

Breaking Through: Bouncing Back from Grad School Rejections

A Self-Guided Workbook from Former Scholars Dani Swope and Rhiannon Roarke
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Overview: This workbook is intended for individuals who were not admitted to graduate school in a previous application cycle and are preparing to apply again. Reapplying provides a unique opportunity to reflect, grow, and build a stronger application. This workbook is designed to help you approach that process intentionally, and is organized into five parts:

- **Reflection** – Acknowledging where you are now and processing the outcome of your previous application cycle.
- **Introspection** – Clarifying your personal values, research interests, career goals, and what you want from graduate school.
- **Retrospection** – Reviewing your last application cycle to identify what worked, what didn't, and what patterns emerge across your applications.
- **Preparation** – Translating those insights into action by refining your narrative, selecting programs, and preparing application materials.
- **Execution** – Actively writing, tailoring, and submitting applications with intention and structure.

Each stage is designed to move you from understanding your current position to successfully submitting strong applications. Although some sections may feel more challenging or less immediately relevant than others, **we strongly encourage you to complete the workbook from beginning to end. Each section builds on the previous one, creating a foundation that will support you** not only as you write your application materials, but also as you prepare for interviews and make one of the biggest decisions of the process: choosing the graduate program that best fits your goals.

The guidance throughout this workbook is based on the authors' personal experiences navigating the graduate admissions process, along with insights gained through conversations with mentors, peers, and faculty. It is intended as practical advice and a framework for self-reflection, not as official guidance or policy from any university, graduate program, or admissions committee. Every applicant's journey is different, so we encourage you to adapt these suggestions to your own experiences, goals, and needs.

Reflection

We first would like to acknowledge that this is an incredibly difficult experience. After pouring your energy and emotions into numerous curated statements, tracking down letters of recommendation, paying application fees, and making it through interviews, being told “no” is an indescribable feeling.

Please take the time to work through some of these feelings in the way that supports you best. This can be with a friend, mentor, therapist, or family member; through art or physical activity or journaling; or through creative ways we haven’t thought of.

Additionally, here are some words from scholars who have lived through this experience:

- ★ Dani: “In case no one has said this: this s*** sucks. I am so sorry you didn’t get a spot in grad school this year. While you can hold grief and anger, please don’t hold shame or self-doubt. What they don’t usually say in the articles, seminars, and online spaces is that you are a capable, creative, smart candidate in a sea of other capable, creative, smart candidates, and there are only so many spots they can fill. These feelings are strong now, but I know that you will move through it towards the right path for you. Because you are capable, creative, smart, and so many more things than this one moment!”
- ★ Rhiannon: “One of the biggest fears I had when I was rejected was that I was “falling behind”- let me be the one to tell you that “falling behind” doesn’t actually exist! Our society encourages us to move from high school to college, then to graduate school or the workforce, with no time to breathe or evaluate what is important to us. Just because the “standard” is to move from one thing to the next, doesn’t mean you’re falling behind or not working towards something greater. So, I encourage you to slow down, enjoy this period of rest before returning to school, and remember that you have the entirety of your life ahead of you- 1 more year is just a drop in the bucket. If you need a reminder that it’s never too late, remember that Katalin Karikó was 68 years old when she was awarded the 2023 Nobel Prize in Physiology or Medicine!”

When you are focused on a goal with a large workload required to accomplish it, you tend to forgo the activities that support and sustain your emotional, mental, and physical wellbeing.

Consider the following questions:

1. Take a moment to check in with yourself: How are you doing today? What feelings are coming up for you right now?
2. What have you been doing to take care of yourself?
3. What's one fun thing you've done recently?
4. What is one hobby or activity that provides an outlet for big emotions? These can be things that inspire creativity, release pent-up energy, or ground you in times of high energy

These questions are aimed at identifying your current state and ways that you can return to supportive habits.

Introspection

Being rejected from graduate school can be a pivotal moment to reflect on not just the experience, but about yourself and the goals you have for your life. This process can take time, and often you will find important insights when you least expect it.

We encourage you to evaluate these questions carefully over time. Whether while out on a walk, over coffee with a trusted mentor, or through journaling, think about what is at the core of “you”, not the science.

1. What is your main goal in life? What is your main goal in your career? What type of life do you want to live?

Note: since this question is rather vague, we have decided to include our own goals here

- ★ Dani: “My big dream in life is getting to lead scientific research that was meaningful to me. In order to do that, I know I ultimately need to get a PhD because there is only so far I can go in my current education level and position. With that in mind, I considered what type of environment I want to be in. Personally, I want a safe space to explore, make mistakes, engage in creativity and play, and live authentically. I want to find joy in what I’m doing”
- ★ Rhiannon: “My main goal in life is to enjoy it! As cheesy as that sounds, what’s most important to me is that I am having fun, learning new things and staying curious, spending time with my community, doing fun hobbies, and going outside. I realized after I got rejected the first time around that my career can not, and should not, provide all of those things. So, my goal in my career is to be in a space where I can continue to learn and have full autonomy over my decisions- and that happens to mean my next step should be a PhD. I’ll figure out what I want to do with it when I get there!”

2. What were your motivations for applying last year?

A PhD ought to only be pursued for YOU. Pursuing a PhD is not for clout, it's not a status symbol, and it's absolutely not for anyone else. It is for people who want the freedom to explore questions, to be creative, for people who are self-motivated and who WANT to do it.

3. Do you enjoy the day-to-day of your lab experience? Why or why not?

4. What do you want to get out of your PhD? Out of your career?

5. Given your answers to questions 1, 3, & 4, what alternative paths could you pursue to accomplish the same goals?

6. Are you ready to apply again? Do you truly want to pursue a PhD?

Retrospection

"Hindsight is 20/20" as the saying goes. Although the graduate admissions process at many schools is working to be more inclusive, bias and status quo runs rampant. There are ways you can "play the game" while remaining authentically true to yourself. Consider whether a particular anecdote or fact could excite a committee reader or flag as a potential shortcoming.

We encourage you to evaluate these questions and review your answers with a trusted mentor who is willing to give critical feedback on your application - someone who has your best interests in mind and isn't afraid to tell you the hard truths.

1. What will/did the admissions committee notice **first** about your application? Think both points for and points against.

2. Consider red flags¹ in your application:

- Are there things that are a struggle for you personally, but a lot of people have that struggle too?
- Do you have any “woe is me” moments, that is to say, any moments where you talk about a struggle without connecting it to some action or growth moment?

