

# Personal Statements and References for Beginners



James Clerk Maxwell (1831-79)  
the world's greatest physicists. From  
1865 he was Professor of Natural Phi  
at King's College London and brought  
magnetism, electricity & light together  
the Maxwell equations, paving the way  
radio, television, radar & mobile  
One scientific

*Defining  
competitive*

*Applications  
& personal  
statements*

*Reference  
writing*

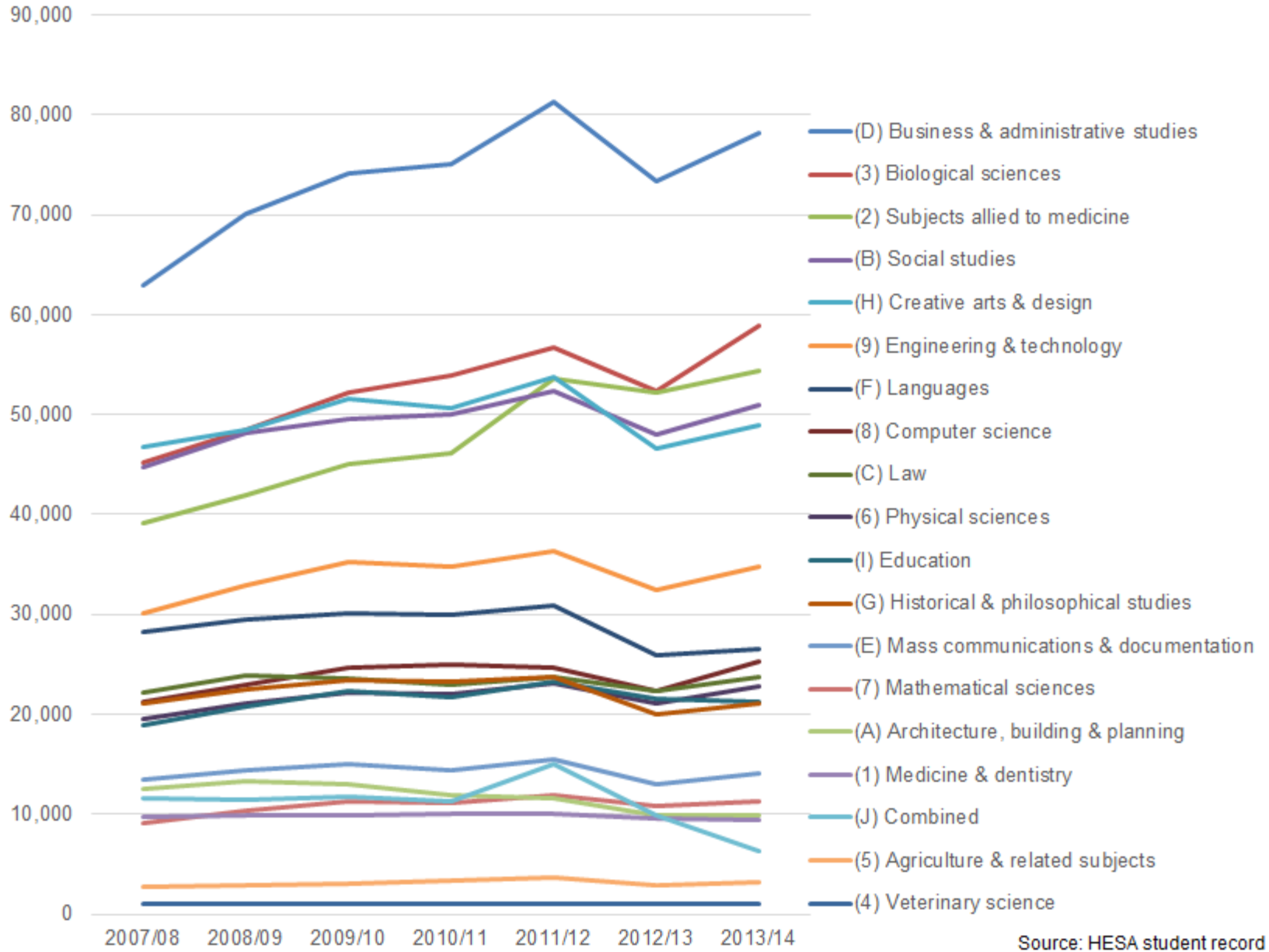
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**First year first degree students by subject area 2007/08 to 2013/14**

