

Miscellaneous Fellowship Information

Writing A Strong Application

A Guide for Princeton University Students

- Allow yourself enough time, no matter how short the application seems. Frequently, the shortest applications are the most difficult to write. It is difficult to express complex ideas or sophisticated plans briefly. Also, 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 the opening of your essay or personal statement. Don't fear straightforward declarative statements: "I am applying for [fellowship] so that I may pursue [graduate study, independent research, etc.]"
- 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.

(This handout is derived from a document written by Professor Robin Nagle, New York University, March 1999)

Personal Statements/Winning Fellowship Essays

You can find examples of these in 406 West College.

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, 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.

Triple space or otherwise interfere with the beautiful, polished look of the laser printer.

And remember:

1. 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.
2. 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.

HOW TO COMPOSE A CURRICULUM VITAE (CV) (some guidelines)

Along with your personal statement, all applications require a document commonly called a CV (for *curriculum vitae* = Latin: “the course of one’s life”). The document is not called (and not to be called) “Selected activities record” or “List of principal activities and honors” or “My life according to me”.

The purpose of a CV is to give the reader a quick and favorable impression of your life. You need to detail your activities relevant to the application and to list those achievements that might distinguish you from other applicants. Imagine that a member of a scholarship committee or the personnel officer of a company may have to read hundreds of applications in a short time; it is paramount that your CV, as it appears on the page, has a clear and pleasing appearance – nobody wants to have to figure out a disorganized eyesore of a document.

For both your CV and your personal statement, choose a trusted font (like Times, Palatino, Bodoni) either 10 or 12 point, not bigger, not smaller. Make sparing use of underlines, **bold type** and *italics*, and never combine them. Try using just one of them for the purpose of highlighting headers. Avoid fancy bullets and other ornaments and keep left indents to a minimum. Try to fit everything on no more than two pages with the following margins: left, right and top: 1 inch; bottom: 1.5 inches.

The first items you enter are your contact addresses, i.e. both your university address (on the left) and your home address (on the right). A *curriculum vitae* is not a continuous narrative, but subdivides your life into various categories; these categories and the order in which you list them may change depending on whether you apply for an academic scholarship or a position as a high school baseball coach. Rank the categories so that the most pertinent aspects of your life come first. Categories for an application might look as follows (and in this order):

- Education (and Research, if applicable);
- Academic Activities;
- Professional Experience (e.g. significant employment, self-employment, internships);
- Scholarships and Awards (you may list honors here or under ‘Education’);
- Publications (if any);
- Volunteer Service; (for both of these note any leadership roles and/or
- Athletic Activities; special accomplishments)
- Extra-curricular Activities and Personal Interests (e.g. music, theater);
- Language Proficiency and/or unique Technical Abilities.

In a CV, you have to strike the proper balance between modesty and self-promotion. Don’t make the entries too long; don’t shorten them to the point of being cryptic or incomprehensible. They should reflect your accomplishments. Moreover, entries in a CV are very often starting-points for questions during an interview; so be prepared—think in advance about how you might respond eloquently when asked about this or that aspect of your life. The thing you may find least relevant—say, your love of snowboarding—might be the item that breaks the conversational ice.

SEE REVERSE SIDE OF THIS SHEET

*“GUIDELINES FOR FACULTY MEMBERS
WRITING LETTERS OF RECOMMENDATION
FOR FELLOWSHIP APPLICANTS”*

**Please provide a copy of the *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 Princeton'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 Dean Frank Ordiway's office immediately (8-1998).

Letters received after the deadline cannot be considered
in the internal review process at Princeton.

WHAT TO EXPECT IN THE INTERVIEW

Every committee is different. This is a summary of various students' experiences in applying for different fellowships.

The interviews last between 20 and 30 minutes. There are usually between five and seven interviewers on each committee. The committee members are often lawyers or businessmen, but may be filmmakers, noted writers or politicians. The order in which you are interviewed doesn't affect the outcome.

ADVICE

- Be yourself. If you are not, it is likely you will not have a great interview. Do not forget, however, that you are being interviewed in a formal situation. It is important to be your self, but if you are the type who feels comfortable with your feet propped up on the table, chair leaning back, suppress the urge. To quote one scholarship winner, "My feeling on interviews is that attitude is everything. It is important to project your vitality and energy—the committee does not want to give its money to some blah who's going to mope around all day."
- Channel your nervous energy into enthusiasm. Be genuinely enthusiastic about the scholarships and the opportunities they can afford you. Be positive and don't hesitate to let them know you really want the scholarship. You do, so show it!
- Do not dress in a manner which will make you feel uncomfortable, but do not dress too informally. For men, it is standard to wear a suit and tie, though they need not be too formal. For women, a dress, suit, or nice skirt and blouse is best.
- In the interview, body language is important. Maintain a firm posture. Don't slouch. Eye contact is important; look your interviewers in the eye. It is good to firmly clasp your hands in your lap, especially if they are shaking. Don't be too stiff, however.
- Preparation is absolutely essential. Ponder what you want to say in advance to the standard, open-ended questions that everyone is usually asked, like "What is your most significant achievement?" "What has shaped you?" "What is the most controversial thing that you have ever done?" "What was your biggest moral dilemma and how did you resolve it?" "What was your worst failure and what did you learn from it?" "What will you do next year if you don't get a scholarship?" "What do you like about Princeton?" "What do you like about your major?" Some students have found that they need to overcome a negative perception of Princeton elitism.
- Before you go into the interview, re-read your application. Interviewers will want to ask you about any and all parts of your application, and you need to be prepared to talk about any statement you have made. It is so easy to forget a seemingly insignificant point you may have made, and it is quite embarrassing to draw a blank on your own writing. When you re-read the application, try to examine what some of the ramifications of each sentence (or paragraph) might be and think of at least one possible question the interviewers might ask. Be sure you can completely and concisely answer all of your own questions. This may be difficult, so consider having a friend read your essay with new eyes and comment or question you on points he or she finds particularly interesting or unusual. Know what it is you wish to study and be prepared to discuss it. If you have written your essay well, you will be able to guide the interviewers to the questions you want to answer!