*Many of us have experiences that **are** difficult, narratively important, and/or feel important to mention. This does not mean they are unique experiences or that they inherently influenced or shaped the scientist you are today.*

- ★ Dani: “My biggest ‘red flag’ is actually something I can’t change. I graduated with a GPA of 2.97, which is a hard number to look at when trying to convince a group of people that I’m worth taking a chance on. The number doesn’t explain that I worked 40+ hours a week to put me through school. I had to accept that the committee doesn’t really care about the circumstances that led to the number. I needed to demonstrate the years of growth in undergrad and post-bacc that I have done to become a great researcher and dedicated student (which I’ll go over in the preparation section later).”
- ★ Rhiannon: “For me, my ‘red flag’ is my mental health and chronic health issues. Working through these challenges have greatly influenced the way I’ve moved through life. However, sometimes these disabilities can be viewed as something that would prevent you from finishing school. I determined that divulging this information didn’t add anything to my application, so I chose to leave it out. However, this is not to discourage you from writing about similar challenges, especially if they’ve directly influenced your journey- i.e. taking a medical leave, explaining a poor semester of grades, etc. A bonus ‘red flag’ was my attending a university without R1 status. Undergraduate university ranking is not the first thing that committees look at, but if they’re splitting hairs, it can come down to something that simple. That just meant I needed to emphasize what I did to overcome that lack of resources, which can then become a ‘green flag’!”

¹ It is important to note that we understand and recognize that lived experience and harms from systemic biases ought NOT be red flags or flaws. Reviewers of these applications often don’t have these same experiences and/or benefit from the systemic biases and therefore do not approach your application holistically or with understanding.

3. How do you speak about yourself? Do you use a passive (we did, I helped, etc.) or active voice (I did, I lead, etc.)?

4. Dissect your application into bullet points. What were your defining moments? What did you choose to highlight?

*This application is all about you. It's not about what your lab studied, but what **you** studied. It's not about what happened to you, but rather **what you have done** to get where you are. You shouldn't be trying to convince the committee that you are good enough. You want to demonstrate how incredible you are and use language that shows you believe it too.*

- ★ Dani: "I wholeheartedly believe that everyone at the level of post-bacc technician has the capacity to be a good graduate student because research naturally selects for the most creative, passionate, and driven minds. It is rare to make it to this level without having some of the skills required for grad school, and impossible to just 'luck' into this stage of our careers. No matter what you call it - faith, manifestation, self-fulfilling prophecy - what you believe at your core is ultimately going to lead your path forward"
- ★ Rhiannon: "Your self image is so important: because no matter how much you try to hide it, the way you think about yourself leaks out- in writing, in speaking, etc. People can tell."

Note: This next question might be difficult to face. Please make sure you are checking in with yourself frequently and reaching out to your support system when needed.

5. Do you identify, accept, and fully believe that you are capable of being a good graduate student? Does the way you talk about yourself (to yourself and others) reflect the confidence of someone who believes in their abilities and potential?

Preparation

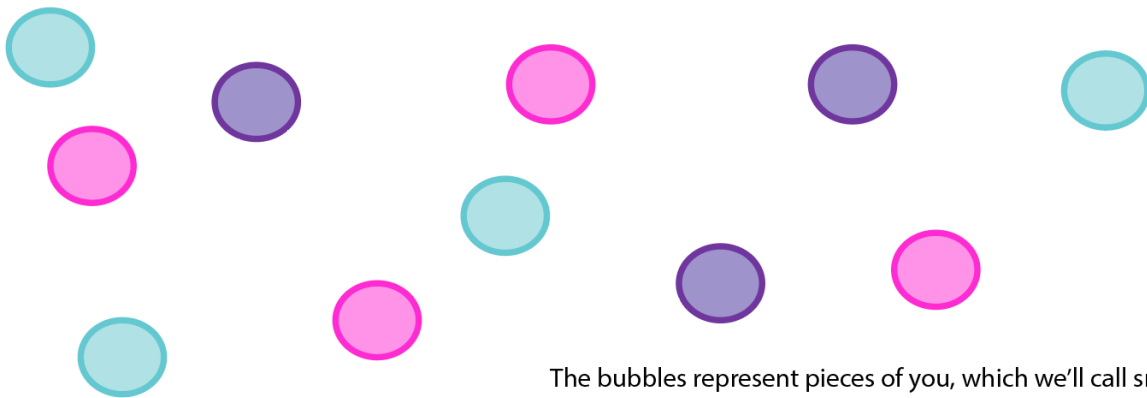
Congratulations! By deciding you truly want a PhD and critically evaluating your prior application, you have taken the first steps towards preparing for the next application cycle. Everything after this point is geared at helping you create a great application and rock your interviews

What else can you do now to start preparing for the next application cycle? We have some ideas

Solidifying your “why”

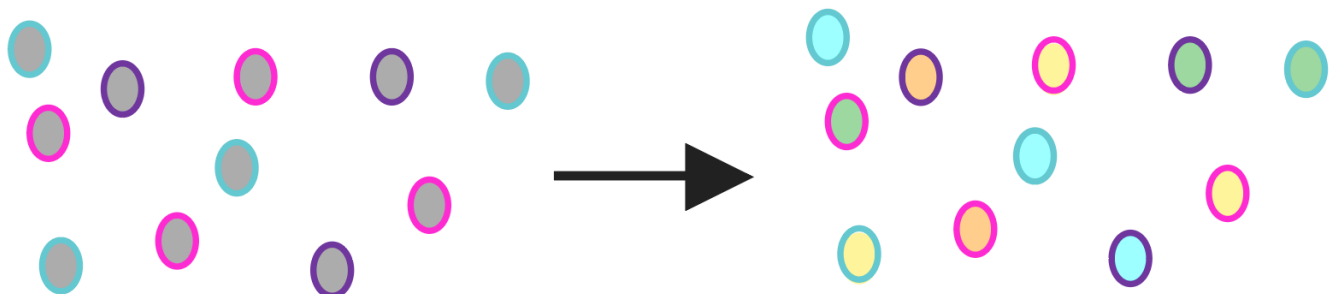
Everyone asks “why do you want to go to grad school?”. You have probably asked yourself the same question (with varying levels of exasperation). It’s hard to find the process of finding your “why” modeled, so Dani has prepared a method that may be useful for getting there.

