



Personal Statement Workshop

Wadham College, University of Oxford

What are universities looking for in a personal statement?



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?

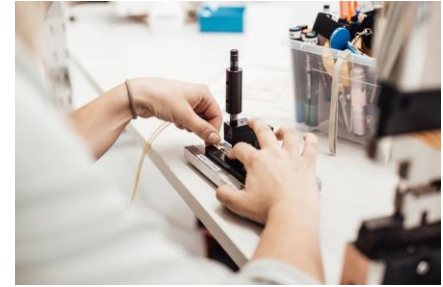
What have you done, read, visited, listened to that has inspired you?

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

- Programmes
- EPQ



- Practical experience
- Relevant work experience



- Reading



- Podcasts
- Lectures



Super-Curricular Audit Activity

- What super-curriculars have you done?
- Have you got others lined up?

- In person work experience
- Positions of responsibility
- Projects or essays
- Mentoring
- Paid employment
- Virtual work experience
- Documentaries
- Awards
- Books, blogs, vlogs
- Work shadowing
- Hobbies

- Podcasts
- Challenges
- Influencers
- Online subject courses
- TED Talks
- Personal life experiences
- Trips or visits
- Volunteering
- Work based learning / training
- Clubs
- Competitions



PERSONAL STATEMENT: Format and Structure



Three
sections
with
question
prompts



4,000-
character
count
split
across
sections



Minimum
character
count 350
characters
per section

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?

”

THE UCAS 3 QUESTIONS

“

Do you
like the
course?

”

“

Can you
do the
course?

”

“

Anything
else we
should
know?

”

