



## **Office of Graduate Fellowships**

**Tips and Advice:**

### **Crafting a Strong Application Package**

#### **The “Application Package”: What Will You Need to Submit?**

Fellowship application requirements vary from one competition to the next, but they almost always include the following components:

- Application data forms.
- Essays, written statements, or proposals, including one or more of the following types:
  - Statement of proposed research / project proposal.
  - Personal statement.
  - Statement of career goals (and their relevance to the fellowship program).
  - “Short answer” essays in response to specific questions or prompts.
- Letters of Recommendation
- Transcripts

Depending on the type of competition, you may also be asked to submit:

- A cover letter.
- A budget detailing the amount of money you hope to receive and how you intend to spend it.
- A resume or CV.
- An abstract of your project or your thesis/dissertation topic.
- A letter of acceptance or affiliation (when your proposal includes a period of time in residence at another institution or organization – usually for international awards like Fulbright or Boren.)
- A letter of endorsement from your home department, program, or institution.
- A sample of written or artistic work.
- A language proficiency evaluation (if foreign language proficiency is required.)

Infrequently, other supporting documents such as GRE scores, FAFSA forms, or a photograph may be requested – but these are uncommon.

These materials together make up your application package. Most competitions now use at least partially web-based application processes, meaning you will submit most (if not all) of the components of the application package online (either by entering data / text directly into a web interface or by uploading PDF files and scanned documents.) Web-based application systems usually also allow you to send your letter writers secure links via which they may submit their recommendations. On occasion, you may be required (or given the option) to submit certain items in hard copy.

Pay close attention to deadlines, including both day and time. When using an online application system, aim to submit well in advance of the deadline as these systems often crash due to heavy traffic as the deadline approaches. In some cases, letters of reference may carry a different deadline – be attentive.

Once you have submitted all the components of the application package, you should always make sure to obtain written confirmation that everything has been received and that your file is indeed complete.

## **Tips and Guidance: What Makes for a “Strong” Application Package?**

One point stands out above all others:

- **The various components of the application package should all reinforce one another, and should work together to create a coherent picture of you as an applicant.** Some strategies for achieving this result include:
  - Read ALL the material about the award carefully – not only the requirements, but the background material, profiles of past winners, tips for applicants, and any other material provided. Make every component of your application resonate with the themes and buzzwords that emerge from this material.
  - Keep the focus on the award you are applying for: Make sure ALL your statements speak to what you will do with the award, why you and your work are a good match for the award, and how the experience afforded by the award is the next logical step for you. Show the reader not only what you will gain from the award, but what you bring to the table – how does your work help to realize the goals of the funding organization?
  - Instead of bombarding the committee with everything you have ever done, highlight the accomplishments and experiences that are most relevant to the award. If you are submitting a CV or resume, customize it to foreground these experiences.
  - Make sure your CV (and/or biodata forms) and application statements reinforce one another. For example, if your statement highlights your commitment to community service, make sure this is apparent in your CV and vice versa.
- There are also a few steps you can take to ensure that your letters of recommendation will reinforce the points you want to stand out in your application.
  - Provide your recommendation writers with copies of your written statements (complete and in near-final form.) This means you need to have these ready considerably in advance of the submission deadline.
  - Provide your recommenders with information about the award.
  - Offer your recommenders a short bullet-pointed list of the key “talking points” for the letter, including examples of work you did under their supervision that relate directly to the award. Alternatively, meet with the recommender to discuss this in person, and then send them an email summarizing the conversation.
  - Inquire with the Director of Graduate Fellowships about seeing examples of previous successful applications, or for pointers on a specific competition.

Beyond this most crucial piece of advice, here are a few more general “dos” and “don’ts”:

**DO:**

- Follow instructions *scrupulously*. Heed page/word/margin limits and complete all required steps.
- Plan on writing multiple drafts of your statements, and get feedback at each stage.
- Make arrangements for supporting documents (letters, transcripts, etc.) well in advance.
- For independent projects or research, provide a very concrete timeline of activities for the tenure of the award. Give the reader a very clear sense of what will happen “on the ground.”
- Consider your audience. Will this be read by people in your field of study, or a wider audience?
- Have a reader who is unfamiliar with your work (i.e. not one of the previous draft readers) proofread the final version to catch any remaining typos or careless errors.
- Aim to submit the application a couple of days early to avoid last-minute crises.

**DON’T:**

- Don’t re-use proposals from other awards. Written statements should always be customized to the award you are competing for. You can usually recycle some material, but not the whole essay. Count on crafting a custom statement for each application.
- Never rely solely on computer-based spelling and grammar checkers to proof your work.