Start by writing down some snippets about you, as many as feels right



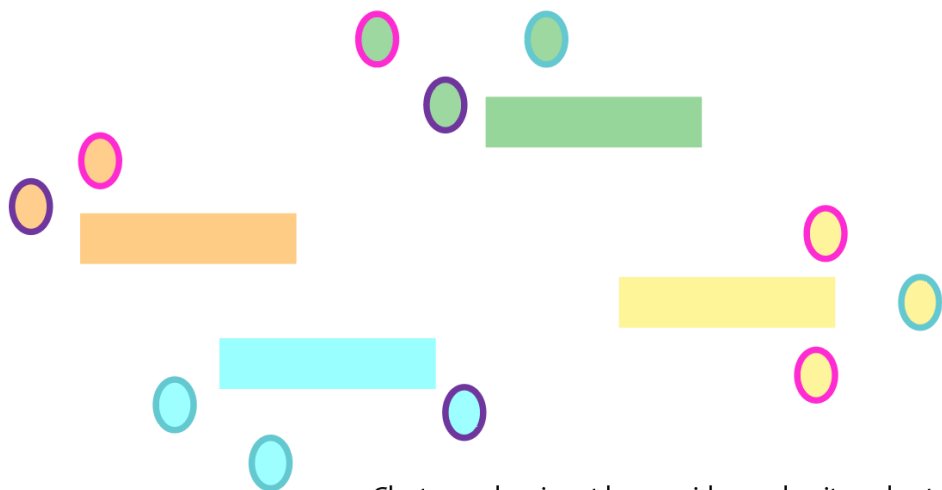
The bubbles represent pieces of you, which we'll call snippets.
These can be stories and anecdotes from your life,
connections you have with someone or some
activity/object, thoughts that run through your head, and beyond.

The colors represent the different types of snippets.

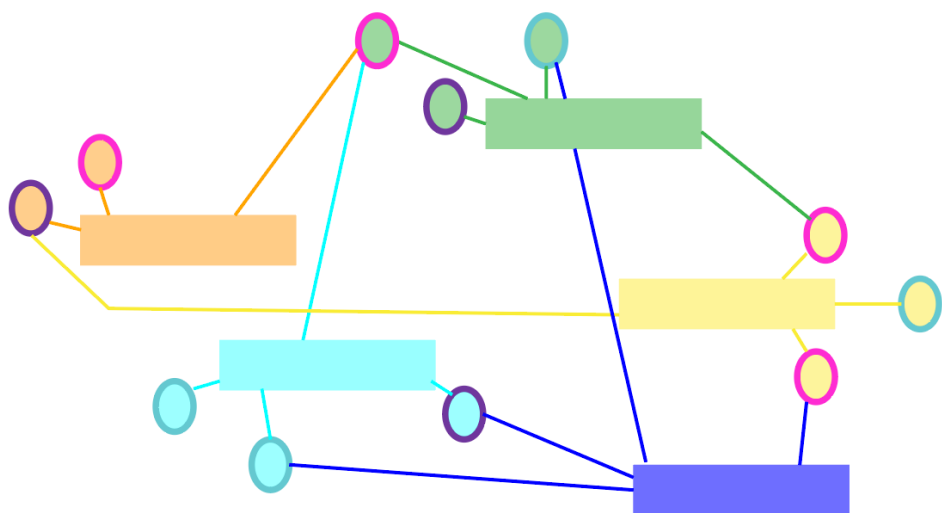


Now, put neutrality on all these snippets. Consider the core idea or theme that they represent.

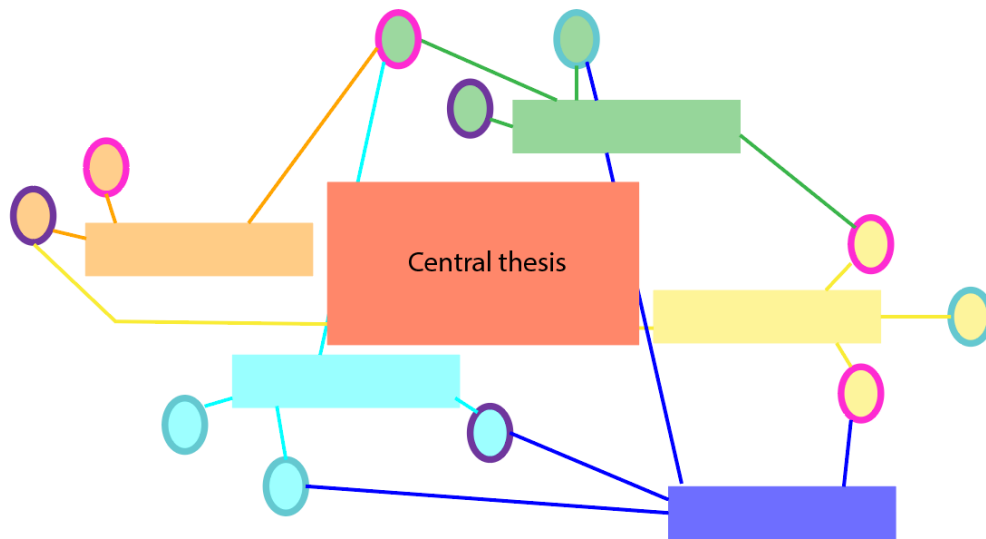
This is meant to be vague! Think beyond what category they fall into.
For example: instead of putting peers and mentors in a “community” category,
reflect on what your community network means to you or what truths are revealed
about you by who you have chosen for your community.



Cluster each snippet by core idea and write a short sentence that summarizes the cluster



Connect your snippets to clusters. They may belong to more than one, and you may find you need to write an additional cluster sentence



At the center of your clusters will be a ground truth about who you are and what motivates you.

Write out 3-5 sentences about yourself and why you want to pursue science, drawing on the core ideas in the clusters,.

Your central thesis will be the anchor of your application and interviews, and is highly personal. Really take the time to think about all of these aspects and what is most important to you.

For an example of a “why” chart, see Appendix 1.

Evaluate your community

1. Who are your letter writers? Are they willing to go to bat for you?

*Who you ask to write you a letter of recommendation is important. We would hope this is not the case, but many folks do NOT have your best interest in mind. Try to strike a balance between the letters a committee wants to see and who is going to write a **strong** letter for you. In many cases, 3 is the minimum, but you can have 4 or 5.*

2. Consider your support system. Who is your critical mentor? Who is your cheerleader? What other types of support might you need, and who can fill those roles?

