



# St Mary's spotlight: personal statements

## Writing academic references

The purpose of a teacher's reference is to provide universities and colleges with an assessment of an applicant's suitability for higher level study, with regard to academic ability, motivation and attitude to study.

Addressing the following topics, where possible, when composing the reference is recommended:

- Proof of the student's commitment to their studies, including specific areas of interest and enjoyment
- An assessment and analysis of the student's academic skills such as essay writing, critical analysis, research, interpretation, etc.

In practice, the reference tends to have input from a selection of teachers close to the student applying; pulling this together as a central function can be a challenge. As a general guide, references should also contain an assessment of a student's suitability for their chosen course, with consideration given to:

- Proposed career plans
- Related achievements in and out of school
- Areas of particularly outstanding development over the past two years
- Any participation in specific award/recognition schemes such as the Duke of Edinburgh Award, gifted and talented or widening participation schemes and the impact such activities have had on the student
- Work experience undertaken

If the student is applying for a practical course such as Performing Arts or Design, then an analysis of their relevant practical skills is useful, as well as an assessment of how these skills have developed/are developing.

The academic reference should complement, not replicate, what is written in the student's personal statement, so you should include your observations of the student's strengths and personal qualities which will contribute to success at degree level.

Predicted grades can be a minefield, with added pressure to score students as positively as possible. If you believe that a student's potential is not reflected by the predicted grades, this can be included in your reference with an honest explanation. Perhaps the student is new to the school or even an Access course student only a few weeks into their studies. The more information included here, the better.

Contextual data about the school, catchment area, attainment levels, qualifications offered, progression data, etc, enables a university to make a more accurate assessment about the applicant's achievements. It is commonplace for references to arrive with the same opening text about the school. This ensures consistency, which is important in order to avoid bias.

Students with disabilities, special education needs or care leavers status are asked to state this in the application. Although students are not obliged to disclose this information on their application, early disclosure gives universities and colleges more time to prepare and arrange the support that a student may need. In addition, universities could have specific arrangements in place to support students in these groups. If any details about learning difficulty, disability or care experience are mentioned in the reference, it is essential that the student agrees to this.