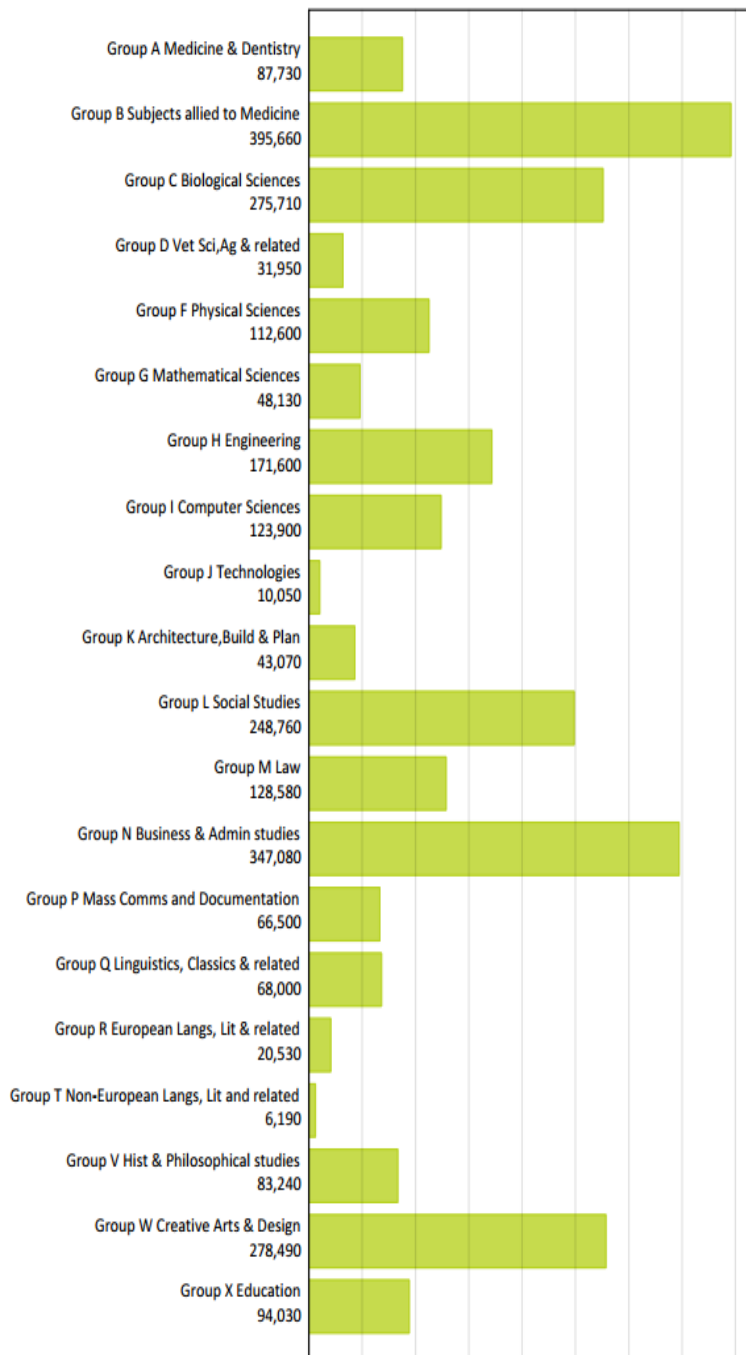


Source: HESA student record

# Applications by subject group 2015 cycle

1. Subjects allied to Medicine
2. Business and Admin studies
3. Creative Arts and Design
4. Biological Sciences
5. Social Studies