3. Write down 3-5 people you want to read your application statements, and why you think they will make a good reader. *We highly encourage asking people who either read applications frequently or have been through the application process recently. We also encourage you to ask someone who you're afraid of showing it to- someone who will be critical of your writing and will be honest with you.*

Find your schools

Most advice out there claims that attending a top 10 school is critical to your success. However, it is important to keep in mind that some of the most successful scientists out there didn't go to an ivy league or a T10. Truth is, these T10 schools are receiving a staggering amount of applications from equally great candidates, but there are only so many spaces available. Prestige can carry weight, but there are numerous schools that are outside of the T10 and have the same quality, if not better, resources and education. The most important thing is how you spend your time while in school, not necessarily what that school's ranking is.

★ Rhiannon: "Sometimes, it's impossible to even know where to start. I would recommend looking at the NSFs "[Rankings by total R&D expenditures](#)" page to help guide your search. There were so many universities on that list that I'd never considered, yet they invest heavily in research—which can also indicate robust research infrastructure and support for graduate training. I recommend browsing through the top 100 schools and sorting them into three categories as you learn more about them.

- **Dream Schools** – Highly competitive, exciting opportunities that would be incredible to attend.
- **Best-Fit Schools** – The programs where your research interests, mentoring style, and career goals align the strongest.
- **Strong Contenders** – Programs you'd be interested in attending, even if they aren't your top choice.

Remember that rankings are just a starting point. As you explore faculty research, mentoring styles, and program culture, your list will likely change. **My number 1 tip:** allow schools that you've never heard of to surprise you. You might find your home there!"

The following questions are aimed at identifying schools and programs that fit your goals.

1. What areas would you like to live in? Do you like big cities or quieter towns? What type of weather is a no-go?

2. While reading papers, where are the labs/PIs that excited you? What types of programs are at that school?

3. Based on your answer to question 3 in *Introspection* and your “why” earlier in this module, what are the overarching fields you’re interested in?

*You **should** start broad and narrow down further along in the process. Look at the program aims to see what type of student they want to admit. For example, if you read the UCSF Neuroscience PhD program page, you will find that the program is looking for those interested in experimental neuroscience and systems (see: course list on basic topics in molecular, cellular, and developmental neuroscience)*

4. Where did your mentors go to graduate school? Where did your graduate students apply to?

Once you have identified a list of schools, critically evaluate if they would be the right space for you.

1. Looking through the faculty list and the brief synopsis of each PI, how many labs are you even marginally interested in?

★ Dani: “To clarify, it can be as simple as ‘I want to know more about this lab’. When reviewing labs at UC Santa Barbara, I realized that no matter how many times I went through the list, only 2 labs sparked my interest. By contrast, UW Seattle had easily 20 labs I really wanted to know more about. My energy went into the programs that I could see myself finding a lab in. This also meant I removed some schools I had previously applied to as well”

2. Will you be able to meet your personal goals and your professional goals in the place?

3. What is the reputation of the program? Are the graduate students satisfied with their experience?

Selecting schools should be a little like picking what to have for dinner. If you know that you want to have Italian, you can look for Italian restaurants. You don't have to know if you want pizza or pasta or tiramisu. In fact, if you go into it only looking for pepperoni pizza, you may miss out on the best lasagna of your life.

We encourage you to approach school selection with curiosity and openness, something you will need to carry over into statements and interviews.

Execution

You're ready to start your applications! PROPEL has spent a lot of time collecting resources to help scholars apply to graduate school. Navigate to propel.ucsf.edu/scholar-resources, scroll to the bottom of the page, where you'll find the [PROPEL application Teamspace](#). Here, there are resources on putting together your application materials, an event calendar, notes from workshops, and a recommended application timeline.

Create a calendar

You are now familiar with the time table that is the application season. Having a schedule helps keep you on track.

- ★ Rhiannon: "This process can feel really hard to predict- even if you've done it all before. There's an end date, but the start date can feel nebulous. I'd highly recommend navigating to the PROPEL application teamspace, where there is a timeline for the application co-working sessions. Even if you can't attend, you can download and use that document as a launching point for creating a schedule. Reach out to Jessica or Izzy if you need help navigating to that page!"
- 1. What are the important deadlines to be aware of? Beyond the actual open and close dates for programs, consider when you should **ask** for feedback or letters of recommendation, and when you want to **receive** feedback/letters.
- 2. What other accountability checkpoints can you add to aid in your schedule? This could be recurring meetings with your support system, reports to your mentors, etc.

Writing statements

Now is the time to put what you've learned about yourself throughout this workbook all together. It's never too early to start writing and receiving feedback on your statements!

Do yourself a favor and don't overwhelm yourself. We recommend drafting a personal and research statement using your most permissive prompts (see below for specifics), getting feedback on it from your community, and once you have solid statements, begin tailoring it to each application.

- ★ Rhiannon: "Every person's writing process is a little different. There is no right or wrong way to start—the most important part is that you just start writing."

A statement on the use of AI in your applications: *AI is an incredibly useful, and tempting tool that can be used to help streamline your application process, however, it should never be used to generate text de novo.*

*AI **cannot** replace your voice or unique experiences, and the use of AI to generate your statements **will** be noticeable.*

*AI **can** help you find the right words to convey an idea, identify if the flow of your statement works, point out gaps in logic, or recognize if your freshly tailored statement matches the prompt of the essay you're writing.*

*Additionally, AI can also be used for identifying faculty to read up on, but **do not trust AI responses to be accurate**. Check the source yourself, just as you would if you found a result from an internet search.*

Finally, keep in mind that your queries are not private. Just assume that everything you submit to an AI chatbot is stored and analyzed by the company that owns it.

Happy Writing!

Personal statement

This is a chance to make your first impression as an individual. Your Personal Statement is not your personal journey, but your narrative. Utilize the “Word Dump” method alongside the following questions to draft this statement.

Narrative (definition): *A high-level word academics use to mean “wrap your life story and academic research into a pretty little digestible package”.*

Think about the experiences that led you to every line on your CV. Your narrative is the thread that ties those experiences together. It's the story that explains how you became interested in your field, why you've made the choices you have, and where you hope to go next. Even if that thread wasn't apparent at the time, the people reviewing your application don't need to know that!

1. What are your career landmarks? These can be specific projects, research experiences, or pivotal classes. What did they mean to you outside of scientific gain?
2. What are examples of your character? These are things like volunteer positions or passion projects. Active vs passive voice will still apply, so avoid things like “I like mentorship”

3. If considering a challenging or difficult experience, is there some result that demonstrates character that you can frame it with?
4. What drives you as a scientist and as a person?
5. What makes you a thoughtful, creative, passionate person who the program would be lucky to have?

