



**WRITING  
REFERENCES FOR  
HIGHER EDUCATION**

**A COMPREHENSIVE  
GUIDE FOR TUTORS**

**SECOND EDITION**



**SUE JONES**



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## SUBJECT-SPECIFIC ADVICE FROM ADMISSIONS TUTORS

### MEDICINE AND RELATED SUBJECTS, E.G. PHYSIOTHERAPY

Medical schools require very specific information and candidates must research these criteria before asking for a reference. The following list only indicates in general terms what may be required.

Students working for a medical degree will be expected to:

- be strongly motivated to medicine
- have an aptitude for science
- be interested in people
- have concern for the welfare of others
- be good communicators
- cope with stressful situations
- be well informed about medicine as a career

#### Admissions tutors look for:

*"Evidence of ability to integrate information, solve problems, study independently and in groups, work consistently."*

*"Service to school, ability to get on with people, ability to think/study independently and effectively."*

*"Team work, job experience."*

*"Mature, outgoing with outside interests."*

*"Evidence of communication skills, teamwork, honesty, integrity."*

#### Tutors also said:

*"Be honest [about predicted grades] because admission depends on actual grades."*

It is important that *"the reference reflects the requirements of the course outlined in our admissions booklet."*

*"That they are realistic in the academic predictions they make and link them to course requirements."*

Most medical courses are heavily over-subscribed, so *"It does help to keep it succinct - they are more likely to get read then."*

#### On submitting applications:

*"Don't write in after the form has been submitted to change the predicted grades."*

*"Get them in on time."*

*"Although I do wait to the deadline, I would not wait that long - the majority of good applications are received earlier."*

#### On wider skills:

Wider skills *"are useful attributes that students need."*

*"We particularly value good communication skills."*

#### On International Baccalaureate:

Details of the *"studied subjects."*

#### On vocational and applied qualifications:

*"Link to course requirements. [where acceptable as qualifications]"*

**GCE Advanced Chemistry: grade A**  
**GCE Advanced Biology: grade A**  
**GCE Advanced Mathematics: grade A**  
**GCE Advanced German: grade A**

X joined the School in 2002 and has maintained an impressive academic record throughout, achieving ten grade As at GCSE Level including 3 at A\*. At Advanced Level, X opted to continue with all four A Levels in Chemistry, Biology, Mathematics and German in Year 13 as she enjoys the challenge and breadth German and Mathematics offer along with her science courses. Focused on Medicine from the outset when she entered the Sixth Form, X also opted for a fifth subject in AS Critical Thinking, offered as an after school course for an hour a week, in which she achieved grade C.

X is a hardworking, able and tenacious student who has immersed herself in the wider life of the School whilst balancing her commitment to schemes such as paired reading, Book Club as well as maintain being an active member of our award winning anti-bullying group which involves being trained by a professional counsellor and possessing the social skills to deal with a range of people and their personal challenges – students have to compete to be chosen to be part of this group. Her long-standing regular medical work experience at a local hospital is commendable. Organised independently, X has also shadowed doctors in UCL and has undertaken voluntary work in a local hospice. There is no doubt that she is focused on reading Medicine and has the intellectual capacity and inner curiosity to both enjoy and be successful on the course.

In Chemistry, X achieved grade A at AS Level and is predicted grade A overall. Her attendance and punctuality records are exemplary – as they are in all her subjects. Attentive in class and always willing to research further, X is a pleasure to teach. She exhibited very sound understanding of intermolecular forces and she proved herself to be adept at thermo-chemical computations. Her work is always clear and thorough and she shows a keen eye for detail. Her mathematical skills support her work in Chemistry. Her Mathematics teachers also predict her grade A overall, especially given that she achieved 98% in one of her AS Units. X impresses her teachers with her willingness to independently locate and complete additional exercises when she feels she needs more practice.

Predicted grade A in Biology, X demonstrates a similar approach to all her studies – concentrating hard in lessons, being attentive in class and always being well organised. She never misses a deadline and always exhibits a sound understanding and enjoyment of the subject which has reinforced her choice to read Medicine. In German, X reads novels independently and has enjoyed the breadth this course offers her diet of study. Her AS Critical Thinking course was a challenge given that it took place after regular school hours and sometimes lessons were irregular so achieving grade C was commendable under these conditions.

