Hints and Tips on Writing UCAS References

Why your reference is important

Universities receive many more applications than they have places. SWAP partner universities are committed to considering applications from SWAP applicants (assuming, of course, that they are on a relevant access programme); however, this does not mean that they are under any obligation to offer them a place. Universities will only offer a place to applicants who can provide sufficient evidence of their academic ability, passion for and good understanding of their chosen subject and the motivation and transferable skills needed to succeed in higher education.

University admissions staff will look for this evidence in the applicant's personal statement and in the tutor's UCAS reference. **The purpose of the reference is to give universities an informed and academic assessment of an applicant's suitability for further study.**

Before you start

You'll need a UCAS Login and password to access the UCAS advisor system, both of which are generated annually by UCAS. You should have received an email from SWAP with these details at the beginning of the academic year. If you do not have them, please contact the SWAP East office.

Read the application and check that the student has:
- applied to UCAS via SWAP East (and not via the college);
- filled in the *Education* section fully, including details of all of the units they are studying this year <u>and</u> anything they studied before starting the access programme;
- made it clear that they are currently enrolled on a SWAP programme and registered as a SWAP student. If they don't do this, they may not get a SWAP offer.

How to start

SWAP references should start with the following heading: SWAP Access to [title of access programme]. This immediately flags to the admissions officer that the student is a SWAP student eligible for SWAP entry. You may also want to include a brief description of the programme—but do keep it brief.

What to cover

Admissions officers are looking to get a good overall picture of an applicant and an idea of how they are likely to get on in a university environment. Information on academic ability is obviously important, but so too are details of the applicant's transferable skills (e.g. communication skills, presentation skills, organisational skills, team working and leadership skills) and their commitment and attitude to their studies.

Things to consider:

- How is the student coping with the demands of the programme so far?
- How well suited is the student to studying at university and to studying their chosen subject?
- Have they demonstrated commitment and motivation? Do they attend regularly and submit work on time?
- How well and how willingly do they contribute to class discussions and group work?
- Are you aware of any particular achievements or skills that are relevant to their chosen subject?
- Has the student had to cope with any major obstacles or personal difficulties during their studies? (See the section below on exceptional circumstances).

Do	Don't
Try to highlight individual strengths or skills where appropriate. If none are mentioned, it could be implied that the applicant does not possess any.	Write a standard reference for the whole class - admissions officers may see multiple applications from the same class or college. Little or no variation between references makes them pretty meaningless.
Comment on the applicant's likely suitability for university level study, backed up with relevant evidence.	Feel obliged to comment on the applicant's suitability for their chosen degree programme if it is a subject or a course you know very little about. You can limit your comments to their general suitability for university level study.
Be tactful but honest. It does not do an applicant any favours if they are recommended for a university place that they are not really ready for or likely to be able to cope with.	Repeat information the student has already provided in their personal statement, unless you want to comment on it in some way.
Double check everything before you submit. Once the application has gone to UCAS it can't be amended.	Mention any universities by name. Admissions officers only see details of the course the student has applied to at their institution.

Exceptional circumstances

If there are exceptional circumstances or particular disadvantages which have impacted on a student's performance, consideration should be given to mentioning these in the reference. Admissions officers can take such

circumstances into account when considering the application. Examples of such issues include health problems, close family bereavements and disruptions to course delivery, such as a tutor being long-term absent. **You must obtain the student's consent to mention any health or disability issues.** Where the matter is highly personal or confidential, the applicant may wish to contact admissions offices themselves, which they should feel free to do.

When problems of this nature do not emerge until later in the academic year, we can consider giving details of the mitigating circumstances to the university or universities when submitting the student's results. Contact the SWAP East Office for advice if such a scenario arises.

Second references

SWAP tutors sometimes feel that they don't know some of their students well enough at the point they are required to write UCAS references for them. Nonetheless, it is important that all references are as detailed as possible to help admissions officers make well-informed decisions. In any case, some degree programmes require a second reference, including nursing and social work. If that is necessary, you will likely be contacted directly by the admissions office at the relevant university. Supplementary references should be returned directly to the university admissions office and not entered into the UCAS system.

FAQs

Who should write the UCAS reference?

UCAS references for SWAP students are usually written by SWAP tutors in consultation with the other subject tutors. Ultimately, it is up to the college to decide who is best placed to write UCAS references; however, in each case, it should be a staff member who knows the student and is in a position to evaluate their academic credentials authoritatively.

Is there a word limit?

Yes. The limit is 4000 characters and 47 lines. You will be timed out after thirty-five minutes of inactivity and will lose any unsaved work.

Should I include predicted grades?

Some tutors do and some don't. You should only include predicted grades if you feel confident enough to do so and provided you have received the necessary information from the other subject tutors.

Do I need to check the student's degree choices and personal statement?

This varies from college to college. Some colleges have guidance staff who support students working on their UCAS applications and personal statements, while other colleges leave this responsibility to SWAP tutors. It is very important that there are arrangements in place for the students to access support with the UCAS application process, including feedback on drafts of their personal statement. A student's degree choices are their responsibility, but tutors should check to make sure they match the agreed progression routes and that they are appropriate for the student (i.e. sensible and fit with the content of their personal statement).

Guidance on applying to UCAS is available in the *Current Students* section of the SWAP East website. This includes advice on what to include in the personal statement. If you need advice on supporting your students through the UCAS application process, get in touch with the SWAP East office and we'll do our best to help.

I'm concerned that the student is an unsuitable candidate for their degree choice. Should I say anything?

This can be tricky and should be handled carefully. If you believe that the student lacks certain key skills then you then should flag this. Needless to say, you should go about this in a tactful and non-critical way (e.g. [Student name] is exceptionally motivated, but he/she has some work still to do on improving her X and Y skills if he/she is to be successful in becoming a [job title] …).

I have spotted a problem with the student's UCAS application. Can I send it back to them?

Yes. The UCAS system allows you to send the form back to the student with feedback on what they need to amend. The student will need to return the form to you once they have made the changes, so that you can resubmit it to UCAS.

A SWAP student has applied to UCAS via the college rather than SWAP. What should I do?

You will need to return the application to the student as nothing can be done while it is with you. The student will then need to contact the UCAS helpline with their 10 digit UCAS ID and ask for their school to be changed to **Scottish Wider Access Programme East (Centre No. S75367T).** We will be able to see the application and move the student into the relevant SWAP class grouping on UCAS. **N.B. This cannot be done once the application has been submitted to UCAS.**

What should I do once I have finished writing the reference?

Provided all other parts of the application are complete and no changes are required, you should go ahead and submit the application to UCAS**. N.B. No changes can be made once the application is submitted.**

Can a student ask to see their reference?

Yes. Under the Data Protection Act the student can ask to see a copy of the reference.

Further Information and Guidance

UCAS Guidance on writing references
https://www.ucas.com/advisers/references/how-write-ucas-undergraduate-references

University of Exeter: Hints and Tips on Writing a UCAS Reference
https://www.exeter.ac.uk/media/universityofexeter/webteam/shared/undergraduate/documents/teachersresourcespresentations/writingaUCASreference-hintsandtips.pdf

Which? University: UCAS Reference Writing – A Beginner's Guide
http://university.which.co.uk/teachers/help-your-students-get-into-uni/ucas-reference-writing-a-beginner-s-guide

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