- ★ Rhiannon: “For me, I saw myself getting stuck trying to follow an outline, so I did what I call a ‘Word Dump.’ My process is outlined below!”

Word Dump

1. **Word Dump (no editing allowed yet):** long form, essentially Snippets from “Why” chart
“I wrote about my life experiences from A to Z as they came to mind. I even started as early as age five. I didn’t worry about whether anything was too much, too personal, or too detailed. The goal was simply to get everything out. My first draft ended up being about ten pages.”
2. **Identify themes:** Creating Clusters
“Working with someone I trusted, I went back through the draft and underlined experiences that felt central to my identity. Instead of trying to impose a message, I looked for patterns and recurring ideas. From that, a clear theme naturally emerged- I let my subconscious do the work for me!”
3. **Refine and focus the story:** Creating Anchor
“From here, I edited aggressively: I removed anything that distracted from the central theme, strengthened the parts that reinforced it, and made sure the narrative consistently returned to my main message. I also removed anything that was deeply personal or could be considered a ‘red flag,’ unless I had a solid, relevant justification for its presence.”

Result:

“By the end of this process, I had crafted a story with a clear theme and purpose. Importantly, I wrote it with the reader in mind—someone with limited time and no prior knowledge of my lived experiences. I assumed my audience would not automatically understand the significance of certain moments, so I made those connections explicit rather than relying on the reader to infer them.”

Research statement

This can also be known as an “Academic Statement”. This is where you reflect on your experiences so far. Does the work you’ve done point to a broader interest? Remember to stay flexible: the last thing a committee member wants to see is an applicant who is interested in one thing- one disease, one process, or one cell type. If that is you - don’t fret, it’s okay if you have specific interests! You just have to tailor your statement to a broader audience.

Research experience (definition): *another high-level word academics use to mean “what specific research questions **and results** have led you to your research topic interest”.*

They want to know (briefly) what question you asked, what the results were, and want you to discuss the significance - to you or otherwise. Think about your research beyond simply accomplishing the immediate goals of the experiments.

- ★ Rhiannon: “For my research statement, I treated it as if I was writing a mini-abstract for each experience, ending with something I learned from that experience (that excludes technical skills!). Additionally, I had someone with no familiarity with my research read the summaries to ensure it made sense to someone with zero context.”
 - ★ Dani: “I struggled with understanding what I gained from an experience, so instead of thinking about it as a concrete lesson, try to think about something that led to a new project or experiment (like a future direction, but focus on the hypothesis) or a lesson that allowed you to grow as a scientist. I leaned into re-running the random thoughts I had around the time of the experience”
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To write mini-abstracts to summarize a research experience, consider the following:

1. What was the immediate goal of an experiment or project? What hypothesis were you testing? (1-2 sentences)
2. What was the result? If it didn’t produce the expected results, what was learned? What could be changed? (1-2 sentences)
3. What did you gain from your research experiences (NOT technical skills) and how do they lead into your research interests? (1-2 sentences)

For a more structured outline, please use the following. Rinse and repeat as many times as necessary

1. Research question:

Results:

Scientific significance:

Personal significance:

2. Research question:

Results:

Scientific significance:

Personal significance:

3. Research question:

Results:

Scientific significance:

Personal significance:

In addition to your research experiences, you will need to explain your future interests and goals, and why you believe this program is the place to do it.

1. What are techniques or topics you want to learn more about?²

2. Taking each topic of interest, what umbrella does it fall under? Map out your interests and the broader topics.

For examples, see Appendix 2

3. What specific labs could you see your skill set and interests working well with?

² Another thing to consider is what literature shaped your narrative and/or research interests.

Statement of Purpose, or Frankenstein Draft

A statement of purpose may be called by many names. Essentially, it takes your research experience and “why” and pins it to the framework of your narrative in a whole picture of YOU. Dani calls this a Frankenstein Draft because you are cutting and stitching all the pieces - personal and academic - together into one essay.

A recommended way to draft this essay is as follows:

- I. Introduction of Central Thesis (see your “why” chart)
 - A. Include the main goal/reason for pursuing a PhD
- II. Argument/Experience 1
 - A. Relevant background information
 - B. Experience
 - C. Significance
- III. Argument/Experience 2
 - A. Relevant background information
 - B. Experience
 - C. Significance
- IV. Argument/Experience 3
 - A. Relevant background information
 - B. Experience
 - C. Significance
- V. Scientific Motivator (why do you want to go to this program specifically)
 - A. Scientific Interests/Goals
 - B. Linker to current faculty
 - C. Linker to overall aims of the program
- VI. Personal Motivator (why do you want to be in this community and what will you provide)
 - A. Personal Interests/Goals
 - B. Action items for being a community member: mentorship, outreach, etc.
- VII. Summary: reiterate central thesis
 - A. Conclude with enthusiasm for this program, school, and community

By utilizing strategies from argumentative style essays, you can demonstrate the logical explanation for why you will be an excellent edition to their program.

Tailoring Applications

Once you have your statements completed and feedback received, it's time to start tailoring your applications. This can be one of the most time-consuming parts of the process, especially if you're applying to many schools. Having a plan before application season is in full swing can make the process much less overwhelming.

- ★ Rhiannon: "I applied to 19 schools, so I knew I needed to come up with a strategy. What worked great for me was not applying to my favorite schools first. I ranked all of my schools from favorite to least favorite, then intentionally started with a few lower-priority applications. This let me work through the inevitable 'application jitters' before I submitted to the programs I cared about most.

By the time I reached my top-choice schools, I had a better workflow, knew the application portals, and had refined how I answered common prompts- I also wasn't scared to press 'submit' anymore! My application order looked something like this:

- **Round 1:** 3-4 lower-priority schools to build momentum and confidence.
- **Round 2:** Once I felt comfortable with the process, my favorite schools or those whose applications are time consuming (i.e. lots of essay questions, instead of a document submission)
- **Round 3:** Remaining lower-priority schools that I was interested in but wouldn't have been disappointed to skip if I ran out of time or energy.

This strategy helped me manage both stress and decision fatigue throughout the application season."

- ★ Dani: "Two things that helped me on top of a similar strategy to what Rhiannon detailed above were 1) creating a spreadsheet that I could check off tasks, and 2) filling out all the basic information on the applications right at the beginning. I got the boring stuff out of the way first so it would feel more like all I had to do was submit an essay or two."