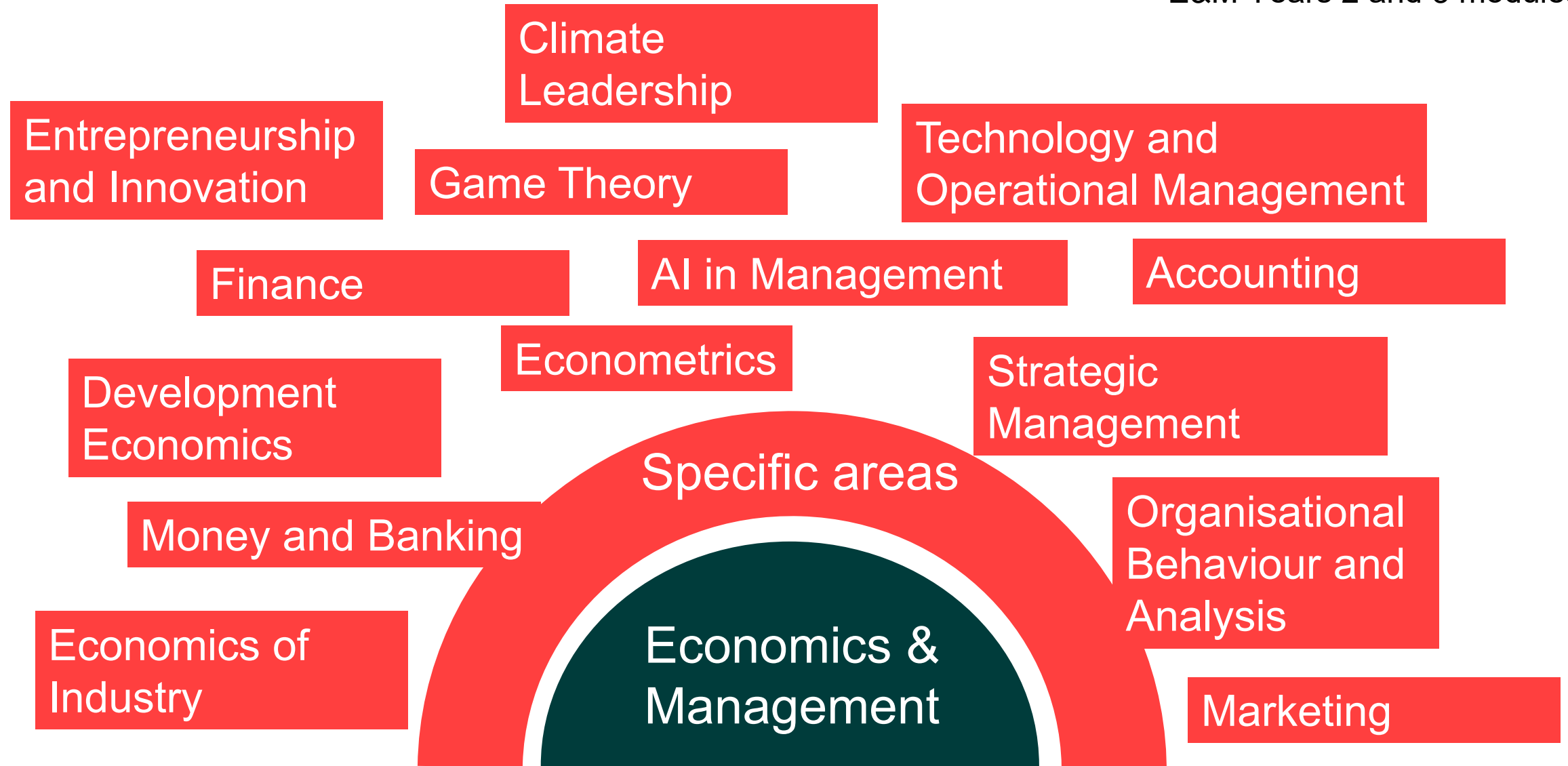
QUESTION 1: Starting off

“
Do you
like the
course?
”

- Why are you excited about your subject? What have you done academically to show this?
- Read course description and identify key skills
- Reflect on key moments / experiences that influenced your choice (but be careful of ‘lightbulb moments’)
- Consider how they could connect their subject choice to real-life issues e.g. Climate change

If you're struggling, have a look at some course descriptions...

Examples taken from Oxford
E&M Years 2 and 3 modules



OPENING EXAMPLES

“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

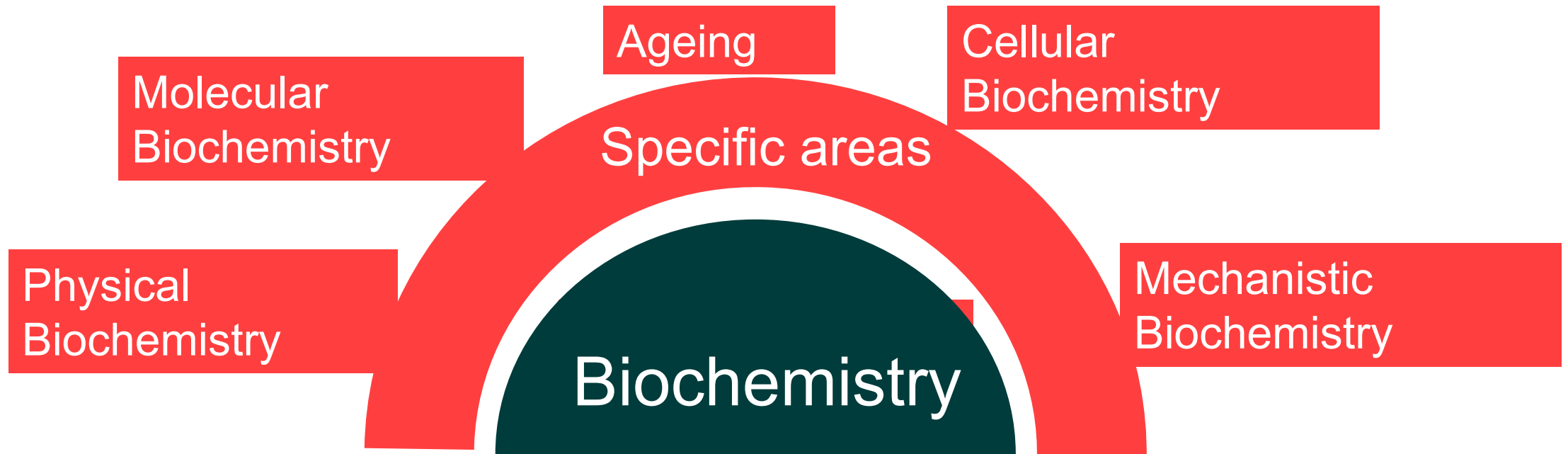
“My admiration for French extends beyond its beautiful sounds to the richness of its history and culture. For my EPQ, I studied the Charter of Laïcité in French Schools and the history of secularism in France. In order to determine whether I believed it was coherent policy to ban religious symbols in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

