



Office of Graduate Fellowships

Critical Language Scholarship Program Application and Essays

What is CLS?

- CLS is a competitive scholarship funded by the U.S. Department of State that enables recipients to attend an intensive overseas summer language institute in one of 13 “critical” languages.
- CLS summer institutes and locations are organized for program participants by the CLS program with the goal of offering intensive, fast-paced language instruction in an immersive context paired with co-curricular programming to familiarize participants with the culture in which the language is spoken.

Eligibility and Rules

- Limited to U.S. Citizens.
- Must be enrolled in a degree program (any level) at the time of application.
- Arabic & Persian require 1 year of prior study by the start date of the summer program.
- Chinese, Japanese, & Russian require 2 years of prior study by the start date of the summer program.
- Azerbaijani, Bangla, Hindi, Indonesian, Korean, Punjabi, Turkish, and Urdu are open to new beginners.
- You may apply to only one language per competition cycle.
- You must apply for a language – not a location, which will be assigned.
- Applicant must demonstrate long-term commitment to learning the language and relevance to academic and professional goals.

Application Checklist

All materials are submitted via the online application at: <http://www.clscholarship.org/>

- Online application forms.
- Three required essays – see pp. 2-5.
- Two letters of recommendation.
- Language evaluation (for those who have prior study / experience in the target language.)
- Transcripts (undergraduate and graduate.)

Timeline

- Early fall: New competition cycle opens.
- Application deadline: Mid-November
- First round notification: January
- Final notification: February / March.

Decoding the CLS Essays

The CLS application requires one “Statement of Purpose” of 500 words, and two “Short Answer” questions of 350 words each. These word counts represent maximums, but a meaningful response should not fall far short.

1. Statement of Purpose (500 words)

Please address the following questions in your statement of purpose essay:

- *Why is it important that the CLS Program invest specifically in you with this scholarship?*
- *What interests you about this language and the people who speak it?*
- *How will increased language and cultural knowledge help you achieve your future professional and academic goals?*
- *How will you continue to develop linguistic and cultural expertise after the CLS Program?*

With a multi-part question like this, it is important to make sure your answer clearly addresses each sub-part of the essay prompt. It is not absolutely required that you address the points in the order they are presented, but doing so can help you organize the information and may make it easier for reviewers to “locate” your answers.

Why Should CLS Invest in You? What Interests you about the language and the people who speak it?

- Describe in a straightforward way how you became interested in studying the language / culture and what you have done up to now to cultivate that interest. This can include formal or informal coursework, tutoring, language partners, self-directed study, study abroad, and any other ways you have sought to learn the language or familiarize yourself with the culture, issues, and current events of the country/region in question.
- If your opportunities to study the target language have been limited, discuss other ways in which you have tried to nurture your interest – through coursework or academic projects, internships or work experiences, travel or study abroad, community service, or participation in cultural events in your city.

Make a clear connection between the target language and academic/career goals.

- Why / how is proficiency in the target language central to your academic / professional goals? Graduate students in particular should have a clear and cogent answer to this question.
- Show commitment and coherence in your plans. CLS is wary of applicants who appear to be “language collectors” – people who dabble in languages, attending classes and programs, but never seem to commit. If you’ve shown a talent for language in the past say so, but keep this point brief and focus on how the target language factors into your present academic and career focus.
- Be creative! CLS is looking to increase knowledge of critical languages across a broad professional spectrum. It is not necessarily to your advantage to say you want to work for the U.S. government or the intelligence community, unless you really do. U.S. interests are also promoted through trade and commerce, scientific research, NGO and civil society work, education, technical expertise, and cultural exchange.
- Many, many applicants to this program say that they want to be a Foreign Service officer/diplomat, work for the State Department, or something similar. If this truly is your goal, distinguish yourself by showing you have done some research and know something about this career path.
- Remember: Things may not turn out as you envision, but that’s OK. The important thing is to have a plan and articulate it clearly. This is particularly important for graduate students, who are expected to have a clearer sense of where they are going with their studies and what their academic and professional aims are.

After CLS: Plans to Continue Language Study

- Don't skimp on this question. Do some research and offer a real plan! If you won't have access to classes through GMU (because the language is not offered, or you will be too advanced or will have graduated), can you find classes elsewhere in the DC area (or wherever you will be located)? Educational institutions, institutes, embassies, and diaspora community organizations frequently coordinate classes or host events where you can meet native speakers. What about tutors, meet-ups, language partners, or electronic media?
- Any plans to return to the country or region in the future? Will work, study, or research take you back?

2. Short Answer Question #1 (350 words)

The CLS Program is an intensive, group-based overseas learning environment. While on the program, you may frequently be exhausted from adapting to a new environment, studying intensively, attending mandatory cultural activities that may not always align perfectly with your interests, building new relationships with people from the host country and your CLS peers, and functioning day-to-day in another language.