When tailoring your applications, keep in mind the following:

1. **What questions do the essay prompts lead with?** Often there can be several requests lodged within a single prompt. Oftentimes the first thing mentioned in those prompts are what is first and foremost on the admission committee's mind, and is something you should ensure you revisit frequently.
 2. **What is the program's research focus?** This can alter the way you frame your research. For example, if applying to an umbrella program, you may want to put an emphasis on the broader topics you're interested in, and when applying to a specific field, consider what about that field makes you excited to study it.
 3. **How can you relate your research experience and interests to faculty you're interested in?** How can you relate it to the resources the school provides? This helps demonstrate that you've done your research on the school and personalized it.
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I've submitted! Now what?

*Here comes the worst and the best part: **waiting**. Do not expect to hear back within the first week of submitting your applications. The earliest you'll hear back is 2 weeks from submission, and this varies year to year. Instead, take that time to decompress, do something fun, reward yourself, and/or spend time with your loved ones.*

Most importantly: mute your personal email notifications on your phone!

*This will help prevent the inevitable "ohmygodisitsomeoneofferingmeaninterview?", and then the inevitable "oh, it was just another marketing email". Set a boundary with yourself to check your personal email at the beginning and the end of your work day **only**- nobody is going to email you past 5pm local time, nor on the weekends.*

Additionally, save yourself the stress and don't look online to find out if "anyone else has heard back yet". Avoid the infamous spreadsheet and r/gradadmissions. It makes it all so much harder. Just because someone else has heard back already, doesn't mean you will not.

Interviews

Congratulations! You just got an interview offer. Now is where you let your personality and newfound confidence shine. Be genuine and lead with who you are.

- ★ Rhiannon: “The biggest misconception I had the first cycle is the advice that ‘once you have an interview offer you’re basically in!’ The intention is pure, but this is not true. This is where all the work you’ve done starts to pay off, but there is still more work to be done. If you’ve taken the time to build your self-confidence, this stage will be much easier for you. My biggest piece of advice is practice, practice, practice! Practice with your friends, neighbors, dogs, your PI, your co-workers, and absolutely practice with strangers. The more you do it, the less scary it will feel.”

Preparing for interviews.

Below are recommended steps to take as soon as you get your first interview offer: the more proactive you are, the better!

1. **Schedule your Interviews.** As soon as you are able, sign up for the interview weekends - *especially* for your top choices. For those larger schools, the interview weekends fill up fast and a scheduling conflict could mean missing an interview weekend! Prioritize those schools that only have one interview weekend. They are often unwilling to make exceptions.
 - If possible, schedule some of your ‘Strong Contender’ program interviews first. Similar to the strategy for applying to schools, starting with interviews that feel a little lower-risk can help you shake off the nerves, get into a rhythm, and be ready to nail the interviews for your top-choice schools.
2. **Selecting Interviewers.** Part of scheduling interviews sometimes includes selecting PIs to interview you. Ensure you select people whose work you are semi-interested in and share common ground with - this will help conversation flow better in interviews! You may not get who you requested, so ensure to read up on the PIs more in depth once you get your interview schedule.
3. **Schedule several mock interviews.** These can take awhile to schedule, so hop on it! Schedule as many as you can. PROPEL offers to schedule one for you, but talk to your PI, mentors, and coworkers and see if they know anyone else who you can practice with. Do mock interviews with as many people as possible, so it feels second nature when the day comes. Additionally, make sure you practice with some folks who make you nervous. Whether that be a stranger or someone you look up to, practicing while nervous will help you be ready to push through the fear and project confidence anyways. Also, if you know the interview format, try to simulate that in your mock interviews. It may feel strange, but doing a zoom with your PI and then meeting up to go over feedback can actually help when it comes time.
 - ★ Dani: “Do your practice interviews. And once you’ve done them, do them again. Find the people who will ask you tough questions and won’t flinch when you fumble over your words or start panicking. The most growth in interview practice will be in the space where you feel like it’s a real interview.”
4. **Fill out “common interview questions”,** in Appendix 3. This can help prepare you for all kinds of wild questions thrown your way. Set yourself up for success and be prepared for anything.

5. **Investigate the Principal Investigators.** Do not prepare this too far in advance- it's easy to forget what and who you've read up on. About a week in advance, you should spend no more than 30 minutes to 1 hour reading up on each interviewer. The information you should keep track of is as follows:
- *What is the PIs high level research question?* (usually found on lab website)
 - *What basics do you need to know about their research?* Consider noting what cell type/ population they work with, a quick overview of background you need to know to understand their research, and some main projects they're working on.
 - *Identify a question about their research:* it can be incredibly rudimentary! They want to see you engaging in science you're unfamiliar with. A great place to identify a question in this area is by looking at their most recent published papers and scanning the introduction and discussion sections.
- ★ Dani: "PIs love talking about their work, so often times if you can get them going with a basic question, they will handle the rest and it'll make them feel like you were really interested"
6. **Come up with a question to ask them in response to the inevitable "is there anything you'd like to ask me?" question.** The PIs love to hear thoughtful questions! Usually, anything goes, but its important to have something prepared to demonstrate you're engaged in conversation.
- I highly discourage asking if they're taking rotation students. Most of the time, they won't know yet, and it's not something you need to worry about until you're admitted.
 - Examples:
 - i. Are there any projects you're excited about right now?
 - ii. What do you like most about this school? Why did you choose to take a faculty position here?

General Interview Advice

- ★ Rhiannon: "At the end of the day, the most important thing is that you come across genuine, confident and excited. I've listed some bullet advice below.
- **Breathe.** Feel yourself becoming flustered? You can just stop, take a breath, and start over. Take your time to think before responding to a question- it can feel awkward for a second, but then you'll be able to form well-thought out responses. I had interviews tell me that they appreciated seeing me take these steps.
 - **Be concise and clear.** Do your best to thread the needle between over-sharing and under-sharing. It's better to err on the side of a shorter response, and have the interviewer ask you follow up questions.
 - **Keep your science high-level.** Ensure you have a solid "elevator pitch" prepared. What is most important is that interviewers understand why you're asking the question in your work that you are asking. Emphasize the background so when you get excited sharing your hypothesis, they can too! There is not enough time to get into the nitty gritty of your project, so keep it short and comprehensive.
 - **When in doubt, assume the question is rooted in curiosity rather than criticism.** Approaching interviews with this mindset can help you stay composed and respond with confidence, even when questions feel challenging.