STEP 1: Subject

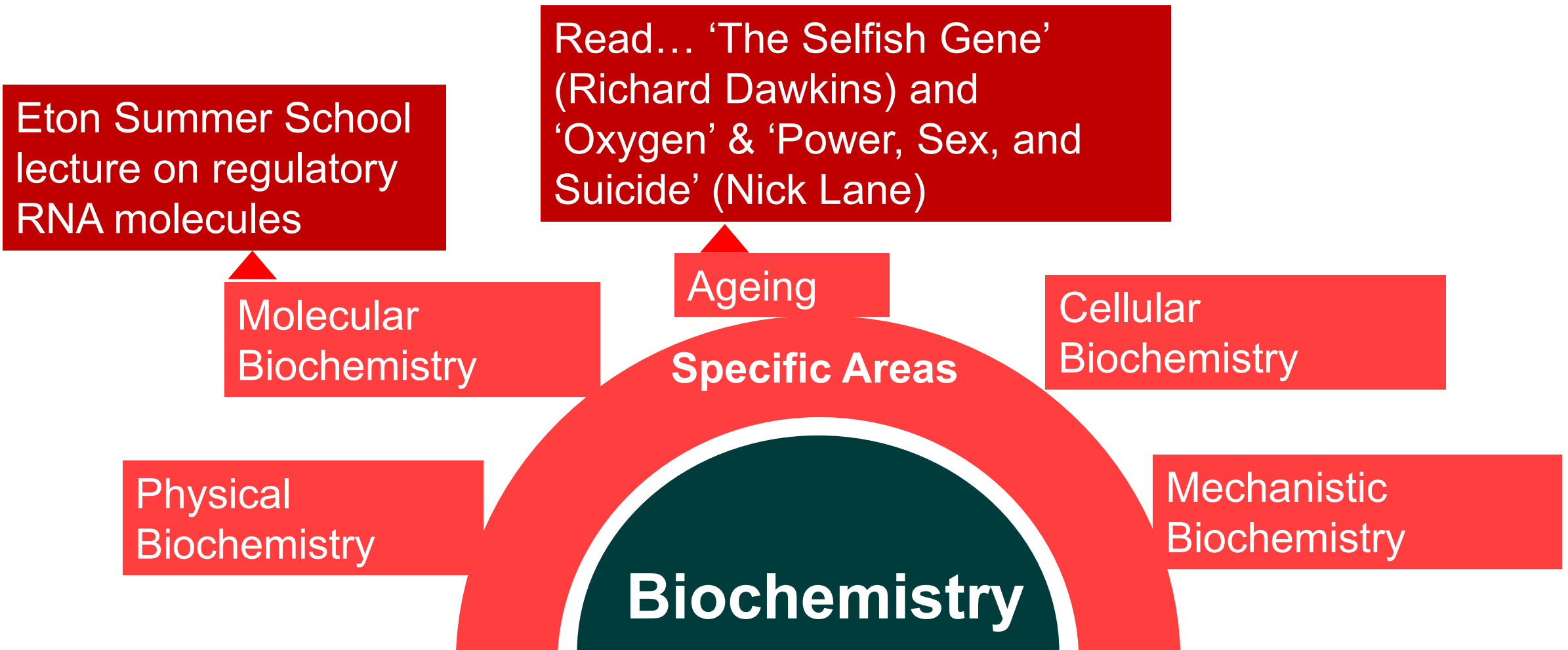
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Subject you're
interested in

