



Office of Graduate Fellowships

Tips and Pointers:

Application Essays

Essays and Statements: What are selection committees looking for?

All graduate fellowship applications require you to write essays, or “statements,” about yourself, your work, and your future goals as part of the application process. These statements are the centerpiece of the application and will be the single most important factor in how your application is judged, particularly in the critical early stages of the selection process. When a selection committee or reviewer reads your statements, at the most fundamental level they are looking for:

- **Good writing.** Whatever the field, whatever the project, strong writing skills and the ability to communicate in an eloquent and articulate fashion are among the best predictors of long-term success. Your writing must be fluent, professional, error- and jargon-free, and understandable to someone outside your area of specialty.
- **Good “fit.”** Every fellowship program has its own identity and its own priorities in terms of what and whom it is intended to support. In most cases these priorities are stated openly in the program materials / web site, and it is possible to get a sense of how they play out in reality by looking at lists of past awardees. It is also a good idea to make an appointment to speak with the Director of Graduate Fellowships, who may have additional insights. Still not sure if your project is a good fit? Contact the fellowship program directly and ask – they get this type of inquiry frequently and will be happy to help. Fit is one of the most important factors in any fellowship competition, and your essays should make a case (implicitly and explicitly) for why this particular award is a good fit for you.
- **Where are you coming from, where are you headed?** The most successful applications are the ones that convincingly portray the award as the “bridge” between where you are now and where you aim to be in the future. How will the fellowship help you build on what you have accomplished up to now in order to “take it to the next level”? Don’t make the reader work too hard to figure this out – make all the connections crystal clear. And don’t skimp on describing your future plans. Things may not turn out exactly as you describe – that’s OK – but it’s important to have a vision.
- **Feasibility.** Many applicants worry about whether their project will seem “ambitious” or “significant” enough, but committees will be equally concerned with feasibility. Is the project “doable”? Are you qualified to do it? Are your time frame and budgetary expectations realistic? Are your goals well matched to the stage you are now at in your educational and professional life? Do you have the skills and contacts you need to get the job done? A smart but modest project that you can do a great job with will go farther than premature promises of greatness.

How to Get Started

Almost all fellowship applications require at least one written statement. If only one is required, it will be focused on the applicant's proposed research or project. This is often the case for fellowships supporting advanced doctoral / dissertation research or writing, since in this case the primary concern is the viability and promise of the candidate's academic work.

Some applications break things down into two or more shorter essays that focus on specific aspects of the candidate's qualifications. This is often the case with fellowships that have more narrowly defined goals and priorities (such as the Critical Language Scholarships or the Boren Fellowships) and want to carefully assess fit as well as pure academic merit.

Finally, some applications require a "personal statement." The personal statement is an opportunity for the candidate to provide some insight into their motivations and the context in which their academic and professional goals have taken shape. The personal statement is also a good place to bring in an element of "diversity." Selection committees want applicants who come from all walks of life and bring with them unique perspectives and experiences. Even if you aren't "diverse" in the narrower sense of being from an under-represented racial or ethnic group, you can use this opportunity to show the reader what kinds of unique perspectives and experiences you will bring to the mix.

Here are some tips to help you get started writing:

- Start early -- before you think you are ready. Several months or even a year in advance is ideal. True, it is possible to complete an application in less time, but the most consistently successful applicants plan far ahead. (On a related note, remember that shorter essays can be even harder to write than longer ones. Don't fool yourself into thinking that an application requiring shorter statements will be quicker to complete.)
- If the application requires two or more essays: Read all the questions first. Then, before starting any one essay, make a rough bullet-point list of ALL the things (personal, professional, academic, future goals, etc.) that you want to convey. Then try sorting out which of these points you will include in the "project statement" and which you will discuss in the "personal statement" (or other statements if required.) Some will clearly fit in one category or another. Others can be worked in to either essay. This will help you economize on your limited space.
- If the application requires a substantial statement about your doctoral research, you may be adapting a version of your dissertation proposal. This gives you a leg up, but don't underestimate the amount of work you will have to do to adapt the proposal. Sometimes it can seem like even more work than writing something from scratch! Don't give into the temptation to just send the dissertation proposal, or to use the same essay for multiple applications. Successful applicants take the time to craft a unique statement for each application – one that resonates with the parameters of that particular competition.
- If the application is seeking funding for an independent project or research agenda that will be carried out over a period of time (such as with a Fulbright Research/Study Grant, a Boren Fellowship, or a dissertation fellowship), lay out the timeline of the fellowship very clearly and be as specific as possible about what you will be doing when. Name the dates, locations, institutions, local mentors, research contacts, courses you will take, people you will meet or collaborate with, and any other concrete details of your plan. (Remember, it is OK if things turn out a little differently from how you plan; the important thing is to have a plan.) Having trouble getting started writing? Sit down and spell out your plan in plain language, as if explaining it to yourself. If you feel like you don't have enough information to do this, you may need to work a bit more on your plan.
- Get as much feedback as you can – from advisors and professors, from peers, from the Director of Graduate Fellowships, the Writing Center, and so on. The name of the game is drafts, drafts, drafts.