- Anything you say in the interview or in your essay is fair game. If you mention that you enjoy reading Hemingway, Dickens and Faulkner, be prepared to analyze Faulkner's style in The Sound and the Fury. If you say that on your trip to Greece, you ran an Olympic race at Olympia, sang Byzantine plainchant in a Greek Orthodox Monastery and read St. Paul in Corinth, expect to have to explain what St. Paul told the Corinthians.
- Be aware that committee members, like all human beings, have political and social biases. Sometimes, students may assume that a question is intended to be hostile when it may or may not have been so intended. One student was asked, "How can you justify being Republican?" A number of candidates have said that their interview went really well until the committee discovered that they were "pro-life," "conservative," "feminist," or "radical." One candidate felt as though she had been attacked for her strong feminist views. However, try not to worry about your interviewer's beliefs, biases, and prejudices and, above all, don't try to pitch your response to what you think they might be. Listen carefully to questions and answer them forthrightly. Be prepared to present your own views rationally and to defend them calmly. As long as you are able to support your opinions and do so without becoming angry or defensive, you will do fine. Also, try not to second guess the intentions of your interviewers. Some interviewers are curious to know how you will react in a situation where your beliefs are being questioned. The same interviewer who presses you to the wall about your thoughts on a particular matter may agree with you completely, so don't waffle for the sake of agreement. Just be straightforward and honestly stand by your convictions. You will not be able to snow the committee. You may not get the scholarship because the committee disagrees with your convictions, but you will assuredly not get the scholarship if you have no convictions, or are seen by the committee as having none. Said one successful applicant, "It is important not to let the committee intimidate you; if you believe in something, you should stand up for it. On the other hand, you don't want to pick a fight over petty issues. Exercise good judgment!"
- Know something about what is going on in the U.S. and in Britain (and in the rest of the world!). Read a newspaper that reports on international news as well as national news. Find out what is going on in your home state, whether it be about who is making a ruckus in a local political battle or why a demonstration is taking place near your hometown. If a panel does ask you about some prominent national or international issue, it is almost certainly disastrous to tell them that you simply haven't had time to read a newspaper lately. They are very busy people who do read newspapers, and this excuse has no chance of sitting well with them. Be informed. Have an opinion. You should be prepared to answer questions dealing with what you feel is the biggest problem in the U.S. (or world) today and how you would overcome that problem.
- Part of the interview can deal with current events. You could be asked to give an opinion on the trends in the Middle East, campaign finance reform, school vouchers, global warming, or bioengineering, for example, so read up on current events. The Economist or The New York Times are good sources. The interviewers will often ask you to make a case for something (like the U.S. intervention in Iraq) and then ask you to make a case against that action, so be forewarned and be prepared. Remember that they are seeking future leaders and those with a wide view who will impact others later in life.
- Have in mind a book that is important to you and someone who has influenced you a lot. Be prepared to give short, specific, and vivid descriptions and explanations of these things. You should be prepared to comment on your strengths, weaknesses and turning points in your life and how you have dealt with these. A common question committees pose is "how will you fight the world's fight?"

- Make sure you are registered to vote, or have a good reason for not being registered (be aware, however, that most interviewers will probably think there is no good reason for this). Applicants are often asked if they are registered to vote. Male applicants may also want to give some thought to reasons why they are registered or not registered with the Selective Service.
- Give short answers to the questions. One of the candidates spent five minutes trying to answer the first question. All of the questions that the committee then asked him began with “Briefly, tell us about...” You only have about 20 minutes in total. If you expand a point, or an observation, know the limits of expansion, and stop at them.
- If you are unsure of what a question is getting at, you can do one of two things: take a definite line on what you thought the question was, or ask politely and briefly for clarification. Some applicants, when asked an especially tough question, request clarification in order to gain a little time to think. It’s not a good idea to risk this tactic more than once in an interview because you may wind up looking like you don’t understand anything.
- Be prepared for some really strange questions that may come out of an individual interviewer’s experience. Don’t worry about saying, “I don’t know.” Don’t get ruffled. Many of the impossible questions they ask you, like “How do you reduce unemployment and inflation at the same time?” are simply asked to see how you respond to pressure. Don’t be fazed if the interviewers look as though they completely disagree with everything you say, they’re just testing you. However, do not let that lead you to a defensive position.
- Try to throw in a tasteful joke or two. Humor is always appreciated. Don’t take it all too seriously. Your interviewers will enjoy an amusing comment, and it makes the interview situation much more human. If there is one thing every previous applicant advises, it is to keep a sense of humor.
- Remember that the interviewing panels will be interviewing a number of candidates. Make allowances for the possibility that the panel may be tired. Let the interviewers determine the interview’s pace. Treat all of the panelists’ questions with respect.
- How you enter and exit is important. Smile at everyone when you come in and leave time for a casual or humorous comment or two at the beginning. Let them set the pace. Make a polite exit when they indicate that the interview is over, but don’t rush out the door. Thank them.