STEP 2: Specifics



STEP 2: Specifics & Evidence



STEP 3: Explain

The concept of RNA used in the regulation of gene expression

Eton Summer School lecture on regulatory RNA molecules

Molecular Biochemistry

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

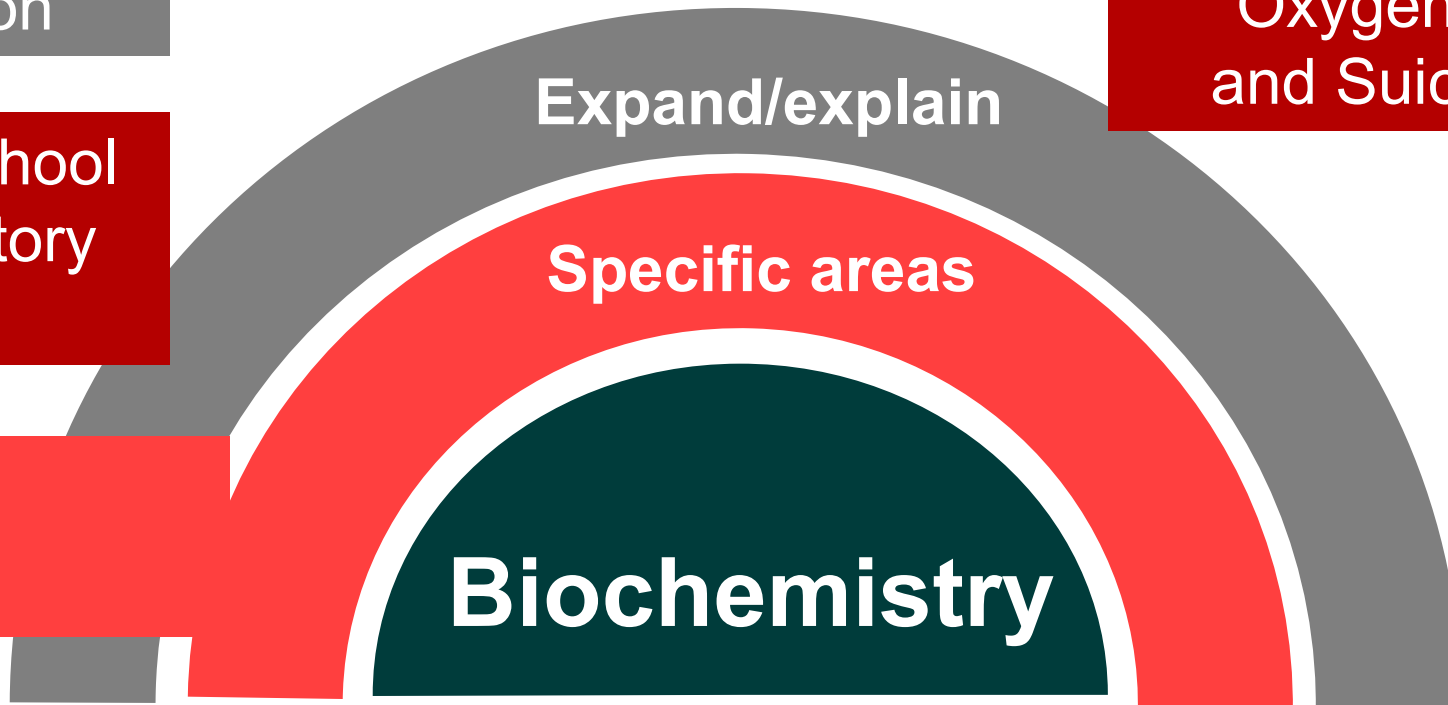
Read 'The Selfish Gene' (Richard Dawkins) and 'Oxygen' & 'Power, Sex, and Suicide' (Nick Lane)

Ageing

Expand/explain

Specific areas

Biochemistry



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)

DEEP and **BEYOND**



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

WHAT?

What
you did

**SO
WHAT?**

What you
learnt

CRITICAL THINKING EXAMPLE

“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*

THE UCAS 3 QUESTIONS

“

Do you
like the
course?

”

“

Can you
do the
course?