*What aspects of the CLS Program do you expect will be the most challenging for you?
How will you meet these challenges?*

What this question is really asking is: **Why is this this the right learning environment for you at this time?**

Here are some considerations that should factor into your answer:

- Why do you need INTENSIVE, OVERSEAS instruction? What is it about this setup that addresses your current needs in a way a language course at home will not?
- Why is NOW the right time for you to participate in CLS? What is the urgency?
- What do you anticipate will be the most challenging aspect of this experience FOR YOU? There's no right or wrong answer – what they are looking for is to see if you are honestly reflecting on your strengths and weaknesses. The important thing is how you will meet the challenge.
- You may find it helpful to draw on past experiences to illustrate how you cope with academic or social challenges. Think in terms of spending hours each day with a small group of people of varied ages and backgrounds, where natural differences in ability and motivation quickly become apparent. Also consider the stress of having to cope in a foreign language *all the time* – which can be exhausting and isolating. Or think of living in close quarters with limited access to creature comforts, little privacy, unfamiliar food, the stresses of travel, a busy schedule of group activities, and so on. Beyond just being friendly and open minded, what will be your coping strategies? What will be your contribution to the CLS group dynamic?

3. Short Answer Question #2

Living in a different culture exposes you to new opinions, worldviews, and ways of living day-to-day that may be completely different from what you have experienced previously. Among other things, you might find that there are differences in concepts of personal space, privacy, and time; socially acceptable behaviors; the role of the individual in society; and others.

What are your strategies for interacting with people who are different from you or situations that are unfamiliar? How do you approach new environments?

What this question is really asking is: **How will you engage with the society around you, and what will be your strategies for dealing with cultural differences in day-to-day life?**

There is a strong temptation to answer this question by talking about your open-mindedness, your positive attitude, and your “when in Rome” adaptability. However, you must try to go beyond this “friendly American” posture to show (not just tell) the reader some of your strategies for handling cultural difference. Here are some factors to consider:

- Draw on past experiences to talk about strategies you have learned for handling cultural differences or adjusting to unfamiliar environments.
- There are proactive strategies and reactive strategies. Proactive strategies are ways you can reach out – for example, by sharing photos of your family or special skills and talents you may have. Reactive strategies have to do with how you respond to people when they reach out to you. This can include reaching out in friendship, such as sharing food or an experience (which you may not like or want), or reaching out in challenge – such as when someone confronts you with questions about the U.S. or about some aspect of your behavior.
- Think about how you will present yourself physically and in terms of dress. Other societies tend to be more “formal” in their interactions and dress than what we see in the U.S. What strategies of appearance and self-presentation might you employ? Also reflect on your boundaries in this regard.
- How can you “recharge” mentally and emotionally? Any normal person, no matter how open-minded and adaptable, gets worn down after a time. What can you do in this situation? Make sure you get 15 minutes alone per day, even if it means hiding in the bathroom? A weekly call home or to a spouse/friend? Keeping a journal? Taking a walk? Exercise, music, or a hobby?

“Do’s”: More Ideas to Make Your Application Shine

- Do you have a good command of another language? If so, think about how you can combine your existing language skills with skills in the target language to create a special niche for yourself.
- Do you have a special hobby or interest that can play a role in how you relate to people? If so, mention it, or better yet, do some homework and figure out you might pursue it in the host country. Not only can this help you integrate with your surroundings, it can help your application stand out – “that’s the guy who plays violin”; “that’s the woman who is interested in the local food culture”; and so on. Even a quirky interest is OK as long as it is socially acceptable.

“Don’ts”: Avoid clichés, banalities, and sweeping generalizations.

- Don’t give the impression that you just chose a language off the list. Even if your interest is newfound, it’s important to convey that your choice of language represents an enduring commitment arising from your prior academic and professional interests.
- Don’t waste space talking about the importance of learning a foreign language, what a fantastic opportunity this is, or what a big honor the award would be. These are givens, and CLS is not a charity. Keep the focus on what you bring to the table. This isn’t an opportunity they are bestowing upon you – it’s an investment they are making in you. Why are you a good investment?
- You don’t need to educate the reader about how “the best way to learn a language is through immersion.” You also don’t need to educate them about where the country is located, what its language is like, its fascinating history, or its strategic importance. Keep the focus YOUR interest in the language.
- Instead of telling us about your “passion” for the language, or about how hard you will work for it, show these qualities through your track record and your future plans.
- If you plan to talk about terrorism, the attacks of 9/11, trade with China, “cross-cultural understanding,” or “our increasingly globalized world” in your essays, you’d better have something very unique and interesting to say on those topics.