

Application and Personal Statement Advice

(A Guide for Michigan State University Students)

- Allow yourself enough time, no matter how short the application seems. Frequently, the shortest applications are the most difficult to write (i.e. Rhodes). It is difficult to express complex ideas or sophisticated plans briefly and you may need to produce several drafts of your application. Show your drafts to other people (friends, family, professors, and mentors) for advice and editing.
- Be clear about why you want the fellowship and make this point in your essay or personal statement.
- Explain why your plan of study is important. Place it within a larger scholarly conversation. How does your work add to or transform what other people in your field already know? What will be the impact of your work in the larger scheme of things?
- Describe your experiential qualifications for the scholarship and for your future goals. For example, if you are seeking to study in a foreign country, do you have relevant language skills? Or, if you are undertaking a research project, have you participated in a related activity?
- What are your personal qualifications for the fellowship? How does the fellowship reflect your values and beliefs? Give a full picture of yourself.

Personal Statements/Winning Fellowship Essays

When reading a personal statement written by another student or writing your own, it is helpful to consider the following questions:

- Would I like the person who wrote this essay? (This is usually the goal -- an interview!)
- Does the applicant offer a clear, detailed, and engaging narrative of his or her past experiences?
- Do these experiences relate to the applicant's goals and the interests of the fellowship?

A strong personal statement will elicit a "yes" to each of these questions.

Plan of Study - Research Proposal

Some fellowships require you to submit an academic proposal describing how you will use the award.

The following questions will assist you with this part of your application:

- Does the proposal present a clear plan of study or research?
- Does the proposal demonstrate a command of resources and facilities needed to accomplish the plan?
- Does the proposal demonstrate possession of the skill/ knowledge necessary to undertake the plan?
- Does the plan, study, or research build upon past experiences or future goals in a clear and convincing manner?

A strong plan of study or research will elicit a "yes" to each of these questions.

Mistakes to Avoid

- Melodramatic or boastful statements
- Overly abstract, vague statements
- Long lists of irrelevant or unexamined accomplishments
- Spelling and grammar errors
- Confusing syntax and jargon

Revising Your Personal Statement: Audience, Voice, and Tone

Reader's Report:

1. What about this opening is compelling?
2. Is a specific word, sentence, or paragraph off-putting? Why?
3. Can you find specific “natural-sounding” passages, passages that reproduce a (likable, intelligent) voice speaking?
4. Where has the writer concentrated on how an experience felt or on what it taught him or her? Is the passage effective? Why?
5. Three ways in which the essay works well.
6. Three ways in which the essay could be improved.

As you revise keep in mind:

Writing is discovery. Until you draft and revise your essay, you will not know fully what it is you want to say. Begin to write with the assumption that you will revise and develop a strategy for systematic revision so that you evaluate specific aspects of the essay before you begin the next draft.

Leave room for serendipity, distance, feedback from trusted readers.

And remember:

- Showing vs. Telling -- Don't tell readers what to think or feel about you; show them concretely an imaginative facsimile of the situation you wish to convey. Use an image, an action, even a gesture, as precisely as you see it, and trust that they will be led to draw the conclusions you wish them to.
- Every piece of writing is a dramatic monologue whose distinctive, dynamic voice can exert a powerful hold on the reader. Strong writing reproduces a voice speaking intensely on its subject, energized by a problematic occasion, a specific audience, and/or purpose. In writing where voice is at work it is the complicated occasion that seems to dictate what gets said and what makes the words resound audibly for the reader. Voice is an elusive quality to define in writing, and yet it may be the very source of coherence in a finished work.

Please provide a copy of the following “*GUIDELINES*” to all those who will be writing letters of recommendation for you.

GUIDELINES FOR FACULTY MEMBERS WRITING LETTERS OF RECOMMENDATION FOR FELLOWSHIP APPLICANTS

Please check with your student(s) for the deadline for receipt of letters for particular fellowships. Remember that some fellowships require an original PLUS several copies.

NOTE: Letters should be addressed to the particular fellowship
– **NOT** to MSU's internal committee.

The selection of fellowship winners is an extremely competitive process, and your letter is critical to the candidate's success. Your letter should address the personal and academic strengths of the candidate and help to make the case that studying at a particular institution is especially advantageous to the candidate in fulfilling his or her long-range goals. We have urged applicants to provide their recommenders with all the information needed to write such a letter. If you feel that you don't have enough information to write as informative a letter as you might wish, please be sure to ask the candidate to come in to talk to you further. Letters that provide specific details concerning the candidate's intelligence, diligence, curiosity, wisdom, independence, and other virtues are more convincing than those that make general claims.

We have been told that letters that are rich in detail are the most credible. It is best if you can speak of varied experiences and encounters with the candidate which have revealed or substantiated his or her many fine qualities. Think of the best letters you have read of this nature over your career.

Think, too, of those that were ever written for you. These letters may launch noteworthy careers. They invariably generate profound gratitude from the students. Remember that students, when approaching you for these letters, often hold you in awe and are hesitant to "trouble" you. However, writing wonderful, compelling letters of this nature can be one of the most gratifying aspects of our work.

If you find that, for any reason, you cannot produce a credible letter, please contact the National/International Fellowships and Scholarships (NIFS) Office (nifs@msu.edu).

NOTE: Letters received after the deadline cannot be considered in the internal review process at MSU.