



Personal Statement Workshop

Wadham College, University of Oxford

The Plan

01

Being **super-curricular** and turning it into your personal statement

02

Structuring your personal statement

03

Planning your next steps

What are universities looking for in a personal statement?

The image features two solid teal horizontal bars. The first bar is positioned below the title and is separated from the second bar by a thin white horizontal line.

What are universities looking for in a personal statement?

1. Someone who likes the course

What are universities looking for in a personal statement?

1. Someone who likes the course
2. Someone who can do the course

English Language and Literature

1. Evidence of wide, engaged, and thoughtful reading
2. Analytical skills and writing
3. Enthusiasm for literature
4. Response to new ideas and information
5. Capacity for independent thought

Which student do you think a university would prefer for English?

STUDENT A

- School Prefect
- Volunteers
- Enjoys reading
- Plays flute
- Enjoys going to the theatre

STUDENT B

- Enjoys reading sport biographies
- Enjoys reading dystopian fiction
- Writes for the school newspaper

Which student do you think a university would prefer for English?

STUDENT B

- Enjoys reading sport biographies
- Enjoys reading dystopian fiction
- Writes for the school newspaper

Extra-curricular

Activities outside of the core school curriculum
e.g. sports, student government, volunteering, playing an instrument.

Super-curricular

Activities that relate to the subjects you are learning in school, but go beyond what is taught in the curriculum and the classroom
e.g. more depth or breadth

Being Super-Curricular

How have you developed your knowledge outside the classroom?

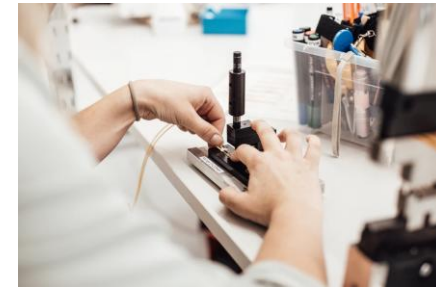
What have you done, read, visited, listened to that has inspired you?

If you haven't done anything, what do you plan to do?

programmes /
EPQ



practical
experience /
relevant work
experience



reading



podcasts /
lectures



Personal Statement: Format and Structure



“ Three sections with question prompts ”



“ 4,000-character count split across sections ”



“ Minimum character count 350 characters per section ”

Personal Statement: The UCAS 3 Questions

“ Why do you want to study this course or subject? ”



“ How have your qualifications and studies helped you to prepare for this course or subject? ”

“ What else have you done to prepare outside of education, and why are these experiences useful? ”

Or...

“

Why do
you like
the
subject?



”

“

Can you
do the
subject?

”

“

Anything
else we
should
know?

”

Question 1: Starting off

“Why do you like the subject?”



- Read course description and identify key skills
- Reflect on key moments / experiences that influenced your choice (but be careful of ‘lightbulb moments’)
- Be specific in the responses
e.g. a specific book, topic, or event
- Consider how they could connect their subject choice to real-life issues e.g. Climate change

Question 1: Elevator Pitch Activity

- In pairs, decide who is A and who is B
- Person A: Explain to B why you'd like to study your chosen subject in 1 minute
- Person B: Ask 'why?' or 'how?' to help.
- Swap roles



“My first exposure to the concept of genetic disease was whilst doing work experience at a deaf school. I found it incredible that the assortment of four bases could have such a tangible effect on health and development. This sparked my curiosity in the theory of genetic mutation and was my first introduction to Biochemistry.” *Biochemistry*

Opening Paragraph Examples

“My admiration for French extends beyond its beautiful sounds to the richness of its history and culture. For my EPQ, I studied the Charter of Laïcité in French Schools and the history of secularism in France. In order to determine whether I believed it was coherent policy to ban religious symbols in schools, while subscribing to a motto of Liberté, Égalité, Fraternité, I read articles on the subject in both English and French.” *French (and Arabic)*