Although X sometimes prefers to listen rather than take over conversations, she is an able, mature and exemplary student who can compete well with able Medical students and would relish studying the course. We recommend her highly to study Medicine.

### WHAT THE TUTORS SAID:

#### Subject comments:

*“Clearly relates to choice of medicine and corroborates points in the personal statement about long-standing medical work experience – which can be really helpful.”*

*“Attempts to offer some detailed subject comments and tries to justify the predicted grades.”*

*“Provides a useful summary at the outset so I get the big picture first.”*

#### Comments:

*“Full of detail and generally helpful.”*

*“Might be useful to hint at how able the candidate is as there is a large difference amongst candidates who achieve grade As.”*

#### Style of language:

*“The subjects are easy to spot and it is slightly less wordy [than some.]”*

*“Easy to read the statement and the writer clearly knows the student and how their experiences relate to their choice of course.”*

# SAMPLE REFERENCES AND COMMENTS FROM ADMISSIONS TUTORS

## FURTHER ADVICE FROM ADMISSIONS TUTORS ON WRITING UCAS REFERENCES

### Admissions tutors depend on referees as professionals:

*"Absolute honesty required."*

*"References are prepared by experienced persons with professional obligations and standards to maintain."*

*"We have a degree of confidence that references are written by teachers who are likely to be reasonably truthful."*

### They depend on the referee's judgement of academic ability:

*"It gives an independent assessment of an applicant's performance and progress by a professional closely involved."*

*"The reference offers a (hopefully) candid assessment of the student's abilities and likely results."*

### They depend on the referee's judgement of character:

*"The reference should be... independent and insightful."*

*"It should be objective and meaningful."*

*"It gives an indication of work ethic and general suitability for the course."*

*"Some applicants are rather modest and do not sell themselves very well and the reference can help to get a more rounded picture of the applicant."*

### But they can read between the lines!

*"Please try to avoid having a standard reference with just the names and predictions changed."*

*"Sometimes the 'cut and paste' reference...is easy to spot."*

*"I look for consistency between [the reference and the personal statement] if they cover the same ground."*

*"Some references are too brief and one does not get the feeling that the person writing the reference knows the individual concerned."*

*"I do take account of the type of school, and I am more sceptical of independent schools where staff tend to be more optimistic with their comments."*

*"I am loath to make too great a judgement on the back of [the reference and personal statement] - I hate to say it but 99% of the references I receive are various degrees of glowing."*

*"I take the reference with a pinch of salt, after all the schools are under pressure to place their students in HE."*

