



Graduate Research Fellowships

***Writing Compelling
Personal and Research
Statements***



What are Reviewers Looking For?

- Will you be a successful graduate student and researcher?
 - Do you understand the research process?
 - Did you do your homework?
 - Can you express your ideas well?
- Is your selected area of research something they want to support?
 - Varies in importance depending on mission of funding agency.
- Are you in the right place to carry out your goals?

WRITING STRONG PERSONAL STATEMENTS

Gives you the opportunity to use your own voice and make a case for yourself. It's like a **pseudo-interview** where the reviewers get to know who you are through your own words and presentation.

This is where you tell your own personal story! Let your passion shine through.

WRITING STRONG PERSONAL STATEMENTS

Chance to describe why the opportunity you are applying for is important to you, how it fits into your aspirations, and how it will help you achieve academic ambitions and professional goals, and how your work will benefit society.

The reviewer should be able to easily ascertain:

- the origin of your interest in a field of study
- the growth of that interest over a period of time (as illustrated by experience)
- that the opportunity you are applying for is the next logical step in the sequence toward a specific goal

WRITING STRONG PERSONAL STATEMENTS

These writing pieces serve as a writing sample. They should be well organized and structured, concise, and completely free of grammar, punctuation, and spelling errors.

WRITING STRONG PERSONAL STATEMENTS

Personal narratives give you the opportunity to address what might appear to be gaps or weaknesses in other aspects of your application.

Here is your opportunity to turn weaknesses into strengths.

How did a negative experience help you grow as a person.

How do I craft a strong piece of writing?

A strong piece of writing starts with developing the content (outline) for structure, addresses the questions asked, and ends with polishing the spelling, grammar and formatting to perfection

Start early, plan well, and give yourself the luxury of enough time, get help.

When you are writing:

Know your audience.

The reviewers will be typically be faculty and professionals. Although it's likely that you do not need to define basic terminology, be careful not to make assumptions that they'll know what you're talking about when you are describing specific research or work in a specific field. To communicate your work and experiences well, find a balance!

When you are writing

- **Establish your voice.** Your tone in the essay should reflect what is special, unique, distinctive or impressive about you. Find a tone of voice that is confident without sounding arrogant. Usually, a straightforward tone will serve you best.
- **Don't tell them you are hard working, give them specific examples.**

When you are writing

- **Answer the questions.** When you are posed with a specific question or topic, stay on point and answer the question.

Typical prompters to generate relevant content and structure:

1. Why are you interested in the particular opportunity and institution/research group to which you are applying?

You need solid reasons why you are applying! The better you can express the reasons that the program fulfills your interests, or why the strengths you offer matches what they are looking for, the better your chances of putting a spotlight on a good match that catches the attention of the reviewers.

2. What are your academic or research interests?

Demonstrate an interest in addressing one or two general questions or problems in your chosen field – fill a knowledge gap.

Need to demonstrate a match between your interests or field of study and the area of research your advisor is pursuing.

3. How did you become interested in this field or research?

Writing about how you became interested in a field establishes the beginning point of your interest and lets you go on to show how you have taken positive steps in pursuing your interest. You might talk about how a professor, or a life experience, first sparked your interest.

4. What kind of activities or experiences have you had that have contributed toward your interest in, preparation for, or understanding of this field or research area?

You can order your narrative here chronologically, or you could group experiences into categories such as internships, work experience, summer research experiences, community service, or life experiences. Make sure you describe what these experiences taught you either about yourself or about the subject matter that stimulated your interest in pursuing the field or research further.

5. What are your aspirations?

You need to be able to paint the picture of what you are interested in, what is next and where you hope to go. What are your goals? Then, tie those goals and aspirations to what the opportunity you are applying for has to offer.

Make it clear -- how this opportunity is the logical next step in reaching your goals.



Your job

To convince the reviewers that you have the potential to become an expert and leader in your field, and that you will contribute significantly to research, education, and **innovations** in science

Suggestions

Your challenge is to create a great new opening line/paragraph.

Be creative and write something that catches the reviewers attention and makes them want to know more.

Some examples

In 2013, during my sophomore spring at Haverford College, I borrowed a pair of thigh-high waders from my Geology professor, Dr. Don Barber, to help him collect belemnite (extinct marine cephalopod) fossils from Delaware riverbeds. He said I could return them “when I finished my fieldwork” – but once I got started, I never stopped.