Question 1 & 2: Starting Off

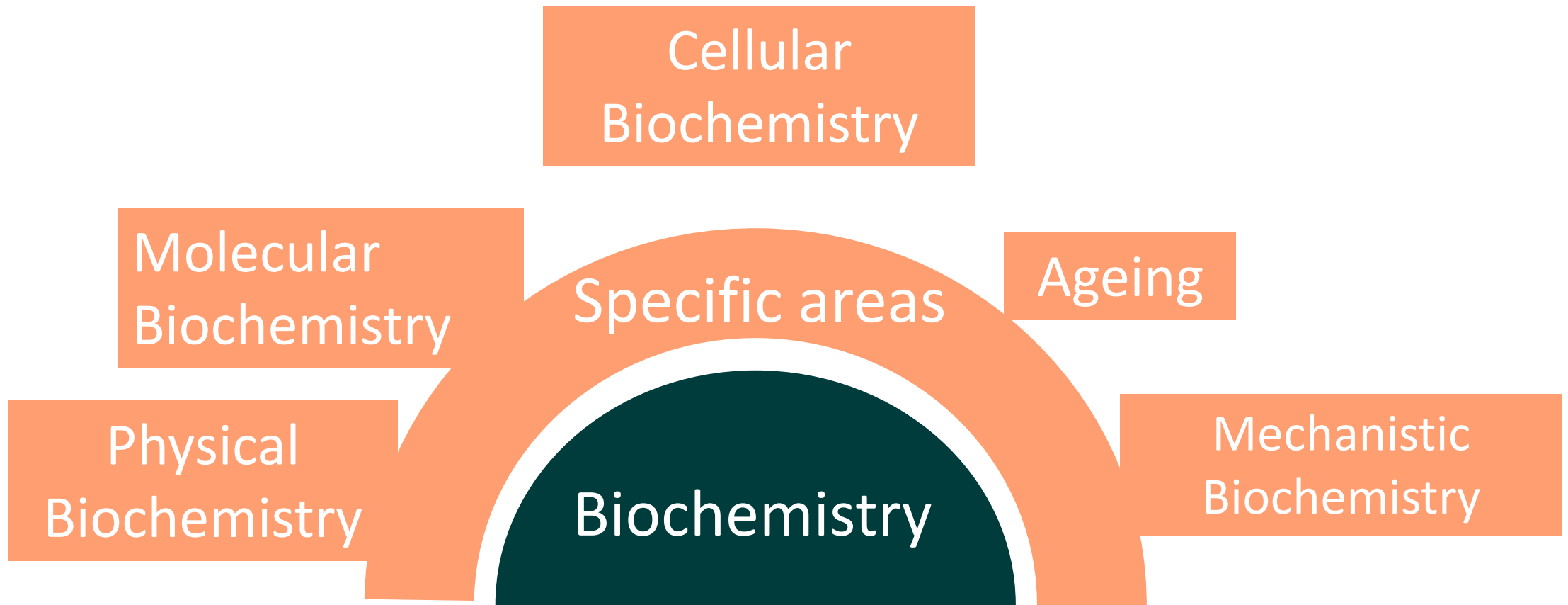


Step 1: Subject

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Subject you're
interested in

Step 2: Specifics



Question 2: Brainstorm Audit Activity

- What are your specific areas of interest in your subject?



<https://unsplash.com/@nathaliarosa>

Step 2: Specifics & Evidence

Eton Summer School
lecture on regulatory
RNA molecules

Molecular
Biochemistry

Physical
Biochemistry

Cellular
Biochemistry

Specific areas

Biochemistry

Ageing

Read 'The Selfish Gene'
(Richard Dawkins) and
'Oxygen' & 'Power, Sex,
and Suicide' (Nick Lane)

Mechanistic
Biochemistry

Question 2: Brainstorm Audit Activity

- What are your specific areas of interest in your subject?
- **What are your super-curriculars?**
- **Do you have any lined up?**
- **What gaps do you have?**