- **Respond to difficult moments with confidence, not defensiveness.** Remember that your interviewers are human, too. Some may challenge your ideas, express skepticism, or simply be having a long day. Rather than matching their negativity or becoming discouraged, acknowledge the concern and redirect the conversation toward your strengths, motivation, or evidence. For example, one interviewer told me they weren't convinced a PhD aligned with my goals. Instead of becoming defensive, I confidently explained why pursuing a PhD was the right next step for me and connected it back to my long-term goals. Demonstrating resilience, self-awareness, and confidence under pressure leaves a much stronger impression than becoming flustered or combative.
 - **Ask questions and show genuine interest in your interviewers.** Many of them are excited to share their science with you and there is nothing worse than someone who doesn't care about what you're sharing!"
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Choosing A School

Congratulations! You've done it! Now is the time to revel in your success. You should be proud of everything you've done to get to this point. Go out, have a nice dinner, celebrate with loved ones- you've just completed something that is incredibly difficult.

Now, you get to be incredibly picky. If you have the option, do not make compromises or settle. You are doing this for YOU, not for anyone else or for clout. Consider the following questions.

1. What type of support does the school provide? Consider how they support their students financially, during interpersonal challenges, rotation issues, in grant writing, in career exploration, etc. Do they provide the type of support you suspect you may need?
2. What is the general disposition of the graduate students? Of the faculty? It's important to gauge how happy the people are. A great question to ask them is "what do you do for fun?". The answers are very telling if work-life balance is prioritized not just by the student, but the institution, so ask your interviewers too!
3. Think about the city you may be moving to. What types of things do you need to have to be happy? How is travel in and out of the state? Will you be able to find a community there? Community is invaluable in helping you complete your PhD.

4. What is your intuition telling you? If you remove societal pressures and expectations, are you feeling drawn to a certain program, city, or the people there? If you feel like you naturally clicked with your interview cohort, interviewers, and/or graduate students, it's highly likely that that university is full of like minded individuals.

★ **Rhiannon:** “This question may seem silly, but I think it is worth asking yourself. Before interview season, I thought I was going to need to spend much more time talking to my community to make a decision. When I received my offer from the University of Washington, I was over the moon! It was the program I had been most excited about throughout the interview process. I loved the environment, connected with the people, and was excited by the career development opportunities. Interestingly, it wasn't the school where my research interests aligned the most closely on paper. I found I had been placing far too much weight on finding the "perfect" research fit. Research fit absolutely matters—you should be excited by the science and confident that you'll receive excellent mentorship—but your PhD does not have to define the exact question you'll study for the rest of your career; it is meant for you to explore. Your research interests will evolve, new opportunities will emerge, and you may find yourself pursuing questions you never imagined when you first applied.

For me, this realization made it easier to trust my intuition. Although another program may have aligned more closely with my research interests on paper, I ultimately chose the environment where I felt I would grow the most—as both a scientist and a person. I knew that building a strong foundation in a supportive community would serve me better in the long run than chasing what seemed like the "perfect" project. Don't underestimate the value of a program where you feel supported, challenged, and inspired. The skills, mentorship, and confidence you develop during your PhD will stay with you long after any single research project is complete.”

PROPEL Resources

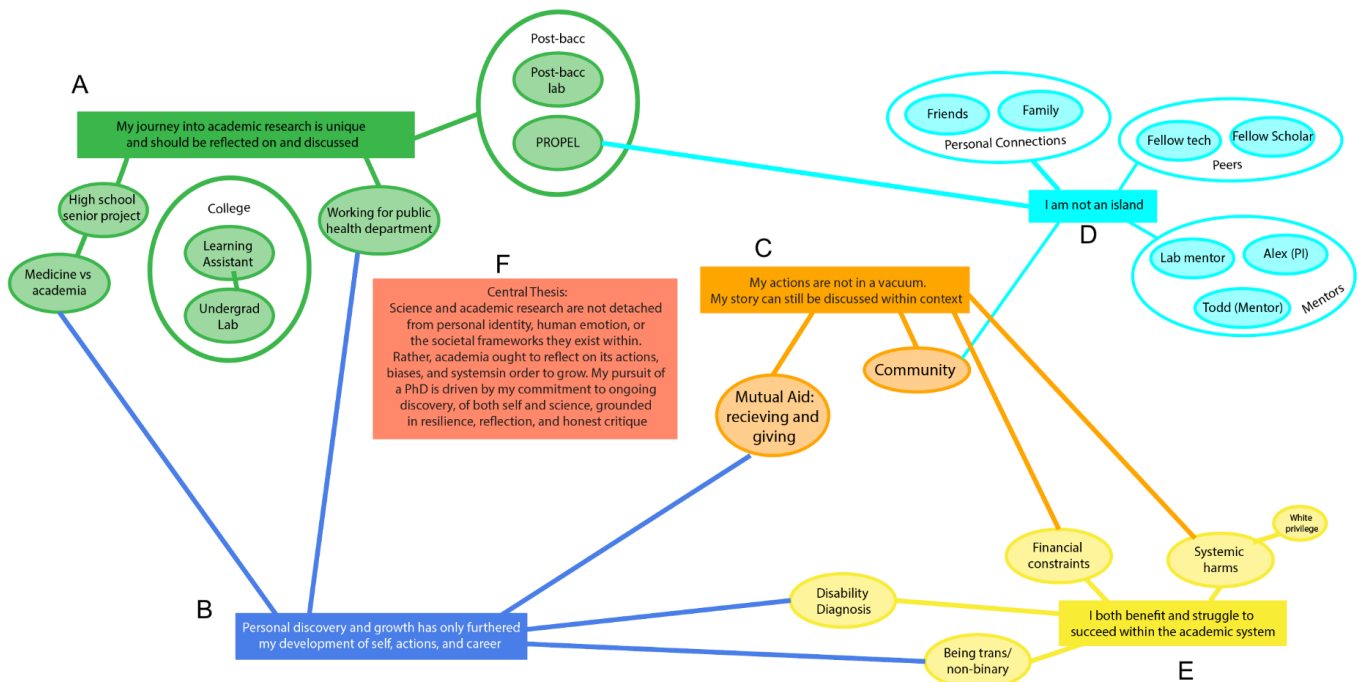
We highly recommend any and all seminars, panels, and workshops that PROPEL has put together for applicants. These resources are there because people are invested in getting you to grad school - let them help!