<https://drive.google.com/file/d/1dy5ybT6KG0HxUxOn4AyWxx3CWGMS8xnz/view>

Do What Makes You Happy: College students often cite happiness as one of the most important aspects of their lives. As a young, first-generation student, I was never an exception to this statistic. However, while most actively seek to obtain happiness, I instead possess a desire to *understand it*. This drive initially led me to the basement of the University of Central Florida library, where I began to deeply immerse myself in emotion theory and research.

http://www.malloryladd.com/uploads/2/3/6/0/23606636/colles_personal_statement.pdf

“I could not believe my eyes. Before me were fifteen massive jugs of Martinelli’s cider, needing to be consumed by my family of nine in just three days. My mother, the science volunteer for my second grade class, needed the bottles for a science project. As my mother came in biweekly to do hands-on projects with the students, I became immersed in science. My class, and myself, marveled at the sights before us. Our lessons were filled with sucking eggs into bottles, dissecting owls’ poop, and even completing a circuit using wires attached to a student’s capped front teeth. The possibilities for amazement were endless.”

<https://www.goingmerry.com/blog/scholarship-essay-examples/>

Web sites with examples

<https://www.alexhunterlang.com/nsf-fellowship>

<https://grad.illinois.edu/fellowship/external-resources>

Proposed plan of research

- The reviewers want to see that you have the potential to design and conduct original research
- **Do not let your advisor write this for you!**
- Your goal is to capture the reviewers' imagination and make them curious about the outcome of the research—curious enough that they want to give you money to pursue it.

“Research progress is very much like an ongoing story, with plot twists and surprises. A well-written application creates a tale that appeals to the reader. ... Unlike a novel, however, the story is unfinished ... and the questions you propose should reveal how you will unfold the next chapter.”

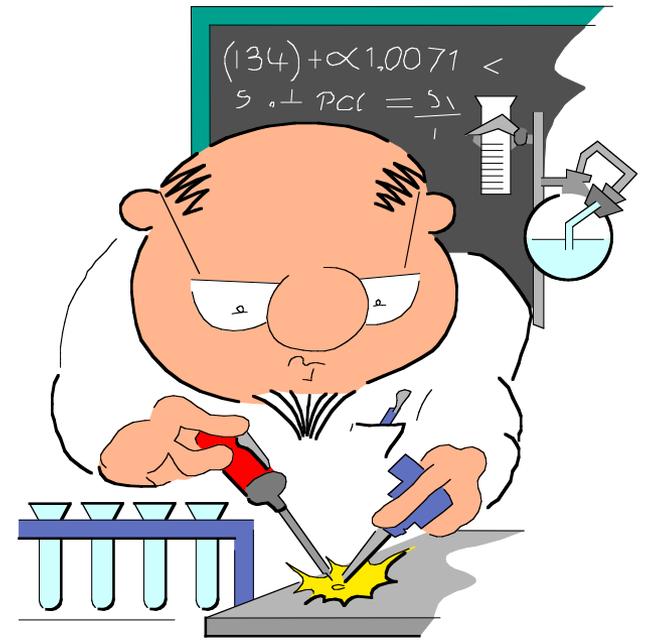
- Otto O. Yang, “Guide to Effective Grant Writing: How to Write a Successful NIH Grant Application”

A Suggested Model for Proposed Plan of Research

1. Introduction:

Give the reviewer a general sense of where your journey is taking you and how you plan to get there. Construct the opening of your proposal narrative as a mini-proposal in which you state the broader issue you are addressing, **introduce your central question and hypothesis, and lay out your overall approach and anticipated outcome.** *Keep in mind that the introduction is not the place to dive down into the details.*

Will it solve a pressing problem? Will it explore an area that has been neglected? The language used to articulate a research question differs from one discipline to another, but the point is the same—the reviewer must be clear on the fundamental question you are addressing.



2. Background

Establish why your question or topic is important. What is the gap in our current understanding, or new interpretation of evidence. To lay this out, give the reader a selective overview of research in your field upon which you intend to build. Highlight recent advances or address any controversies, and discuss preliminary research you have carried out.

By the end of the Background section, your reader should understand why your proposed project is a logical next step in a succession of advances in research. Those advances represent the intellectual road trip you're on with other people in your field.