<https://unsplash.com/@nathaliarosa>

Step 3: Explain

The concept of RNA used in the regulation of gene expression

Eton Summer School lecture on regulatory RNA molecules

Molecular Biochemistry

Expand/explain

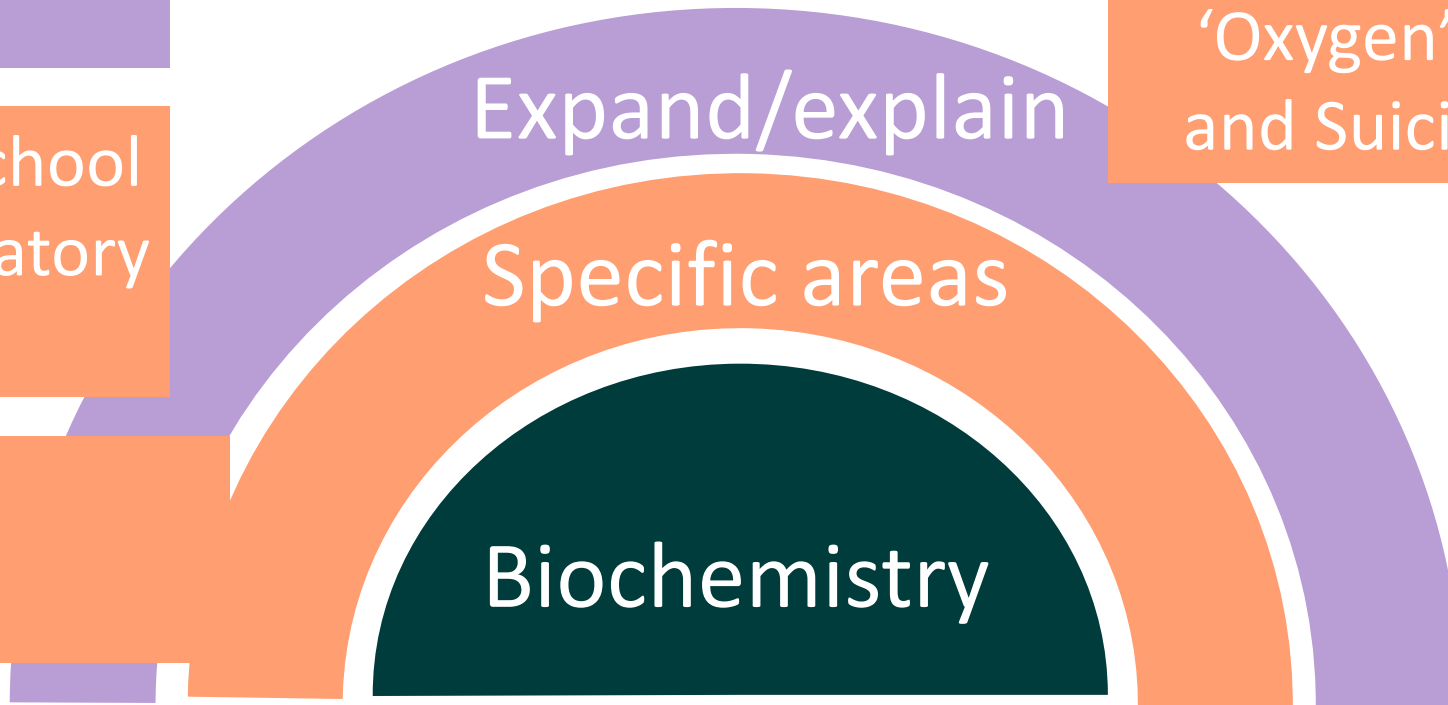
Specific areas

Biochemistry

The Medawar theory of late acting genes Vs free radical theory of ageing

Read 'The Selfish Gene' (Richard Dawkins) and 'Oxygen' & 'Power, Sex, and Suicide' (Nick Lane)

Ageing



Question 2 (and reinforcing your answer to Question 1)

“

Why do
you like
the
subject?



”

“

Can you
do the
subject?

”

What looks impressive is if you can...

...take your super-curricular activity and say what it made you think or link it to things you have done or are learning about (critical thinking)

Effective personal statement paragraphs will use **super-curricular** activities to say...



Example: Critical Thinking

“Wanting to learn more about genetics, I read *The Selfish Gene* by Richard Dawkins, but instead found myself immersed in his chapter on ageing, and the Medawar theory of late acting genes. While it is true that selective pressures to remove late acting genes from the gene pool are few, I couldn't imagine how conditions could exist that would only express genes late in life. I instead aligned more with the free radical theory of ageing, explained by Nick Lane in his book, *Oxygen*. By reading another of his books, *Power, Sex, and Suicide*, I learnt more about the mechanism of this theory, and the role of free radicals in intracellular signalling and gene expression. Maybe the late acting genes Medawar spoke of are normal genes that are periodically expressed in cell function; when the cell is under long term oxidative stress (i.e. from an electron leaking transport chain) the genes' transcription factors could be oxidised, resulting in their continuous expression. The altered proportions of proteins produced could then have a detrimental effect on cell function, and contribute to ageing. While this may not be correct, reading Nick Lane's books gave me a new perspective on the mechanics of ageing...” (*Biochemistry*)

Example: Critical Thinking

"After reading John Donne's 'The Flea', I was intrigued by his choice to represent love for a woman through the conceit of a parasite, eating away at himself. I saw this as an example of Donne's alleged misogyny furthering the stereotype of women as 'cruel and sudden', in contrast to his predecessors who idealized and even worshipped them. However, I think it is equally interesting to consider the view expressed by Ilona Bell that Donne does not present the woman as singularly cruel, but as being capable of independent thought and challenging patriarchal authority, even if Donne himself viewed that in a negative light and considered it a perversion of gender roles." *English*

What looks *really* impressive is if you can...