### Admissions tutors often want to make fast and accurate decisions:

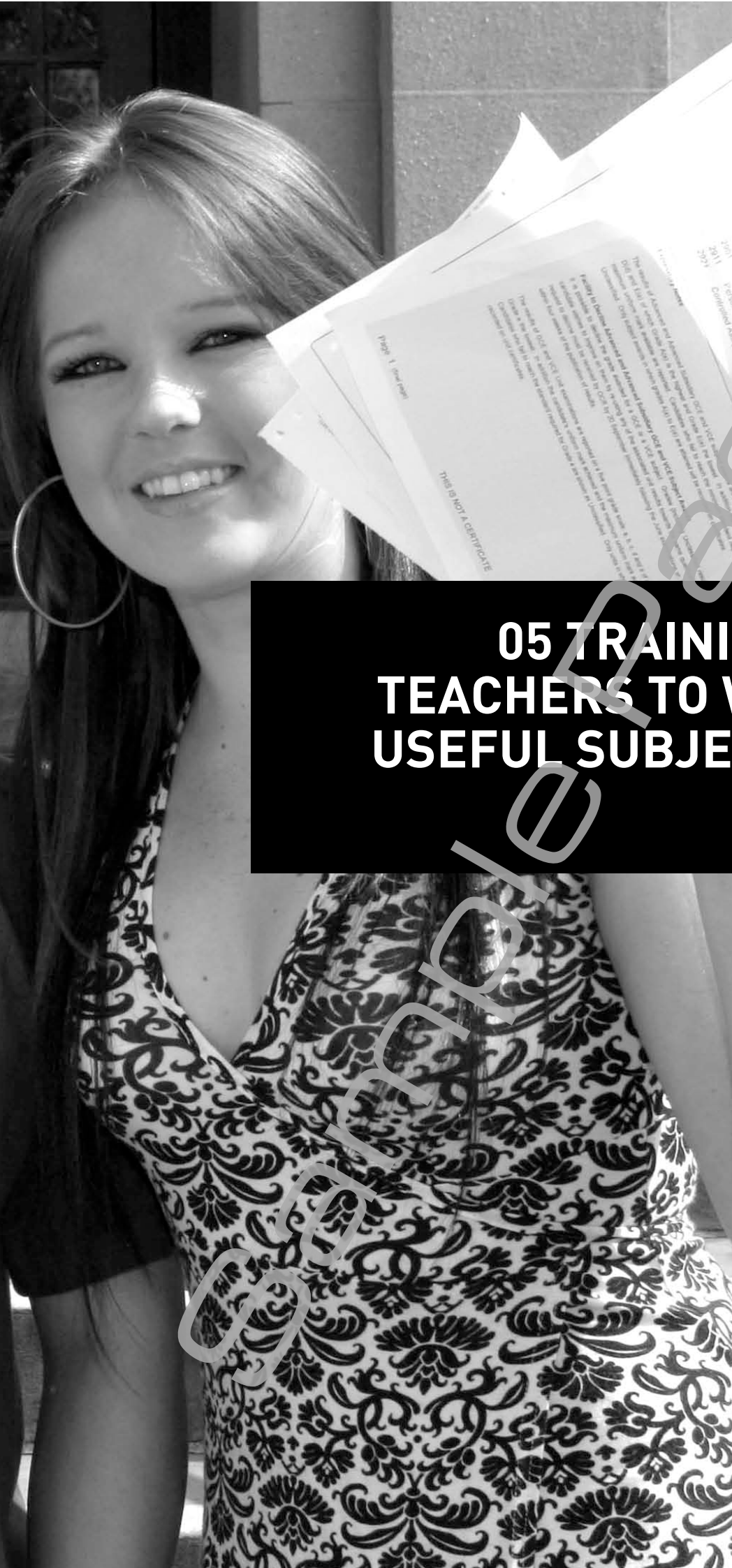
*"Some referees write wordy, literary tones; others are brief and to the point; a few are too brief to be of use. Remember, I want to find out information about the applicant quickly, and I am not interested in the expressive skills of the referee."*

**But**

*"I do appreciate it when a referee has spent a moment or two longer in composition so that the reference brings a point of importance into sharp focus."*

### And the reference must be relevant to academic life!

*"Universities are not looking for appellations like 'well-behaved', 'polite' or as I saw recently from an unnamed 'ladies college' the description of a 'girl with excellent breeding and charming manners'."*



## 05 TRAINING SUBJECT TEACHERS TO WRITE MORE USEFUL SUBJECT REPORTS

# TRAINING SUBJECT TEACHERS TO WRITE

## MORE USEFUL SUBJECT REPORTS

### EXAMPLE SUBJECT REPORTS BY STAFF

#### INSTRUCTIONS

Please read through the following examples of typical subject teacher reports used for the UCAS reference. The two versions show how some teacher comments can be really useful and others simply provide words on a page that the overall UCAS reference writer could have generated themselves. Specific details or phrases or examples are key to helping the reference writer. The reference writer needs no help simply filling space – they need facts to build up a picture of the student. In addition, justification of the grade is key e.g. why predict a grade B not an A or C?

#### Reference 1: Not a useful reference

X has a good attendance and punctuality record

X works hard in Psychology lessons but needs to write more clearly

X needs to be more organised as his subject folder is a mess

X asks perceptive questions in class

Very suited to higher education as he enjoys learning and is very self-motivated.

Achieved grade B at AS Level. Predicted grade A at A2.