Resources available:

- You can find a lot of resources on the PROPEL website. Here is a step-by-step guide.
 - Navigate to propel.ucsf.edu/scholar-resources
 - Scroll to the bottom of the page, where you'll find the [PROPEL application Teamspace](#).
 - Here, there are resources on putting together your application materials, an event calendar, notes from workshops, and a recommended application timeline.
- Adriana Bibo's Statement Writing (she is awesome! Even if she's not doing a session, ask Jessica for her information or for the notes from prior years)
- Grad Application Panel: program directors and committee members Q&A
- CV Writing Workshop
- Personal Statement Writing Workshop
- Co-working Sessions

Appendices

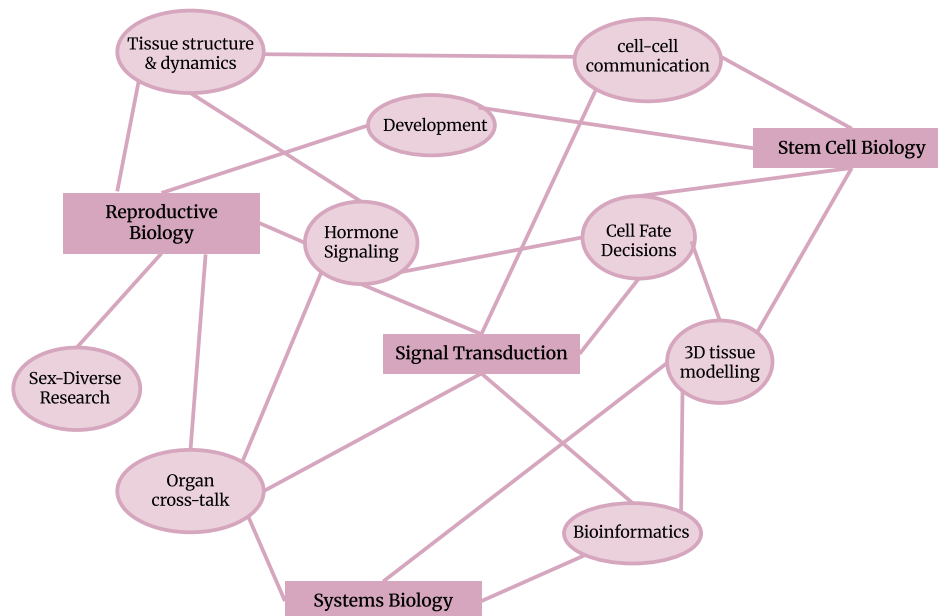
Appendix 1: Dani's "why" map



- A) My journey into academic research is unique and should be reflected on and discussed
- B) Personal discovery and growth has only furthered my development of self, actions, and career
- C) My actions are not in a vacuum. My story can still be discussed within context
- D) I am not an island
- E) I both benefit and struggle to succeed within the academic system
- F) Science and academic research are not detached from personal identity, human emotion, or the societal frameworks they exist within. Rather; academia ought to reflect on its actions, biases, and systems in order to grow. My pursuit of a PhD is driven by my commitment to ongoing discovery, of both self and science, grounded in resilience, reflection, and honest critique.

Appendix 2: Research topics maps

Rhiannon's example: "I really wanted to study reproductive biology, but these programs are few and far between. So, I decided to evaluate what broader topics feed into reproto bio that span many fields, knowing full well that I can learn some essential skills in topics in other related fields, that could feed into post-doctoral research at another point in my career."



Dani's example: "I knew I had a lot of ideas that fit into a larger framework, but didn't quite get how they all fit together to find a cohesive 'research interest'. I went broad for programs because of this as well."



Appendix 3: Example interview questions

◆ Motivation & Career Goals

- Tell me about yourself.
 - Why do you want to pursue a PhD?
 - Why graduate school now?
 - Why this field?
 - What areas of research interest you? What led you to these interests?
 - What are you hoping to gain from graduate school?
 - Why do you need a PhD to reach your career goals?
 - Where do you see yourself in 5-10 years?
 - What is unique about you that gives you a competitive edge over other applicants?
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◆ Program & Faculty Fit

- Why this department/program?
 - How do your interests align with our program?
 - What resources here are particularly exciting to you?
 - What would you contribute to our community?
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◆ Research Experience

- Tell me about your research experiences, both present and past. (Elevator pitch)
 - What questions did your research help answer?
 - What was your role in the project?
 - What are your biggest research accomplishments?
 - Why is your work important?
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◆ Research Understanding

- Why is your research important?
 - What excites you most about your project?
 - What are the future directions?
 - If you had unlimited funding, what would you like to research?
 - If you started your project again, what would you do differently?
 - How would you convince a funding agency to support your work?
 - Where do you think your field is heading?
 - Could you walk me through your experimental design process? Which variables turned out to be most critical, and what did you learn from the troubleshooting phase?
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◆ Problem Solving & Critical Thinking

- Tell me about a major challenge in your research.
- What was the most frustrating part of your project?
- Describe a time an experiment failed.
- How do you distinguish between a true biological negative and a failure in experimental design? Please share an experience where you had to critically evaluate negative data and decide on your next steps
- How did you troubleshoot a difficult problem?
- How do you approach problems with multiple possible solutions?

- Tell me about a costly mistake and how you handled it.
 - Describe a time you showed initiative.
 - What do you feel are the main differences between undergraduate and postgraduate study?
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◆ Technical Skills

- What laboratory techniques are you most comfortable with?
 - Which techniques would you like to learn?
 - What computational or bioinformatics experience do you have?
 - What techniques have you used? Any favorites?
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◆ Teamwork & Communication

- Tell me about a time you worked on a team.
 - What role do you usually play on a team?
 - Describe a mentoring experience.
 - Tell me about a time you explained a complex topic.
 - How do you handle disagreements with colleagues?
 - What kind of supervision helps you do your best?
 - How do you balance independence with collaboration?
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◆ Personal Qualities

- What are your greatest strengths?
 - What are your greatest weaknesses?
 - What motivates you?
 - How do you define success?
 - How do you handle stress?
 - How do you prioritize your work?
 - How do you stay motivated when projects aren't working?
 - What do you think will be your biggest challenge in graduate school?
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◆ Personal Interests

- What are you passionate about?
 - What do you do outside the lab?
 - Who has influenced you the most?
 - Have you ever considered another career? If you couldn't pursue a career in STEM, what would you pursue?
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◆ Big Picture Questions

- Why is science important?
- What are the biggest challenges facing your field?
- What do you think is the future of your field?