...take your super-curricular activity and say what it made you think or link it to things you have done or are learning about (critical thinking)

Or...say what it made you think, and use it as a link to other activities beyond the school curriculum (using it as a stepping stone)

Effective personal statement paragraphs will use **super-curricular** activities to say...



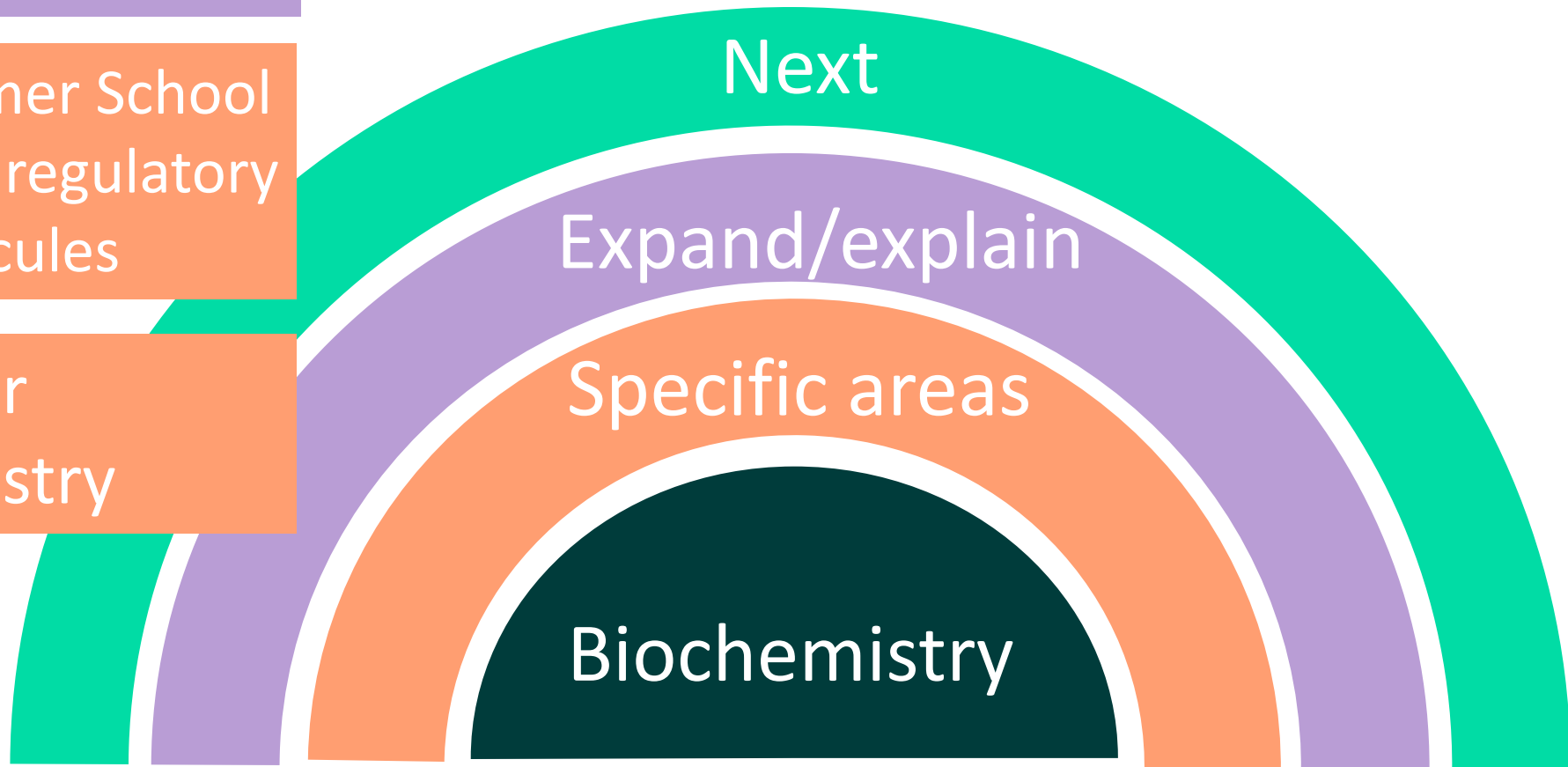
Step 4: Steppingstone

The concept of RNA used in the regulation of gene expression

riboswitches which bind to a ligand and change their physical confirmation

Eton Summer School lecture on regulatory RNA molecules

Molecular Biochemistry



Example: Steppingstone Scaffold

1. WHAT?: Select something that you have done.
2. SO WHAT?: What were you struck by? What questions did it raise?
3. NOW WHAT?: What did you do to find out more?
4. What struck you about this?

