

General Pointers

- Make a calendar with due dates for each part of the process (draft different essays different pieces) to keep yourself organized.
- Combined statement was 2 pages
- Individual statements 1.5 pages each
- Individual statements are easier to write first.
- Personal statement talks more about strengths and weaknesses, what classes the school offered that you'd like to take. Why science is important.
- Research statement includes a lot more detail about the methods and the research you did.
- Don't use ChatGPT. It will take away your voice.
- Pick a format/storyline that works for you! It will feel more personal.
- Every sentence needs to serve a purpose (The reviewers will be reading soo many. You want to get them through it as efficiently as possible.)

Walkthrough

Paragraph 1: Briefly introduce myself and why I love science.

Topic sentence at the beginning, and then sentences demonstrating the evidence for the topic sentence. This sets up the rest of the essay so hint at what you'll talk about. You'll likely have to revise this part the most.

Paragraph 2: How I found science and overview of a few early accomplishments

Can demonstrate this with a story from childhood or early school. Or undergrad research experience and why it was meaningful and how it affected you. Highlight accomplishments. Don't need to go into too much detail in the methods for this type of essay. Explaining what you did is your research statement / stories about why it mattered to you is your personal statement. This paragraph is from a combined essay

Paragraph 3: My turning point as a researcher, outlined my proudest project, and independent work

Talk about what you feel makes you stand out as a scientist. Highlight your accomplishments. What was exciting and how did it make you feel and how does it connect back to your life. Like paragraph two, combine personal stories with explanation of your scientific details, if it's a combined statement. Also great to demonstrate your development as a scientist by highlighting your curiosity in your previous research. Use language that hypes yourself as long as you can back it up by discussing it in your interviews and in your resume.

Paragraph 4: PROPEL

Describe what you did in your postbac, your science, and how that affect your career trajectory. Also great to demonstrate your curiosity in science and tie together with earlier experiences, with what you are doing, and how it leads in to your interests in grad school

Paragraph 5: What does science mean to me? And Resilience.

It was really hard to find the why science. What about when you are really tired after a long day? Is it still fun for you? Why? Adriana finds power in science to ask questions and do what she wants. It gave her the ability to change her own life. It helped with health issues and it changed the direction of her life. Grad schools really want maturity, resilience, and gratitude. Can use your non-science experience as way to demonstrate these qualities (either in your combined or personal statement). Talking about herself always comes back to science because she learned so many things in life that made her a better scientist. Having perspective that the amount of work needed to do science is something possible to do. She did mention continuing her mission at Stanford (insert school) here in paragraph 5.

Paragraph 6: Why Stanford (insert school here) and address some weaknesses

Address weakness and frame as a strength. Why are you connected to this school (different reason for different school). I'm doing this, you're doing this, this is how it matches. Mention the faculty (two or three faculty is fine) that resonate with you.

Conclusion: Briefly who I am, what I want to accomplish, and why (insert school here).

Connect everything together and talk about what you will do once you arrive at this school.

Q&A

“Did admissions ask you about things on your statement during the interview?”

Not really, as they seemed to have read the statements in detail. And they brought up things that you put in the application. So don't add things that you aren't willing to talk about in an interview.

“How important is peer feedback when it comes to your statements?”

Sometimes people will give you feedback that doesn't work for you, and you can ignore that. Adriana ignored feedback that she should remove personal information from essays. A mentor said "Don't you want to go to a school that will support you and see you for who you are?" The focus of the essay isn't the challenge, it's your resilience in the face of that challenge. Take feedback from people who you trust and admire. People who have state on admissions committees before have great advice.

"If I'm applying to 10 schools and each one requires 2 essays, does that mean I'm writing 20 essays?"

No. You are only writing two essays, sometimes squishing them together to make a combined research and personal statement, and then editing them a little to match them to the school.

"Did you change the way you discussed your research for other programs at Stanford?"

More neuroscience for neuroscience program, more signaling information for cell bio programs.

"Could you please speak on how you adapted your essays to each school?"

Tried to have a personal connection to each school.

Duke – Dad said great basketball team

Stanford – I was overwhelmed with joy in the parking lot at Stanford.

Name at least 3 faculty for each school who you are interested in. The faculty may read the essay and see their name.

Non-research reasons are also important to share. How will you contribute to their campus?

Courses you want to take, campus organizations you want to join.

"Do you have advice for someone who wants to go to graduate school but doesn't necessarily want to become a PI?"

No one expects you to have it figure it out. There is some bias for this, but places with industry will be very interested in industry bound PhD candidates. You don't have to have your entire career figured out at this point and no one expects you to. Demonstrating a clear trajectory to academia is not necessary.

Jessica – On this note, try to focus on getting into the right school, rather than just any school. School that only want academic-bound candidates may not be the right school for you. It may seem like you are lowering your chances by sticking to what you really want, but the irony is that admissions committees can tell the difference between someone who is looking for a specific school (their school) and someone who's trying to get in anywhere and they want the ones who are specifically focused on their school.

Storytime: I had a scholar who tried to get into their dream school once, but their response in practice interviews and the actual interview was always “put me in whatever lab, I’m just so excited to be at this school.” They weren’t selected.

The next cycle they were asked to interview again so obviously this school was interested in them. We practiced their interview answers to make it clear that they had a point of view and a specific focus in science, and that their dream school was a fit IF they could offer the science this scholar was pursuing, and they were selected that year (and it was last year which was a tough year for everyone).

“For Stanford, how does the admission process work if you apply for both programs? Could both programs potentially accept you?”

You will pick one, and interview at one. Some places will accept you to multiple programs and have you pick. Others will put you in one program they think is the best fit.

“How important is it to disclose that your undergraduate major is different from the graduate program you’re applying to?”

They may or may not see it. Adriana felt it was important for her. You don’t want to have them wonder why. It would be good to put your spin on it.

“For schools that ask about your research interests, how do you approach this if you haven’t had the chance to explore those specific areas in your past experiences? How detailed and knowledgeable should you aim to appear when describing your interests in your essays?”

It’s fine if you haven’t had an exact experience. They expect that you will still be exploring. You want to have a point of view, but it’s fine to demonstrate that there are several things that you are still curious about. That’s a good thing. General appreciation for science is good.

“How many programs would you advise someone apply to?”

Jessica - Of the PROPEL data I have the scholars that don't get in regularly apply to less than 5 schools. My theory is that this leads them to have less interview practice (your actual interviews are going to part of your practice, and your first one likely will be your worst) so if you'd like to do fewer than 5 schools, focus on interviews.

Adriana applied to 10 programs across 5 schools. You get more opportunities to get interviews if you apply to more than one program at one place.

"Did you discuss trying multiple careers at any point in your essays?"

Yes, as examples of resilience, maturity, and gratitude. Show what you gained from each career experience. Try to be generally positive throughout your essay. Whatever is unique about you, highlight that.

"Did you have any pushback to make it more flowery?"

There are a few places that PIs told her to put into the essay (like the childhood fly story), she just put it in. And there were things that she removed that people told her to remove. When you are taking feedback from your PI versus your own voice. It definitely doesn't need to be flowery to be powerful.