#### Comment

*This has very little that is useful for a reference. There are no comments that justify the predicted grade (A) being higher than the AS grade achieved (B). Other than asking perceptive questions in class, there is very little that can be used to make the reference feel tailored to the individual.*

#### Reference 2: Useful reference

X has excellent records of attendance and punctuality.

X takes a keen interest in the subject and comes to lesson being able to talk about books he has read at home. Even if he knows little about the topic, he asks perceptive questions in class.

His presentation on the extent to which we can trust eye witness testimonies was thorough drawing on wider material than the textbook alone and was confidently presented.

Although he lacks organisational skills – his folder is a mess – he makes up for this in intellectual curiosity and intelligence.

His handwriting is a mess which might explain why he sometimes scores poorly as he did in one unit but the content is rich – he sometimes overwrites and runs out of time so he needs to learn to be more selective.

One of his AS units scored 90%. Predicted grade A despite attaining grade B at AS Level.

#### Comment

*This is a useful subject teacher comment for the UCAS reference writer. It explains why the student scored B (needs to be more selective and handwriting a concern) and yet justifies the grade A (intelligent and knows his material). The specific example of the presentation on eye witness testimony can be useful, especially if the choice of course relates to Psychology, where more can be made of the example in the final reference. The use of external test scores was very useful in helping to illustrate the strengths of the applicant.*

**ACTIVITY 2: ANALYSING ACADEMIC SUBJECT REPORTS**  
**ELLEN'S UCAS SUBJECT REPORTS**

**INSTRUCTIONS**

Read through the selection of some lengthy subject reports from teachers to help the UCAS reference writer.

Underline the information in each subject report that you believe would be most useful to help the reference writer.

After each subject report rate how useful you found the overall report. Then state if the predicted grade was justified e.g. if a grade B was predicted, why a B and not an A or C?

**ELLEN'S SUBJECT REPORT FOR A LEVEL ENGLISH LANGUAGE**

**Estimated grade A**

Ellen is able to analyse language texts using a full range of frameworks including the higher band discriminators: semantics and grammar. Her commentaries are generally (although not always) of a high standard. She has found some areas of language study challenging but as a result of determination and perseverance she has often improved her standard and continued to make excellent progress. She is always willing to participate in class and ask questions to develop a deeper understanding.

Although predicted an A grade, Ellen does need to develop a deeper understanding of some grammar concepts. Ellen has had a 100% attendance record for my part of the course. She is always on time. Some of the commentaries she has produced on the Unit 2 exam preparation for Language and Occupation have shown Ellen at her very best. One particular commentary on a representational text achieved full marks. She was able to show Band 5 thinking in the way she applied theories and studies, her ability to be tentative, methodical and analytical.

During group work Ellen is able to work collaboratively to achieve shared goals. When needs be, she is also able to show leadership in group work, taking control and responsibility but never being autocratic or domineering.

Ellen is absolutely suited for Higher Education although she might find Oxbridge challenging. Her success often stems from hard work and determination which may not be enough to cope with the demands of Oxbridge or the competition she will face.

**Comments  
useful**

1

2

3

**Comments  
not useful**

4

Is the predicted grade justified? Yes No

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## TRAINING SUBJECT TEACHERS TO WRITE MORE USEFUL SUBJECT REPORTS

### ACTIVITY 3: ANALYSING ACADEMIC SUBJECT REPORTS

#### TONY'S SUBJECT REPORT FOR A LEVEL CHEMISTRY

Estimated grade B

*What strengths/skills does the student display to achieve your estimated grade?*

Hard working and well organised.

Good attender who contributes good ideas in class, and is always ready to ask questions to further his understanding.

*What is preventing the student achieving a higher grade?*

Needs to be more accurate in quantitative experiments

Answers need more detail for higher grades

*Provide specific examples that demonstrate strengths or interest in your subject*

Qualitative experiments are a strength, Tony is able to deduce logical inferences from his observations.

*Have you any concerns about the suitability of the student for Higher Education? (e.g. work ethic, independent study, etc.)*

None.