Source: UCAS June deadline analysis



# How about King's?

- King's offers over 145 courses
- We receive over 43,000 applications
- 50% are for nine programmes
- 70% are for 20 programmes



# Alternative courses

- Shoulder subjects
- Different name, similar course
- Look at module choices available
- Wider interests?
- Research undertaken in department
- Consider skills and competencies

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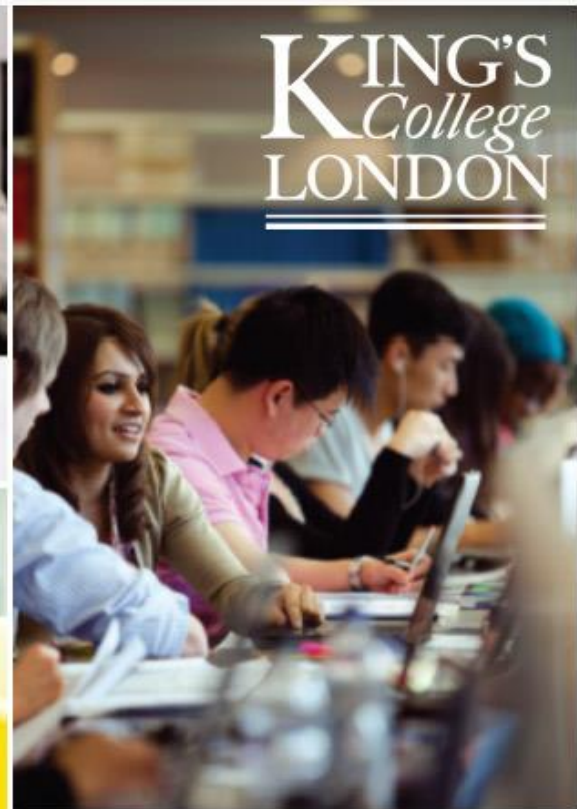
# The Application Form

1. Personal information
2. Course choice
3. Education information
4. Employment information
5. Personal statement
6. Reference



# Five choices, one personal statement

- Does the weighting marry the structure of the programme?
- Opportunity for supporting statement?
- Is there enough of an overlap if applying for a joint honours?



# Personal Statement

- Applicants should tell universities what excites them about their chosen course
- Helpful if applying for competitive courses
- Cover requirements for all courses being applied for



*Universities are explicit on their websites,  
often providing criteria*

# What to include

- 75+% relevant to academic pursuits in and outside of school/college
- Key skills and competencies
- Work experience or placements

*What are we looking for?*

*Core knowledge and technical fluency, focus and determination, ability to learn independently*

# What to include

- Academic engagement outside of the curriculum:
  - summer schools
  - lectures
  - exhibitions
  - wider reading
  - out of the ordinary
  - other wider exploration
  - relevant work experience
- Be selective, critical and analytical
  - don't cram everything in – expand, enrich, improve
- Write clearly and with integrity



## Structure of the statement

- Why do you want to study the subject?
- What do you currently enjoy in your A-level studies
- Any outside reading/ interest in the subject
- Any (ideally relevant) work experience/voluntary work/ clubs
- Spare time

**Introduction** – Why do you want to study the course? What interests you about the subject area? What aspirations do you have, further to university study?

**Academic achievements/subjects studied at level 3 (AS and A2 levels, BTECs etc.)** – Write about your academic achievements. What academic skills and knowledge do you have that will prepare you to succeed in your chosen subject?

**TOP TIP**

*It's great to talk about your aspirations but remember you are applying for a course at university, not for the career that you hope university will lead to.*

**Work experience/employment/volunteering** – Write about any skills that you have gained from work experience, employment and/or volunteering opportunities and how these experiences prepare you for university study.

**TOP TIP**

*This section will be bigger if you are applying to a course that requires work experience such as Dentistry, Medicine or Veterinary Science.*

**Extra-Curricular activities/awards (e.g. a First Aid course or Duke of Edinburgh award)** – Mention any other achievements or extra-curricular activities that demonstrate you have the relevant skills for the course you are applying to.

