



Office of Graduate Fellowships

NSF GRFP: Essay Tips and Advice

How GRFP Essays are Evaluated

The most important part of your GRFP application is the essays, and this is where the great majority of the work of the application will be concentrated. The most obvious function of the essays is to present the merits of your proposed pathway of graduate research and your individual promise as a researcher. But the essays also serve other, more subtle purposes:

- The essays are a test to see how well you follow directions. Essays that do not conform to formatting rules will be disqualified without further consideration. NSF figures that if you can't follow directions and conform to the rules when something this big is at stake, you are probably not going to cut it as an advanced level research scientist.
- The essay provides evidence of how well you communicate about your ideas and how well you write. NSF is interested not merely in brilliant scientists, but in brilliant scientists *who can talk/write about their work (without dumbing it down) in an engaging and accessible way*. The quality of your writing and your communication style matter.
- The essay is an opportunity for you to offer the review committee a glimpse of you as a person. NSF wants our next generation of scientists to reflect the diversity of our nation, and "diversity" is not something that can easily be measured with check boxes on forms. The essay should offer the reader some insight into your background and your personal motivations for wanting to do the kind of work you propose.

NSF makes no secret of the two criteria it uses to evaluate candidates for the GRFP – and in particular their essays: (1) Intellectual Merit (Potential Contribution to Science) and (2) Broader Impacts (Potential Contribution to Society). These criteria need to be addressed explicitly in both essays. How can you do this?

Intellectual Merit – What NSF Looks For

- Past academic performance (grades, curriculum)
- Academic awards / honors
- Research experience (can be outside your chosen field)
- Publications/presentations
- Research plan
- Choice of institution (fit, institutional resources)
- Communications skills
- References

Thinking of applying? Please contact:

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Broader Impacts – What NSF Looks For

- Prior activities / accomplishments, leadership experiences
- Community service and outreach (including with underrepresented groups)
- Participation in partnerships between academia, industry, and others
- Ability to articulate potential impact on society / connections
- Ability to communicate with diverse audiences (national and international)
- Integration of research and education
- Potential contribution to national security/interests
- International experience, foreign language skills
- Future academic and professional plans

Some Additional Essay Tips

General:

- Think carefully about your choice of primary field: This will determine which panel reviews your application. It need not match exactly the name of your department or program.
- Institutional fit is very important. NSF will look carefully to see that your intended institution is equipped to provide proper mentorship, support, and infrastructure for your area of research. You must make the case for this. If you have not yet committed to a program, write with your top choice in mind (but emphasize that all the programs you applied to were selected for their suitability.) It will help if your letters of reference back up the reasons for your choice.

Personal/Background Statement:

- Emphasize experience relevant to your application, but include ALL examples of research experience.
- Part of the goal here is to let the review panel see your level of comfort and familiarity with scientific process / method, from problem/hypothesis to analysis, methods for assessing the success of your work, and dissemination of results.
- Highlight what you personally did, but also discuss experiences with collaboration, teamwork, and leadership.
- International / global experience and interest is valued.
- Discuss future goals, not only in terms of specific career aims but in terms of broader interest in contributing to scientific community and public interest.

Graduate Research Statement:

- Demonstrate understanding of the chosen field
- Do not assume readers are experts in your specific area of research
- Discuss your choice of institution and possibilities for mentorship, plus resources at that institution – FIT IS IMPORTANT.
- Spell out details of your research and study plan
- Don't forget to comment on broader impacts
- Discuss career plans, but be flexible.

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