3. Research Plan

Lay out how you intend to carry out your project, leading the reader from general to specific. Outline the type of data you will collect and the methodology you will use to analyze it. A primary research question might break down into several smaller ones (specific aims), or you might be pursuing multiple independent aims, each with its own plan for data collection and method of analysis.

4. Resources

How can you give the funder confidence in your ability to complete your goals?

Identify the lab where you will carry out the work, and list your advisor, mentors, or hosts. If you'll need special equipment or materials, clearly state that they will be at your disposal. If you'll require access to field sites, subjects, or informants, explain what arrangements you have made. There are many permutations, but they all carry the same message: **you will have resources you need and the guidance to use them effectively.**

5. Pitfalls and Contingency Plans

You don't need to discuss routinely employed methodologies or techniques. However, you do need show that you've had the foresight to anticipate major problems that might derail your project, and that you've given thought to some alternatives.

6. Anticipated Outcomes

- What do you expect to have accomplished? What new knowledge or understanding will you be able to share upon successful completion of your project? In the Background section, you cited other people's work. This section lays out at a high level why other people might cite you on their own intellectual journeys at some other point in time.
- Here is also a great place to return to your vision and to your understanding of the target audience. Funders may have multiple goals in mind ("*support basic science in order to improve cancer treatment*"). Be sure to address each one in your narrative.

6. Dissemination

In order for the work to have an impact, others need to know about it, so tell the reviewer how you intend to share your results. Be specific about the conferences and journals to which you plan to submit. Some funders have additional requirements (e.g., presentation at a Society's annual meeting), so don't forget to mention that you'll fulfill them!

7. Sections Specific to the Funder

In some cases, you may need to add a section tailored to particular guidelines. “Include a timeline” is pretty obvious, but sometimes instructions are quite general. A funder may say that a proposed project must be “original” or “interdisciplinary.” While there may be no requirement to have a section entitled, “Originality” or “Interdisciplinarity,” having one could help the reviewer find this information.

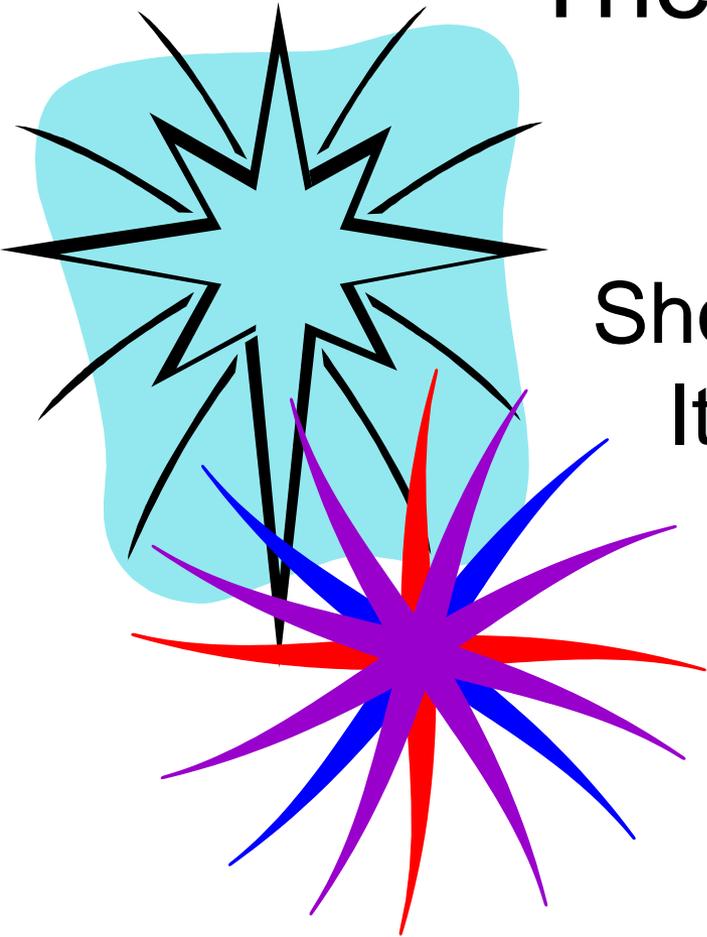
- References cited
- Observe any page limitations
- Have you addressed each requirement in the application instructions?
- Make sure that you have not proposed more than you can do in the time allowed.



The number 1 rule!

Make the job of reading your proposal
as easy and pleasant as possible
for the reviewers.

The number 2 rule:



Show your passion!
It is contagious!