“Reading A Very Short Introduction to Molecular Biology (1), I was struck by a segment on regulatory RNA molecules. I was particularly fascinated by the concept of RNA used in the regulation of gene expression (2). This led me to a Nature article about Riboswitches: RNA molecules that can bind to a ligand and change their physical conformation (3). This happens in the expression region of the riboswitch, and determines whether the RNA is transcribed or not... Taking biochemistry at degree level would allow me to learn more about cell function and control... (4)”

Biochemistry

Example: Steppingstone Scaffold

1. WHAT?: Select something that you have done.
2. SO WHAT?: What were you struck by? What questions did it raise?
3. NOW WHAT?: What did you do to find out more?
4. What struck you about this?

1. **WHAT?** *Reading/ Attending/ Listening/ Work Experience in/ Participating in/ Visiting*
2. **SO WHAT?** *I was struck by/ I was particularly interested in/*
3. **NOW WHAT?** *This led me to/ To further my understanding/ In response, I/ Fascinated, I/ Extending my knowledge, I*

Effective Personal Statements

Some things to avoid...

Top Tips

- **“I got my first computer when I was X years old.”**

And...

#1 Avoid Clichés

- *Rhetorical flourishes*
 - **“I want to study Business, and I mean business”**
- *overly verbose language*
 - **“Over the summer I was elated to be have been selected for Wadham College Oxford’s prestigious Summer School probing Climate Change....”**

Top Tips

#1 Avoid Clichés

Don't Copy

“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.”

#2 Don't Copy (or Lie)

Don't Lie or mislead

Saying things you haven't done

Saying you've read something you haven't

Your own statement

#1 Avoid Clichés

#2 Don't Copy (or Lie)

- Generating (and then copying, pasting and submitting) from an AI tool, could be considered cheating by universities and colleges.
- This could affect your chances of an offer.
- Use builders and guides when getting started but ensure your final statement is all your own work

Top Tips

“My interest in Biology began when my pet cat Snuggles died and I performed an autopsy.”

#1 Avoid
Clichés

#3 Don't be
quirky

#2 Don't
Copy
(or Lie)

"On the 20th of April a great figure in history was born...It was me, who will go on to make great changes in history as we know it"

Top Tips

#1 Avoid Clichés

#3 Don't be quirky

- What did you learn?
- What do you think?
- What questions do you have?
- What do you agree/disagree with?

#2 Don't Copy (or Lie)

#4 Don't List

Question 3 (aka the short one)

- Reflect on the skills gained
- Link to degree or university-level study
- Include critical analysis of their experiences
- Focus on the impact of the experience, rather than over-explaining what it was



Work
experience,
employment &
volunteering



Personal life
experiences,
achievements &
responsibilities



Hobbies &
extracurriculars

“
Anything
else we
should
know?
”

Work Experience: Vocational Course

“Shadowing a barrister encouraged me to go to court and watch trials, allowing me to understand the role of a barrister, and especially how it contrasted with the work of a solicitor, to which I was exposed during a placement at Clifford Chance. During my time in a clerk's office, I enjoyed reading skeleton arguments, allowing me to understand the preparation needed to construct an argument, which I used in a debate they arranged on prisoners right to vote...” *(Law)*

“Work experience shadowing doctors at my local hospital allowed me to appreciate the workload and challenges of the field. I witnessed coronary angioplasties, helped to carry out ultrasounds, went on ward rounds and even sutured a banana. The teamwork between staff demonstrated how patience and a readiness to undertake responsibilities are indispensable. When a doctor had to persuade an elderly dementia patient that she needed root canal surgery it was clear how important compassion and communication are, particularly with the rise of neurological illnesses.” *(Medicine)*

Link them to skills useful for university:

“Balancing my work in school as a language and student council prefect, as well as working part-time, has greatly improved my organisational skills, as well as teaching me how to properly arrange my time.”

Classics

“...represent my school in hockey and netball, for which teamwork and commitment are crucial.”

Human Sciences

Or keep it short and simple:

“To relax I play hockey and was captain of the team at school. I enjoy Music and Dance; achieving Grade 8 in Dance, Grade 7 in Piano and Singing, and competing at a national level in Dance.”

Medicine

“Outside academia, I enjoy reading, playing hockey, and taking part in drama productions, both on and off stage.”

Biochemistry

Next Steps

01

Reflect on things you've done which you could write about

02

Plan to fill any gaps you have identified.

03

Draft a paragraph based on one of your super-curricular activities