**Conclusion** – Finish with a brief summary. Why should you be offered a place? Remember what the admissions tutors are looking for and leave them with a good impression.



# Potential Pitfalls:



# Potential Pitfalls: Thesaurus

*Original:*

*I remember how excited I was when my mother told me there was a kid my age moving into the old brick house, the one Mr. Bukowski died in*

*Thesaurus'd*

*I recall how energized I was when my matriarch informed me there was an adolescent my maturity propelling into the aged brick dwelling, the one Mr. Bukowski expired in*

# Potential Pitfalls: Exaggeration

“I’ve wanted to be a doctor since I was in the womb”



# Potential Pitfalls: Plagiarism



# Potential Pitfalls: Plagiarism

“Ever since I accidentally burnt holes in my pyjamas after experimenting with a chemistry set on my eighth birthday, I have always had a passion for science.”

**234**

# Potential Pitfalls: Grammar and Punctuation

“Let’s eat Grandma”

Or

“Let’s eat, Grandma”



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Personal statement: do's and don'ts

[www.which.co.uk/university](http://www.which.co.uk/university)



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Press office

**News**

Key documents

Love Learning 2015 competition winners

Love Learning 2014 competition winners

Take the Spotlight 2016 winners

Take the Spotlight 2015 winners

Uni Leap

# UCAS shares the most frequently-used opening lines in university applicants' personal statements

20 Apr 2016

"From a young age I have (always) been..." was the most popular opening line with university applicants last year, UCAS has revealed.

Some 1,770 students (from over 700,000 who applied) started their personal statements that way; and most of these finished the sentence with 'interested in' or 'fascinated by'.

"For as long as I can remember I have..." was close behind, followed by "I am applying for this course because..."

Over 900 applicants told universities: "I have always been interested in ..." with "Throughout my life, I have always enjoyed..." and "Reflecting on my educational experiences..." some way behind.

## Stats

A record 235,400 UK 18 year olds placed in 2015; up 5%.



1. From a young age I have (always) been [interested in/fascinated by]... [1,779]
2. For as long as I can remember I have... [1,451]
3. I am applying for this course because... [1,370]
4. I have always been interested in... [927]
5. Throughout my life I have always enjoyed... [310]
6. Reflecting on my educational experiences... [257]
7. Nursing is a very challenging and demanding [career/profession/course]... [211]
8. Academically, I have always been... [168]
9. I have always wanted to pursue a career in... [160]
10. I have always been passionate about... [160]
11. “Education is the most powerful weapon which you can use to change the world...” [148]



## Exercise

### Assessing a personal statement

You work in admissions at King's...

Read the personal statements and identify **three great things** and **three things to be improved** in each.



# PPE

- ✓ Interest in subject is explained very well and is enthusiastic whilst also coherent
- ✓ Understanding of the subject is apparent from the way he speaks about it and the skills required, e.g. the benefit of having A level Maths
- ✓ Knowledge and reading are clearly indicated
- X Some of the explanation is generic and lacks meaning, e.g. “I make regular contributions to my college’s Philosophy programme” – are they well received? What is written about?
- X Sections are too list-like (over-editing)
- X Missed opportunities to explain benefit/learning outcome from multiple relevant experiences

# English

- ✓ Passion for subject very apparent, pursued both in and out of school
- ✓ Understanding of course – comparing Literature, mention of plans to study French Literature
- ✓ Concrete examples used with some sound explanation in places (e.g. Milton's quotation used for comparison of Heaven and Hell)
- X Language is overly ornate in places, not always appropriate tone and can be meaningless e.g. 'smitten' and omnivorous interest
- X Quantity takes precedence over quality in places – lots of book names, elaboration sacrificed
- X Flow is lost in places, structure not very apparent (difficult to read)