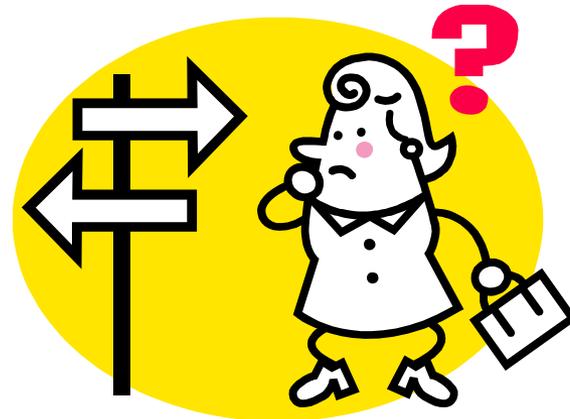


3. Start early

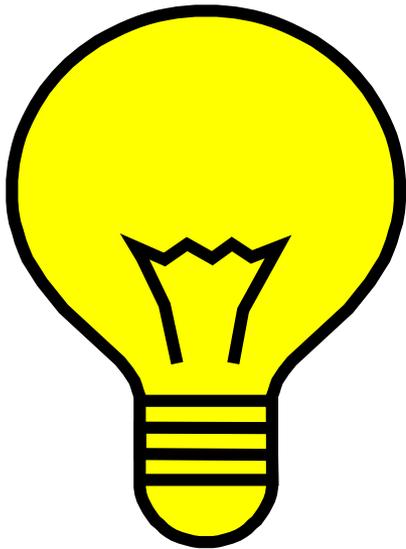
Think, talk, write, reread, rewrite, repeat.

4. Follow all instructions exactly.

If something is ambiguous, ask. There is almost always a contact person named in the announcement, and this is part of that person's job.



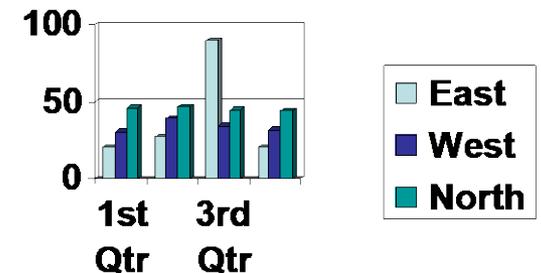
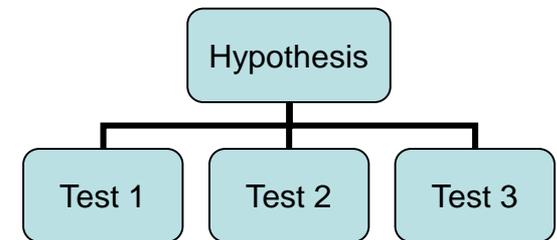
5. Provide all information requested and answer all questions asked.



Create a list of information requested to make certain you cover everything.

6. Organize your narrative:

- Use headings to define major topics and use the topics identified in the announcement.
- Make each page look inviting. Nothing is more daunting than a solid page of text.
- Use white space (even when space is at a premium).
- Use diagrams, tables, pictures, charts. But keep them simple and understandable.
- Use bullets and numbered lists.



7. Grammar counts!

- ✓ No misspellings
- ✓ Proper sentences
- ✓ Proper grammar
- ✓ Correct punctuation

8. Your writing style counts

Direct sentences are best.

Example:

The research to be undertaken will.....

It is proposed to....

Better:

I will conduct research that.....

My research will establish that....



- Write in the first person (I, we) unless you are directed otherwise.
- Avoid technical jargon when possible.
- Avoid phrases like: It is obvious. It is apparent. As previously stated.
- Take out every “very” in your narrative.
- Use short, easy-to-read sentences and paragraphs.



Does what you have written make sense?
Read it aloud. Ask others to read it. Do
they understand it? Do they enjoy reading
it?

- **It is OK to use the same words that are used in the instructions. Reflect back the words the funder uses.**
- Is your proposal internally consistent – no contradictions and no ambiguities.

- Use reviewer' s comments to your benefit (if you submitted before).
- Don' t give up. You will improve your proposal and your skills each time.

NSF reviewers see over 100 applications in 2 days!

- Make your application simple, clear, and easy to read. Show your excitement and potential.
- Remember that the reviewers are not all experts in your particular area. Use language that any scientist can understand and emphasize the significance and innovativeness of your ideas.