Linh Pham - Common App and Stanford questions

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This is a fictional applicant written for the PrepMyRound Stanford sample.

Profile

- Westchase Park High School, Houston, Texas (public, ~2,800 students). Class of 2027.
- Family: father (HVAC technician), mother (pharmacy technician), brother Bảo (age 13), grandmother Bà Nội (age 81, speaks only Vietnamese). Parents immigrated from Đà Nẵng in 2004.
- Languages: English (native), Vietnamese (fluent spoken, slow reader).

Grades and tests

- GPA 3.88 unweighted, 4.42 weighted. Rank: top 6% (31 of 612).
- Senior courses: AP Calculus BC, AP Statistics, AP English Literature, AP Government/Macroeconomics, Physics (regular, by choice), dual-credit Intro to Psychology (Houston Community College).
- AP exams: Computer Science A (5), Calculus AB (4), World History (4), English Language (4), Physics 1 (2).
- SAT 1460 (ERW 720, Math 740), second sitting; first sitting 1350.

Activities

1. **Counter and prep cook, Lucky Bamboo Bánh Mì, Bellaire Blvd** (grades 10-12, 16 hrs/wk, paid). Open Saturdays at 6 a.m.; pickle 30 lbs of daikon and carrot a week; trained 3 new hires; rewrote the menu board in English and Vietnamese.
2. **Independent project: "Bà's Voice Notes"** (grades 11-12, 4 hrs/wk). Recorded 212 clips of my grandmother asking everyday questions; taught myself Python to score three free speech-to-text tools. Word error rate: 41% for her, 9% for a Vietnamese news anchor.
3. **Volunteer interpreter, Alief Neighbors Free Tax Clinic** (grades 10-12, 5 hrs/wk, Jan-Apr). Interpret for Vietnamese-speaking filers; about 70 households last season.
4. **Programming lead, FTC Team 18233 Sprocket Theory** (grades 9-12, 8 hrs/wk in season). Wrote autonomous and driver-control code in Java.
5. **Tê´t show director, Vietnamese Student Association** (grades 10-12). Ran the 2026 show: 34 performers, 180 attendees, $1,140 raised for the tax clinic's printer and supplies.
6. **Family responsibilities** (grades 9-12, 8 hrs/wk). Drive Bà to doctor and pharmacy visits and interpret; walk Bảo to school.
7. **Saturday badminton, Alief community center** (grades 9-12, 3 hrs/wk). Just for fun; mostly doubles with retirees who beat me.

Honors

- AP Scholar (2026)
- FTC Houston League Control Award, 2nd place (2025)
- Westchase Park Honor Roll (grades 9-12)

Personal essay (prompt: a background or identity)

My grandmother says "bà" and the phone hears "bar." She says "gọi Hạnh," call Hạnh, my aunt, and the phone offers her directions to a Honda dealership. Bà is eighty-one. She raised four children through a war and two moves. She cannot get a phone to call her daughter.

I have been her voice since I was nine. I read her prescription labels at the CVS on Wilcrest, translated "take with food" and "may cause drowsiness," and explained the automated pharmacy line, which asks you to "press or say one" and has never once understood her saying one. For years I treated this as my chore. Last year I started treating it as a question: what exactly is the machine getting wrong?

Vietnamese has six tones. "Ma" can mean ghost, mother, but, horse, grave or rice seedling depending on the pitch. Most speech software, I learned, was trained on huge amounts of English and much smaller amounts of Vietnamese, and almost none of it from old women from central Vietnam. So I sat Bà down at the kitchen table with my phone and recorded her asking 212 ordinary questions. What time is it. Call Hạnh. Is it going to rain. Then I taught myself enough Python to compare what three free tools heard with what she said.

They got 41% of her words wrong. They got 9% of a news anchor's words wrong. Most errors were tones, and more of them happened on the central-Vietnam vowels Bà has kept since 1962.

I didn't fix anything. I am a high school student with a laptop and a grandmother. But I understand now that "the phone doesn't work for Bà" is not a fact about Bà. It's a fact about whose voices were in the room when the system was built. I want to study the place where language meets computers, partly so that the next version has more people like her in it, and partly because I have fallen for the problem itself. Bà still asks me to make her calls. Now, each time, I make a note.

Stanford short questions (50 words each)

Most significant challenge society faces today: Systems that only work for the people who built them. Phone menus, forms and apps are now the front door to medicine, taxes and benefits, and many people, like my grandmother, can't get through that door without a translator.

How did you spend your last two summers? 2025: six weeks in Đà Nẵng with Bà's sister, then work. 2026: 30 hours a week at Lucky Bamboo, evenings on my voice-notes project, and retaking physics concepts on my own after my AP Physics 1 score.

Historical moment you wish you'd witnessed: 1952, Bell Labs, when "Audrey" recognized spoken digits. It understood one man's voice. I'd like to have asked whose voice they chose, and why.

Elaborate on an activity or job: At Lucky Bamboo I learned speed, and that regulars notice when the pickles are short on sugar. Mr. Đặng let me rewrite the bilingual menu after I counted how many customers pointed instead of ordering.

Five things important to you: Bà's fish sauce ratio; doubles partners; well-commented code; the 6 a.m. shift; my brother's terrible jokes.

Stanford short essays (250 words each)

An idea or experience that makes you excited about learning

Word error rate is a blunt number. It counts mistakes, not why they happened. When I sorted Bà's 87 most-misheard clips by hand, I found the software almost never missed the consonants; it missed the pitch. A falling tone heard as level turned "grandmother" into "three." That made me want to know how a machine represents pitch at all, which led me to spectrograms, then to the Stanford online lectures for CS 224N, about half of which I understood. The half I didn't understand is why I want Symbolic Systems: it puts linguistics, psychology and computer science in one room. I don't want to only build better models. I want to know why a language works the way it does before I teach a computer to hear it.

Letter to your future roommate

Hi! Warnings first: I wake up at 5:30 even on weekends because of four years of bakery shifts. I will try to be quiet. I talk to my grandmother on video every Sunday; she will ask whether you are eating enough, and she means it. I make cháo when anyone is sick and keep a rice cooker as a sacred object. I play badminton badly but enthusiastically and will recruit you. I make playlists for every mood, including "debugging at 1 a.m." Honest flaw: I say yes to too many things and then go quiet when I'm overwhelmed. If I go quiet, ask. I'll do the same for you.

What would you contribute to Stanford?

I'm the person who notices who isn't being understood. At the tax clinic, I watched a man nod through an explanation he clearly didn't follow, and learned to ask, in Vietnamese, "what will you do first when you get home?" At the Tết show, I put the grandparents' table near the stage and printed the program in both languages; attendance went from about 90 to 180. At Stanford I'd want to interpret through the Haas Center, bring a Tết lunch to my dorm, and join any team building tools people actually use.

Additional information

My AP Physics 1 grade (B- second semester) and exam score (2) are my weakest marks. That spring I took five APs, worked 16 hours a week, and led robotics programming. At the 2026 league tournament my untested autonomous code drove our robot into the other alliance's zone; the penalty cost us advancement. I had skipped testing to study for physics, and still did badly in physics. I now take one fewer hard course and test code before matches.