”

Question 2: Critical Thinking & Beyond A-levels

“Within my Economics A-Level class I found the topics of globalisation and trade particularly intriguing. I further supplemented this with 'Bad Samaritans' by Ha-Joon Chang, who exhibited the argument that many leading countries try to deter the expansion of lesser developed ones. He attacked the World Trade Organisation and World Bank for the growing draconian roles they play through intervening with developing countries' policies. I found this astonishing as organisations such as these are often paraded as necessary for the progress of poorer nations; however, as I later realised, at times they are actually being obstructed rather than established. It is these real-life situations that fuel my enjoyment for this subject, beyond the syllabus. The idea of secretly corrupt institutions appeals to me, a motif I have encountered in my Modern History class relating to the power and fall of monarchy.” Philosophy, Politics & Economics

The balance should be on YOUR critical thinking / reflections; not over-explaining someone else or listing super-curriculars

You can also link
your learning
together...



...often a super-
curricular will
prompt you to take
another step
(stepping stones)

Effective personal statement paragraphs will sometimes add a third question...

WHAT?

What
you did

**SO
WHAT?**

What you
learnt

**NOW
WHAT?**

What you
did next

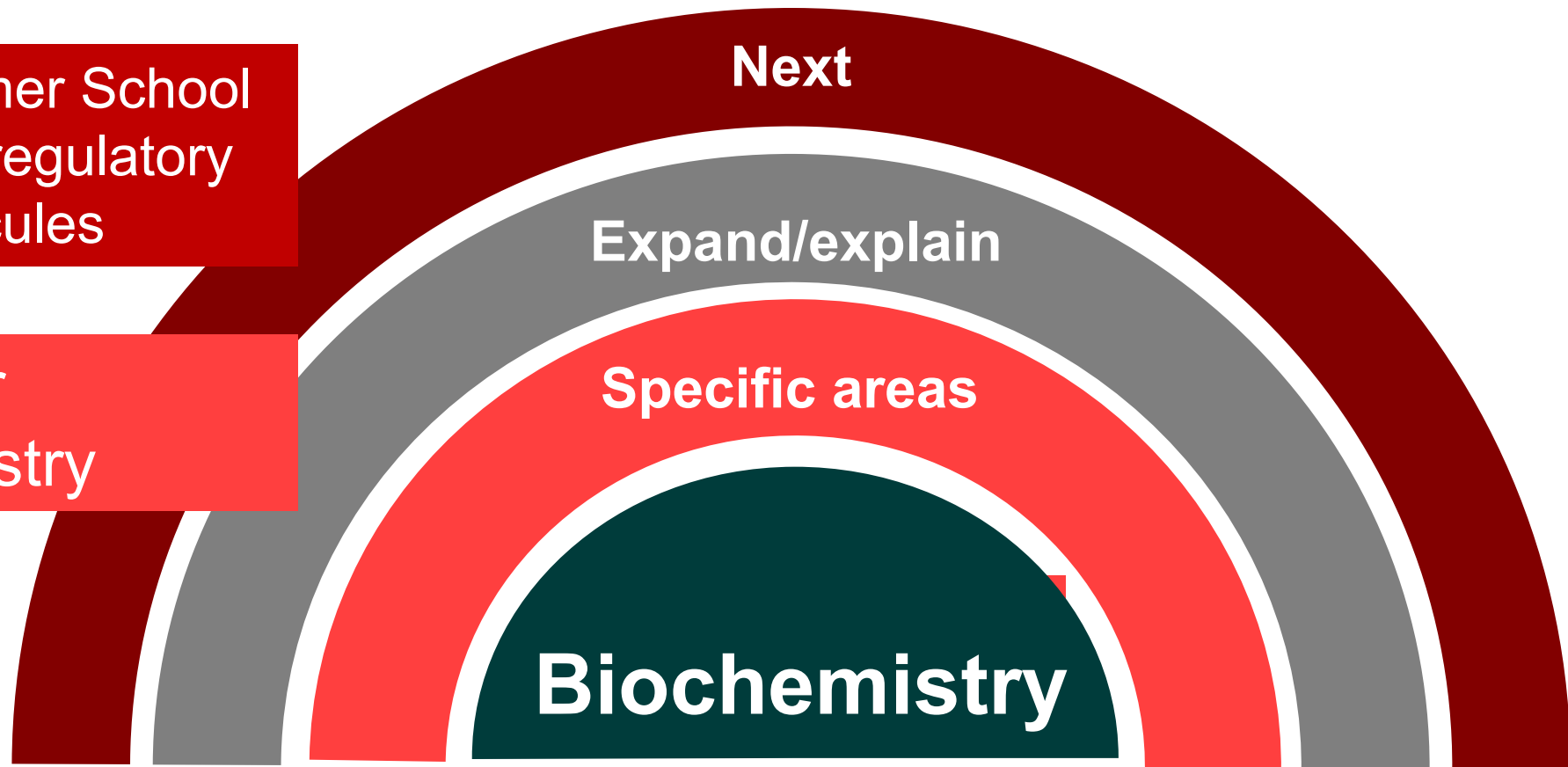
STEP 4: Stepping stone

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



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

STEPPING STONES EXAMPLE

“I watched an online lecture about the use and abuse of the corporate form examining the repercussions of the Salomon case. I was struck by how the courts have attempted to 'pierce the veil' of the corporate form. Subsequently, I read an article in the Student Law Review explaining that the difficulty of the Salomon decision was that it created a 'facade' that allowed shareholders to escape liability for fraud. However, the decision in *Prest v Petrodel* had 'undone this wrongdoing'. According to Montesquieu's 'Separation of Powers' theory, the law-enforcers are the judges, yet in this circumstance they have taken the position of the law-makers, which questions the supremacy of Parliament.” *Law*

STEPPING STONES EXAMPLE