# Aptitude tests

- A way to differentiate between a number of good applicants
- Another opportunity to show universities how good applicants are
- Can assess professional and course competencies
- Can't always revise but can do practice tests – timing is often key



*Specimen papers are often available online*

# UKCAT

Test is 2 hours and is split into five sections

- Sat at local Pearson VUE test centre
- Results available as printout from test centre

Verbal Reasoning - 22 minutes - 44 items

Quantitative Reasoning - 25 minutes - 36 items

Abstract Reasoning - 14 minutes - 55 items

Decision Analysis - 32 minutes - 28 items

Situational Judgement - 27 minutes - 67 items



# UKCAT

2015 entry 630

2014 entry 735

2013 entry 695

2012 entry 685



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# Are they really that important?

- Vary by programme and university
- Essential for:
  - 10% of students - 2.5% of these are the “high fliers”
  - Highly competitive universities such as Oxford and Cambridge



# What admissions staff say....

“The reference is the first thing I look at...”

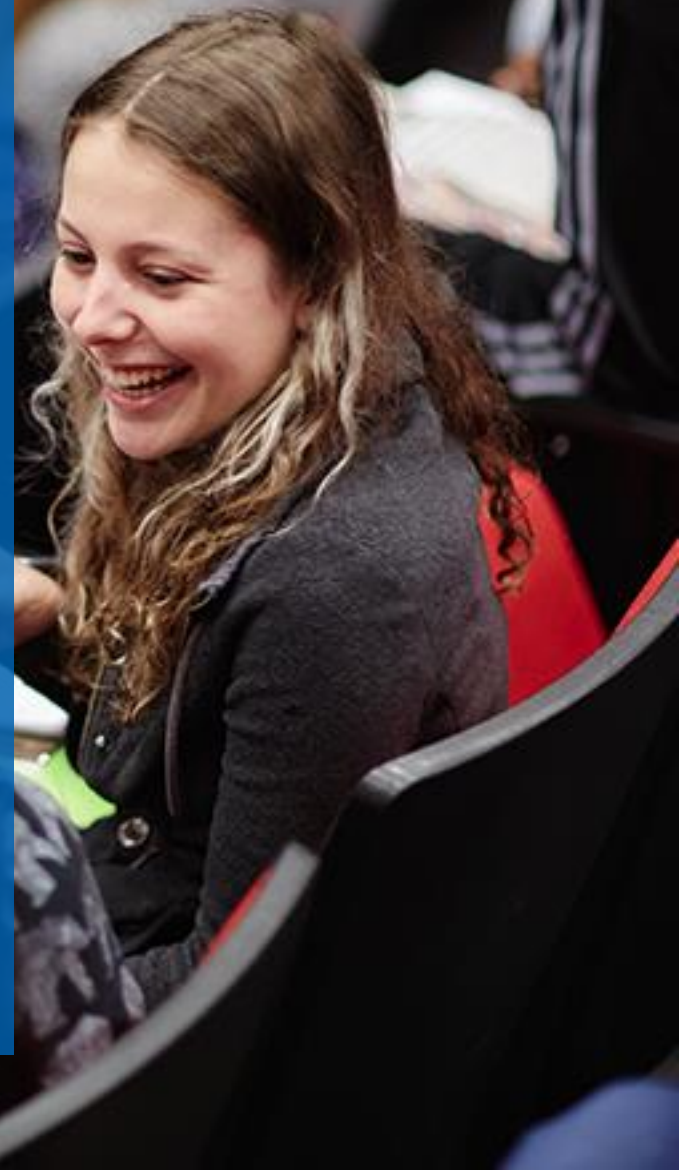
“Extremely important to assess whether an applicant has what it takes to succeed on my course”

“Useful if academic skills are described”

“Very useful if it is not a ‘standard’ applicant or there is an odd choice of A-Levels such as a ‘false start’ ”

# What do we look for?

- A team effort
  - Knows the student best
  - An editor to pull it altogether
- Linked with the personal statement
- Specific to the course and subject being applied for
- Same rules as personal statement
  - Content
  - Detail
  - Evidence



