



Office of Graduate Fellowships

Tips and Pointers:

Personal Statements

Almost every graduate fellowship competition requires the applicant to submit one or more written statements as part of the application package. These statements form the centerpiece of the application, and are the single most important factor determining success or failure.

Often one of the required statements is a “personal statement” in which the applicant is invited to share more about him- or herself than what comes across in the research or project description, transcripts, forms and other application materials. What are selection committees looking for in the personal statement? What do they hope to learn about you?

1. **Motivation:** What drives your commitment to your project / field / degree program / the language you want to study / the dissertation you want to write... or whatever it is you want them to fund you to do? Why are you doing this? Where are you going with it?
2. **Grit:** Do you have what it takes to follow through on the project or program you are applying for? If you are writing a dissertation, they will be looking for signs that you have a lot of self-discipline, are making progress through your program, planning realistically, and that you are good at working independently. If you are applying for an award to travel overseas, do you have the flexibility and maturity that the experience will demand of you? Selection committees are often less interested in whether you are the smartest person in the room than in whether you seem grounded, realistic, stable, independent, and adaptable, since these “emotional intelligence” qualities are often better predictors of who will go farthest.
3. **Diversity:** Even when “diversity” is not a defining aspect of the fellowship program, funding organizations seek candidates that reflect a diversity of experiences, backgrounds, places of origin, ethnic identities, academic fields, motivations, and career aspirations. The personal statement is your opportunity to draw attention to the unique perspective YOU will bring to the table.
4. **Filling in Gaps:** The personal statement is a place where you can address any quirks in your record. Is your GPA a little lower than it should be? Are there gaps between your degrees? Do you go to school part time or are you taking longer to finish your degree due to other factors? Have personal or economic challenges created a “bump” in your record? Rather than leave the committee guessing, it is usually to your advantage to address issues head on. Here is your chance.
5. **Writing:** One very basic function of application essays is to showcase your writing. Regardless of your field, the ability to express yourself in a manner that is clear, professional, and free of errors is fundamental to long-term success. Personal statements, due to their open-ended and “personal” nature, tend to allow for more latitude to express yourself and showcase your writing talent.

Consider sharing your personal statements with your recommendation letter writers, particularly if they don’t know you well as a person. The insights provided in the personal statement may help them write a “richer” letter on your behalf.