“Both Kafka and Suskind challenged the way I think about myself and others by dealing with abstract concepts far removed from my own experiences. This inspired me to explore whether this symbolism is used in poetry. I began with Winterreise, which enlightened me about the German perception of nature. I felt there was a deep respect for nature but a resentment to its constant changes. I wanted to explore if this attitude to nature had changed in poetry over time, and whether that mirrored culture, leading me to read poems about seasons and nature from Rilke, Menger, and Neuert. These poems captured the same admiration for nature and opposition to it changing; I felt that this sentiment was embedded in the culture and was the inspiration for the forward-thinking environmental policy. The newer poems were also less constrained by grammar rules, giving them more flow, representing changes towards a more modern, liberal, and open culture.” *German*

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

Things to avoid...

Top Tips

#1

Avoid Clichés

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

- **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

Top Tips



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.

#2 Don't
Copy
(or Lie)

Top Tips

#1
Avoid
Clichés

#2
Don't Copy
(or Lie)

#3
Don't Be
Quirky

Top Tips

#1

Avoid Clichés

#2

Don't Copy (or Lie)

#3

Don't Be Quirky

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

“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.”

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?
”

Be brief and link them to skills useful for university:

“I am passionate about long distance and trail running and ran my first marathon when I was thirteen, having now completed eight marathons and four ultramarathons. I have honed my resilience and organisational skills by leading my school's student council over the past year.”

English

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*)

Work Experience: Vocational Course

“I noticed first-hand the growing emphasis on personalised healthcare at a work experience event at GlaxoSmithKline. I attended lectures on the process from 'Molecule to Market', becoming a Silver Industrial Cadet. Faced with a 'Dragons' Den' competition to present a business plan for a new drug, I won by challenging myself to think creatively and critically, problem-solving skills I recognised as crucial for innovative research at GSK and beyond.” (*Biochemistry*)

“Outside of academia, I work part-time in Sainsbury's - including throughout the COVID-19 pandemic, where I observed how businesses have to adapt to unprecedented situations in the short term, often with a lack of funds. In 2018, completing two weeks of work experience in a Santander branch taught me how commercial banks function.” (*PPE*)



1

REFLECT

on things you've done
which you could write
about

2

DRAFT

a paragraph based on one of
your super-curricular
activities

3

BUILD UP

a complete draft ready for
teacher feedback and editing