



## Guidelines for Writing the Personal Statement

The personal statement is your opportunity to communicate directly to the selection committee and often serves as the heart of your fellowship application. It should be a clear, logically-developed set of points with supporting evidence. However, as this is a *personal* statement, the language does not have to be very formal or academic. Think of the statement as a way for you to tell a story or paint a portrait of yourself. In essence, it should:

- Address the prompt directly with specific detailed examples.
- Provide insight not revealed in other parts of the application.
- Be sincere and maintain a consistent tone.
- Make the reader want to meet you!

### Where do I start?

The personal statement should merge your personal narrative with the goals of the fellowship to demonstrate how you qualify for the fellowship and, in turn, how the fellowship is fit for you. To do so, you should:

- Research the fellowship you are interested in to gain a sense of who will be reading your personal statement.  
Determine the purpose of the fellowship, the selection criteria, and its history. Find out essay prompts, word counts or other constraints for your personal statement (most allow 1,000 words, though you should check with each respective fellowship).
- Tell the committee about yourself by answering these questions:
  - Who am I?
  - Who do I want to be?
  - What contributions do I want to make, why are they significant, and how will I work to achieve them?
- Find ways to demonstrate how you and the fellowship are aligned by answering these questions:
  - What am I proposing to do with the fellowship, where, and why?
  - Why is this fellowship for me, specifically?
- Your audience for the on-campus selection committee will generally be comprised of faculty in diverse academic disciplines, and that the readers on the national committee may include renown faculty, experts, accomplished individuals, and often former fellowship recipients.

It may be helpful to think of your application package as a whole to narrow down what should be included in your personal statement. Figure out what points you want to convey to the committee and consider which parts of your application would be most appropriate and effective for showcasing them:

- What is best said by you? (personal statement and short essays)
- What might be better communicated about you by other people (letters of recommendation), your studies/grades (transcripts), or your involvement/accomplishments (résumé), etc?

For additional guidance, here is a list of questions to ask yourself as starting points:

- What makes me distinctive? How would friends or family describe what is important or significant about me to others?
- What specific moments in my life have shaped who I am today and my future goals?
- What drew me to my field of study?
- What do I care deeply about?
- What are my plans 5-10 years from now?
- Which possible academic programs or opportunities through a particular fellowship excite me and why? What further research or contacts have I done/made to learn more?
- How will this fellowship help me reach my goals?

### Sample short essay prompts

Some fellowships may also require shorter essays in addition to the personal statement. If this is the case, utilize the personal statement to communicate information that is unique from your responses to specific short essay prompts.

*Note: below are general guidelines on content by topic. Please check with respective fellowships for current application essay prompts on what information they are specifically requesting in the essays.*

#### Proposed Academic Program (500 words)

Information to include in this essay:

- Your proposed degree program and institution and justification for your choice
  - Unique features of the academic program
  - Current research being conducted at a particular university
  - Outline proposal for research you wish to undertake
  - Specific resources (eg. research facilities, expert faculty) available at the institution of choice
  - Contact made with host university
  - Brief reasoning for alternate degree program choices
- Your qualifications
  - Coursework
  - Research/lab/fieldwork experience
  - Relevant extracurricular work/accomplishments

#### Post-Scholarship Plan (300 words)

The fellowship opportunity should fit within the larger scheme of your long-term goals. Describe in this essay:

- Immediate plans upon completion of the fellowship
- How the fellowship enhances/contributes to your plans
- Future academic or career aspirations
- How contacts and connections made during the fellowship will be maintained after the completion of the fellowship

#### Ambassador Potential (500 words)

For most fellowships, especially ones where you will travel abroad, your potential as an ambassador is especially important to take into consideration. While the fellowship award benefits the recipient directly, the goal extends beyond that to how a fellowship winner might make meaningful contributions to the community as a result of the experiences made possible through the fellowship. It would be useful to communicate the responses to these questions to the selection committee to help them assess your ability to serve as an ambassador:

- What is your current understanding of relations between the U.S. and the proposed nation you will be traveling to for the fellowship? How could these ties be strengthened?
- What are you looking forward to in your new destination? Are there opportunities unique to your place of study?
- How will you get to know people and the place? How do you plan to engage with your new environment? Do you seize opportunities and what outcomes have you experienced from doing so?
- What past experiences have shaped your perspective or given you tools that will help you adapt and get to know a new place? Are you able to demonstrate your ability to build relationships outside of your peer group and ability to appreciate the needs, motives, and concerns of others? How can you apply your knowledge and skills to enhance relations in the fellowship you wish to undertake?
- What are good reasons (professional, academic, etc) for making contacts in this new area/university? How do you plan to maintain these relationships upon your return from the fellowship?
- How do you anticipate the fellowship to change you and how do you plan to use your new knowledge and outlook?
- How will you try to give back to the community? What contributions do you wish to make as a result of the newfound knowledge and experiences gained through the fellowship?

Your essay should go beyond general arguments for the benefit of study abroad and other typical responses that applicants may include in their responses. Remember, you want your essay to stand out.

### Leadership (500 words)

Leadership is often an important trait that is sought in fellowship applicants. In an essay on this topic, aim to describe:

- Personal ideas on leadership
- Experiences that have shaped your leadership style and situations in which you have exercised leadership that resulted in a positive outcome or learning moment
- How you have mobilized, inspired, or influenced others to achieve a goal
- Other character traits that influence your determination, drive, and ambition to work towards your goals
- Your sense of purpose and motivation to make significant contributions to society or within your field of study
- Creativity or innovation in your problem-solving skills

### **General tips**

The personal statement is the component of your application on which you will spend the most time and energy. A successful statement will likely go through many drafts as you try different narratives or figure out ways to develop certain points further. Here are some general tips to forming a final piece that is a reflection of your best effort:

- **START EARLY!** Give yourself sufficient time to thoroughly explore different approaches for your personal statement.
- Write a statement that is a unified whole – have an opening sentence that captures the reader's interest, a connecting thread throughout the essay, and a strong conclusion. Expect to write and rewrite your statement multiple times.
- Build connections between your personal experiences, your goals, and what you plan to study.
- Follow instructions carefully – address all parts of the prompts, adhere to word counts and other technical requirements.
- **PROOFREAD** – edit your piece thoroughly, revisit your statement often, have others look over your writing (where allowable).
- Be sincere – you should be comfortable discussing your personal statement during the interview.
- **AVOID** writing a statement that is too generic or too polished – the committee wants to get to know you, and your writing style is a part of who you are as a person.
- **AVOID** coming across as bragging or being too overly modest.
- **AVOID** describing yourself mainly in adjectives – instead, use concrete examples to demonstrate your character.
- **AVOID** turning in your résumé/CV/list of activities into a narrative – your résumé/CV/list of activities indicates how long you have been in a student group; use the personal statement to highlight lessons/skills you have learned through your involvement (or other insight not listed in your résumé/CV/list of activities).
- If the application consists of a personal statement and other short narratives, be strategic in what information you include in each essay; avoid redundancies by using the essays to demonstrate a more comprehensive outlook to your character and experiences because you have a lot to share!

**Your end goal is to make the selection committee want to learn more about you and invite you for an interview.** Your personal statement will most likely serve as the basis for some of your interview questions, so be prepared to go into detail about any part of your personal statement.

The Scholarships & Fellowships Office is an available resource for students applying for fellowships. Whether you need guidance on getting started with your personal statement or someone to review a draft, we are here to help. Please feel free to contact Fellowship Advisor, Sylvia Wu, at [ugfellow@hawaii.edu](mailto:ugfellow@hawaii.edu) or (808) 956-8361.