students may have
- information about your school, college or centre which may affect performance, such as significant staff changes, or damage to buildings
- any policies or processes used for predicting grades (e.g. internal assessments). This is an opportunity to articulate any policy about not predicting grades for qualifications where the school or college feels the assessment method or qualification structure is not suited to predictions

This section will vary from student to student and should be completed by someone who really knows the student. It might be a collaborative effort between subject teachers, personal tutors or the Head of Sixth form.  
For students with no adverse circumstances leave Q2 blank.



Section 2: If applicable, enter any information about extenuating circumstances which may have impacted the applicant's education and achievement.

Include relevant information that **contextualises** the educational journey, for example:

- individual circumstances – e.g. mature student, disability, serious, acute, or chronic illness, bereavement, significant adverse **personal circumstances** (with applicant consent)
- **context** as to why there is a **disparity** between an individual's grades achieved throughout the school or college (e.g. at GCSE/Scottish National 4/5 equivalent and predicted grades, where applicable)
- factors which have limited the individual's choice of subjects or load of study at UK Level 3 or equivalent (factors which have affected the whole centre rather than the individual should be included in section 1)
- support the university or college should consider putting in place to ensure the applicant can thrive on their course (with applicant's consent) – e.g. highlight the measures the school, college or centre put in place to ensure the student's inclusion/experience

You must be clear whether any of the circumstances outlined in section 2 have already been considered by the student's examination boards or awarding organisations for the qualifications taken

# What to focus on

We know writing the reference can be challenging and students will clearly want to know that you'll recommend them. But it can also act as a supporting guide for those assessing the application, for example, support needed for interviews or adjustments needed for ongoing study (Section 2).

Please contact the admitting college at Oxford ANY time after the deadline (PRIOR to the interview and then results day) to offer additional or new information relating to extenuating circumstances or challenges that might either give further context to the application or impact on meeting the conditions of an offer.

**Subject teachers:** this may be where you will contribute to the reference more significantly



Section 3 : Outline any other supportive information specific to the applicant and relevant to the course(s) applied for that you think universities/colleges should be aware of.

It is not necessary to craft the perfect paragraph here; providing short, clear, factual statements helps universities and colleges digest the information.

Useful information could include:

- evidence of suitability for the course(s) applied for which may include performance and academic ability in relevant UK Level 3 or equivalent qualifications, relevant work experience, cases where an applicant is the strongest performer in their cohort, or extracurricular achievements
- any barriers the applicant has faced in accessing work experience opportunities, only where relevant to the course applied to

## Section 3: what to focus on

- We know writing the reference can be challenging and students will clearly want to know that you'll recommend them.
- Whilst we don't suggest you write anything other than the students' positive academic attributes, it is important not to overstate suitability of a student with less academic strengths: “*Aspirational but achievable*” (UCAS).
- For some, your reference will simply be shorter with less evidence of suitability compared to other students and that is a sufficient way of writing a reference without being overly negative or overstating suitability for study.

# Section 3: what to focus on

- It is fine to use words like “*sometimes*”, “*frequently*”, “*mostly*”, “*consistently*”, and “*always*”, which might be a useful way of describing the academic skills a student demonstrates. A little like writing our students’ reports, though avoiding the statement bank appearance.
- It is also fine to personalise but avoid being too descriptive and subjective – **evidence** is needed to back up the claim “*this is the best student I have ever taught!*”
- What **specific data** (metrics, rankings, other numbers) can you refer to that supports your claim? **“show, don’t tell”**.

## Section 3: what to focus on

- High-performing students with outstanding potential probably will be doing extraordinary things – eg. Super-curricular, depth.
- Does it repeat what the student is saying in her/his personal statement? If so, is that effective? cf. a dovetailing approach, especially where a teacher can be more boastful.
- Note any changes in study or direction.
- Extra-curricular only if it's outstanding and has a relevance to academic success.

## Section 3: what to focus on

- Academic skills and experiences of the student, giving prominence to the subjects that are most relevant to their chosen degree. If this means that the information on the candidate's A-level Biology course is twice that on English Literature because they are applying for Biology, that is appropriate.
- The individual student's particular strengths relevant to their chosen subject. Tutors at Oxford, like other universities, are interested to find out if the student is expected to flourish in an intensive academic environment and how they may cope with a sustained workload; **specific examples** are useful here. Relating the relevant selection criteria to specific pieces of work, activities, experiences or interactions with the students are helpful indicators and bring the candidate's qualities to life – again class test results (eg. this student achieved 100% or consistently scored in the top 5% of the class) are helpful.



# A note on predicted grades

- When predicting grades, the details you give in the reference on how your school or college are determining what differentiates this candidate and, for example, what makes them an A\* or A grade student is really helpful to tutors.
- Methods of making predictions will of course vary from centre to centre: whether to include in Section 1, either way this should be 'Data driven' (UCAS).
- Any particular factors affecting the individual's predicted grades – Section 2.
- 'Aspirational but achievable' (UCAS). Timeliness and communication of the predictions process and the predictions themselves. 'Predicted grades ... should not be affected by student, parental, guardian or carer pressure' (UCAS). Useful to cite; the centre's (and thus not an individual's) policy.

# Discussion exercise – 1 and 2

## **Section 1 centre statement**

Your thoughts, specifically, on mentioning ...

1. Degree of selectivity, e.g. grammar school, comprehensive?
2. Community & socioeconomic/HE indicators
3. Standard study path and course offer in sixth form (is it broad or limited)
4. Basis for grade predictions
5. Extraordinary centre operating conditions, e.g. staff turnover

## **Section 2 extenuating circumstances**

Your thoughts, specifically, on mentioning ...

1. Medical issues, SENs, bereavement, care experienced
2. Context of prior attainment if lower than expected
3. Factors limiting choice of subjects or load of study at L3
4. Support needed to ensure applicant can thrive at university – eg access arrangements

# Discussion exercise – 3

## Section 3 supporting statements

What works particularly well?

What examples are there of very specific detail?

What good examples are there of super-curricular engagement?

How is extracurricular treated?

# Summary



- The personal statement provides additional information about why they have chosen the subject and why teachers think students are suitable for the course.
- The reference provides tutors at Oxford with additional information on the academic suitability of a candidate to study their chosen subject.
- While both are important documents within the application; students will be neither successful nor unsuccessful in gaining a place at Oxford on the basis of their personal statement or teacher's reference alone.