

Biochemistry Applicant Advice

Below is some advice from Laetitia who is currently studying Biochemistry at St Hugh's, we hope you find it helpful!

Personal Statement Advice

Make sure your personal statement is focused on why you LOVE Biochemistry. Without making it cheesy – put a reason and then back it up with an example e.g. I find the topic of genetics really interesting, so I read this book.... or the other way around, use an experience and say why that made you like biochemistry, e.g. I did a shadowing placement at a lab where I learnt about genetics which I now really enjoy learning about.

It's really useful to have actual examples of why you like Biochemistry, so the best thing you can do is get work experience. Even if it's only for a day or two, it's so useful to put on your personal statement. Email/call all your local hospitals and universities and laboratories, most of them will have had shadowing placements before. With coronavirus it's probably quite hard to get work experience, but you could ask to ask some questions to a lab researcher for example, about their work. Try emailing the Oxford Biochemistry department if you don't know where to start.

The next best thing is an extended project qualification (EPQ). This is an official qualification that some schools make compulsory but, in my school, only a few people did it. Ask your teachers about it, it's one of the best things I did and I found it really fun. I talked about it in my interview and I honestly think it's how my passion for the subject got across to the interviewers. If you can't get on this official qualification scheme, this shouldn't stop you from doing a bit of research on a topic which you can talk about on your personal statement – maybe you can prepare a PowerPoint presentation to present to your family or to a teacher or to younger students, or write a short essay about it to send to your teacher.

Don't think you just have to talk about books because those can be long and difficult to get through sometimes! Also listen to podcasts or watch documentaries, I really like the "how stuff works" podcast on Spotify and on the podcasts app – it's free and they talk about hypothetical, far-fetched science things rather than just boring textbook stuff.

Finally, if you want to read some books then do, but don't let this stress you out and definitely don't feel like you have to read more than one for your personal statement (unless you actually want to and enjoy it). Look on the Oxford biochemistry department website, they have a page for applicants. They have a few book recommendations on there: <https://www.bioch.ox.ac.uk/recommended-reading-list>. I read "Genome - An Autobiography of a Species" by Matt Ridley from this list which was interesting, but it was very long, and they didn't actually ask me about it in the interview. The classic book that people read for biochemistry is "The Selfish Gene" but be aware that you won't be the only one who has put this on your personal statement! However, if you're struggling for things to mention then it's definitely a good idea, just make sure you don't cut out anything else that you have done in order to mention a book.

Dedicate a lot of time to fine-tuning your personal statement and make sure each sentence is telling them why you love the subject, because it's all they have to decide whether or not to give you an interview. It's a good idea to not necessarily use the word biochemistry a lot and rather focus each reason on a different aspect of biochemistry e.g. genetics, proteins, cells, metabolism (you can find a

breakdown of the course online too). If you're applying to different courses at different universities then this is also a good way of writing your personal statement.

Interview Advice

Be sure to brush up on things that you have already learnt in class – especially the basics. But don't try to learn all of the A level/IB course before your interview, because this is impossible and also Oxford interviewers are much more interested in how your thinking works than what you know already, so they will always end up asking you something you won't know the answer to.

You will have two interviews, at two different colleges. Each college does different interviews, so if you want a heads up you can look up the tutors at the college you have interviews at to see what they specialise in, although they're not guaranteed to ask about the topics they specialise in.

I found that watching lots of cartoon scientific educational YouTube videos was really useful. For example, I watched some about different diseases, genes, techniques e.g. PCR, proteins. This is a really good way to learn as they're easy to follow and understand, and you can watch a few and hopefully something related to one of them will come up in your interview that you can talk about.

In the actual interview, do all your thinking out loud! They will give you some problem-based questions to talk about, so be sure to say out loud what you're thinking, even if you're not sure if its correct. If you are not sure where to start, don't just say "I don't know" instead list things that you can already tell about it and just literally say what thoughts come into your head about the question. They might ask you a bit about yourself and your personal statement, so if you mention something on your personal statement, e.g. a protein, a gene, a technique, be sure to know what it is. Try and get across your passion for the subject.

The interview replicates a tutorial which is the main form of teaching in Oxford, usually with 2 students and 1 tutor but sometimes is 1 on 1. So it gives you a real insight into the Oxford style of teaching.

Good luck!