# Open references

- Applicants can now see the reference
- Work with the applicant to write it
- Applicant should “fact-check” and “sign off” the final reference

# What to include

- Context
  - School/college information
  - Extenuating circumstances
- Academic skill and potential
- Suitability and interest in the course
- Non-academic



# The first paragraph

- A short introduction about school/college, intake and environment
  - A sentence or two at most
  - If more information is essential then add in a hyperlink e.g. [www.xxxx.ac.uk/ucas](http://www.xxxx.ac.uk/ucas)
- Out of the ordinary things
  - Does your school/college do anything different or unusual?
  - How is this relevant to the individual student
  - Is this a Widening Participation student
  - Did they do GCSEs or A-Levels early
  - Extenuating circumstances

# Extenuating circumstances

- Best to put them on the UCAS form rather than a separate note
- Include as much information as possible
  - Health, educational disruption, home, financial
  - Facts and figures – when, how much, to what extent
- Prioritise to the first line of the first paragraph rather than school/college information





# Academic skill and potential

- Accounts for 60-80% of the reference
- Teachers: write twice as much to give editor more to work with and cut down
- Editor: Place the most relevant subject first, with less detail on the less relevant subjects



# Academic skill and potential

- Predicted grades
  - AS grades, UMS module scores
  - How good is the school at predicting grades?
- Does the applicants attainment reflect their ability?
- How do they compare? – If not within the year then previous years

# Academic skill and potential

An indication of their potential to study at that level at that university

- Are they motivated to learn?
- Are they capable of independent study?
- Do they have an enquiring mind?
- Are they able to present an argument?
- Can they talk and discuss confidently in class?
- Are they good at problem solving?
- Have they improved?

# Suitability and interest in the course

**Modern languages:** has the applicant visited the country?

**Science and Engineering:** is their maths good enough?

**Medicine/Dentistry:** Have they worked to obtain relevant work experience?

**English:** Can they critically appraise a text?

**History:** Do they understand the use of sources?

**Psychology:** do they understand the scientific as well as the human side?

# Non-academic information

- Interpersonal and other relevant skills/qualities that may be important for the course
- Important positions of responsibility
- Career aspirations
- Anything else relevant to the course



# Assessing a reference

You work in admissions at King's...

Read the references and identify **three great things** and **three things to be improved** in each.

## Reference A – Taylor Swift

- ✓ Includes contextual information from the applicants previous school
- ✓ Weights relevant subject more heavily
- ✓ Geography: reflects on what she'd done, skills developed and how its relevant at university level
- X Could have supplied more contextual information about the college
- X Doesn't give sufficient weight to Geology
- X Could have demonstrated how other subjects and extra curricular activities are relevant

## Reference B - Harry Styles

- ✓ - Provides context – introduces school and gives link to more information
- ✓ - Highlights out-of-the-ordinary information early on
- ✓ - Good evidence of academic attainment potential
- X – Relevant academic content could be placed higher up the reference
- X- Could state more clearly how evidence is relevant to application
- X – How does enjoyment of museums apply to business?



## Reference C – Justin Bieber

- ✓ More context on the College environment and previous school
- ✓ Extenuating circumstances in the first paragraph
- ✓ All areas reflect on relevant skills for the course e.g. team work and problem solving, analysis
- X Extenuating circumstances should be moved before the things he doesn't do so well on to put them into context
- X Not weighted towards relevant subjects
- X "Finds independent study and written maths difficult"  
– Gives impression that study at university level isn't for him!

# Top three tips for subject teachers

1. Write twice as much
2. Content, detail, evidence
3. Focus on the course and subject that's being applied to



# Top three tips for editors

1. Place the most relevant information and subjects first and weight accordingly
2. Avoid filling word limit with unnecessary statements or information already on the form
3. Get applicant to fact check and sign off the final reference

But whatever your  
role.....

....be positive!



Questions?