**Comments  
useful**

1

2

3

**Comments  
not useful**

4

Is the predicted grade justified? Yes No

# SUPPORTING UCAS REFERENCE WRITERS

## TIPS FOR WRITING UCAS REFERENCES

### INSTRUCTIONS

Read the guidance provided in this Section and discuss to what extent you agree / disagree with the points.

Generate some of your own guidance by drawing on advice from those staff more experienced at writing references.

### TIP 1 VARY SENTENCE CONSTRUCTION

Instead of beginning each sentence with the name of the applicant, try switching the details at the end of the sentence to the beginning e.g.

Instead of Ben writes fluent essays which are detailed and reflect wider reading.

Try Wider reading along with the fluency of his essays makes the quality of Ben's work impressive.

### TIP 2 CONSIDER USING UNIT MARK INFORMATION

Where a student has performed well in certain examinations e.g. Units at AS Level, try using the results in the reference e.g.

Instead of Ben performed well at AS Level, gaining grade B overall.

Try Although attaining grade B overall, Ben attained grade A in one of his Units scoring 83% which suggests he has grade A potential.

### TIP 3 WRITE A REFERENCE THAT SUITS THE PREDICTED GRADE

Writing a reference that reads as if the applicant is predicted a grade A after which the reader is confronted with a grade C prediction, can be a little odd. To be fair to applicants who deserve comments that reflect their grade A potential, write comments that suit the appropriate predicted grade.

Instead of Reshma is an incredibly talented biologist whose work is of the highest quality. She is predicted a grade B overall.

Try Reshma thoroughly enjoys biology and strives for the highest grade. With slightly more detailed answers and analysis, she could achieve grade A but she has maintained a very consistent record of attaining high B grades.

### TIP 4 MAKE REFERENCE TO THE HIGHER EDUCATION COURSE TO WHICH THE STUDENT IS APPLYING

The best references focus on the choice of course and avoid being generic.

Instead of Alex enjoys his studies and has managed to undertake some wider reading.

Try Alex is keen to study chemical engineering which is evident by the wider reading he has undertaken to broaden his understanding of the discipline.

### TIP 5 BE HONEST BUT AVOID BEING NEGATIVE

References need to be honest to do justice to all the applicants from your centre – why should all students receive a glowing reference when some students do not deserve such accolade? However, there is no point in focusing on negative qualities alone.

**Instead of** It has taken a long time for Jennifer to mature throughout the sixth form, so her commitment to studies, record of attendance and punctuality are all a concern. I am surprised she is applying to university.

**Try** When Jennifer focuses wholly on her studies she demonstrates that she is ready for study at higher education level. With a developing level of maturity, Jennifer is focusing on her studies in Year 13 and this renewed approach is reaping reward.

### TIP 6 USE EXAMPLES

The most engaging references use examples to demonstrate strengths.

**Instead of** Krupa is able to present information clearly and precisely. Her essays are detailed and relate well to the title drawing on background reading.

**Try** Krupa has written a range of precise and clearly written essays including an impressive submission on the biological basis of anxiety disorders which used material gathered from background reading from the New Scientist. The material used was directly related to the title and demonstrated the sort of independent learning skills required for higher education.

### FURTHER TIPS

- 7 Avoid the journalistic approach adopted by the infamous Private Eye contributor, 'Phil Space!' – do not waffle as admissions tutors often have seconds to read a reference not minutes. If the reference is short but effective that is better than longer and full of waffle. Waffle fools nobody.
- 8 Do not make candidates all appear the same – able candidates need to shine so avoid dressing up a weaker candidate to look the same as an able one. If a candidate has not worked hard throughout the course, avoid making out that they have as students who have a note-worthy work ethic will not be rewarded.
- 9 Think about the choice of course. The more competitive the course and institution, the more likely the reference needs to focus on academic issues.
- 10 Be clear – think about how a reader, who does not know the applicant as you do, will read your reference. If you state that their independent learning skills are 'good', do you mean their skills are less than excellent or do you mean that skills are note-worthy?
- 11 Avoid bland references – read your reference and see if you have done justice to the applicant. Sometimes, teachers can be reserved in praise. Have you been too reserved? Have strengths that are exceptional been portrayed as average? Is there a 'feel' for the student that captures that person, honestly?

## UCAS INTERVIEW BETWEEN STUDENT & HIGHER EDUCATION ADVISOR

NAME: \_\_\_\_\_ TUTOR GROUP: \_\_\_\_\_

POST 16 SUBJECTS	LEVELS	AS GRADE	PREDICTED GRADE
1 _____	AS / A2 BTEC Single / Double Award Certificate / Diploma		
2 _____	AS / A2 BTEC Single / Double Award Certificate / Diploma		
3 _____	AS / A2 BTEC Single / Double Award Certificate / Diploma		
4 _____	AS / A2 BTEC Single / Double Award Certificate / Diploma		
5 _____	AS / A2 BTEC Single / Double Award Certificate / Diploma		

Interviewer \_\_\_\_\_ Date of interview \_\_\_\_\_

Higher Education Course \_\_\_\_\_ Specified subjects in tariff (if any) \_\_\_\_\_

Grades/Tariff required for 1st Choice \_\_\_\_\_ Grades/Tariff required for Insurance choice \_\_\_\_\_

Notes (e.g. extenuating circumstances; GCSE under performance issues)

PART B: CONFIDENTIAL. TO BE FILLED IN BY HOD IN CONSULTATION WITH SUBJECT STAFF.

	<b>4 HIGH</b>	<b>3</b>	<b>2</b>	<b>1 LOW</b>
<b>MOTIVATION</b>				
<b>POWERS OF ANALYSIS</b>				
<b>COMMUNICATION SKILLS</b>				
<b>INDEPENDENCE OF THOUGHT</b>				
<b>COMMITMENT TO COURSEWORK</b>				

PLEASE ALSO COMMENT ON:

1. The student's **strengths** in terms of skills and concepts in your subject

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2. The extent to which they have shown **initiative** in developing their knowledge beyond basic course requirements

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Any other **positive comments**

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TEACHER'S SIGNATURE: \_\_\_\_\_

RETURN: TO \_\_\_\_\_ BY (date) \_\_\_\_\_

**A COMPLETE RETURN IS ESSENTIAL**

# INFORMATION GATHERING MATERIALS FOR THE UCAS REFERENCES

## DOCUMENT 6

### PASTORAL SUMMARY AND STUDENT CONTRIBUTION

STUDENT TO COMPLETE THIS SECTION

WHAT ACTIVITIES HAVE YOU TAKEN PART IN THROUGHOUT THE SIXTH FORM / OUTSIDE SIXTH FORM?

<b>NAME OF ACTIVITY 1</b>
Describe the activity in two sentences _____ _____
Staff involved to sign to confirm that the student has been involved in a genuine way Staff / Supervisor signature _____
<b>NAME OF ACTIVITY 2</b>
Describe the activity in two sentences _____ _____
Staff involved to sign to confirm that the student has been involved in a genuine way Staff / Supervisor signature _____
<b>NAME OF ACTIVITY 3</b>
Describe the activity in two sentences _____ _____
Staff involved to sign to confirm the student has been involved in a genuine way Staff / Supervisor signature _____

## UCAS REPORT – INDEPENDENT LEARNING SKILLS

### INSTRUCTIONS

Use this self-report to log your independent learning skills. Submit this to your form tutor for inclusion with the information provided for the UCAS reference writer.

*Qualities* - \* Self-motivated \* able to meet deadlines \* study successfully in large groups \* have read more than standard textbook \* initiative \* manage time well, seek feedback \* overcome challenges and disappointment \* understand how you learn e.g. use images, use lists, use flow charts \* carried out some research in a topic \* enjoy learning \*

*Evidence* - \* positive subject reports about my approach to studying \* evidence of organised file \* evidence of meeting deadlines from staff \* evidence of wider reading \* evidence of research, progress record throughout course \* evidence of engagement with learning e.g. reading for pleasure \* evidence that you seek and take advice when needed \*

<b>MY INDEPENDENT LEARNING SKILLS</b> <i>e.g. good organisational skills</i>	<b>MY EVIDENCE</b> <i>e.g. In Biology, I have a good record of bringing equipment to every lesson, using a diary to schedule my work and my file is always organised.</i>