

## Writing Personal Statements for Fellowships

Writing personal statements for fellowships can seem like a daunting task—how do we write effectively and truthfully about ourselves? As scientists, we often feel more comfortable writing about our research; research results are believed because of evidence and data. In actuality, writing personal statements is very similar. We can treat the experiences we have in and outside of lab as evidence to our qualifications, so we can promote ourselves based on facts rather than feelings. In a research article, we may say “We believe that the correlation holds because of x, y, z evidence;” in a personal statement, we would frame it as “I believe I am the best candidate because of h, k, l experiences.” We just have to make sure that the way we present the experiences is clear and effective.

Personal statements are usually comprised of two parts: previous research and community outreach. These may be separate formal essays, or two aspects of a general personal statement. We will discuss both aspects in this tutorial, as well as how to craft your overall story.

### Getting started

One applicant concern is that the personal statement comes off like an expanded CV/resume. However, it may help to start your initial outline like this to keep your story focused and concise.

1. Look at the resume/CV you are submitting to the fellowship and choose the most important experiences for your personal statement.
2. What was the one (or two) important skill or lesson you learned from this experience?
3. Why are these skills relevant to your current proposal or helpful for the institute you are applying to?

Keep steps 2 and especially 3 in mind throughout the writing process. You have limited space to express why you deserve funding; use your real estate wisely! Think about an ideal form of you, a **character**, that would fit the mission statement of the fellowship. We will discuss **characters** later in this tutorial; if you keep steps 2 and 3 in mind, character development will be a natural process. Once you have your relevant experiences, it is then time to expand and personalize the story beyond what a CV conveys.

### Previous research

Writing about previous research experiences tends to be the easier of the two parts. You should include all relevant lab experiences. If you are applying for an earlier year fellowship (NSF, HHMI, etc.), you can include rotations and lab time in fields which do not directly relate to your current research. This is especially true if you learned a technique which is going to be used for your current proposal or established collaboration with your current lab.

**The essentials:** All lab experiences mentioned should include:

- Who, what, where
  - Lab group and institution, their overall interests, and what your project was
- Skills you learned
  - Practical lab skill like biochemical assays, mass spectroscopy training, etc.
  - A lesson in research practice like mentorship of younger members, working in a collaboration, educating the public, etc.
- How these skills/experiences are relevant to your proposal

**Personalize your story:** The points above are the essentials which must be included in your statement, but to help personalize the story and add a layer of depth beyond a CV, think about adding:

- How you became interested in the research group
- Struggles you encountered and how you overcame them
- Connections you made between your research and other labs
  - Why you chose to switch fields (outsides talks, classes, collaborations, etc.)
  - Collaborations you made with your research and help from another lab
- Connections you made between your research and community outreach opportunities

Oftentimes, these points can help connect your lab experiences together and even explain jumps to different fields (turn it into a positive! See below). Most importantly, these points show not just what you did, but *your trajectory as a mature scientist*: one who knows how to problem solve, collaborate, and educate students and the public alike.

## Community outreach

For an early year fellowship like the NSF GFRP or an award based on personal stories like the Paul and Daisy Soros Fellowship, the way you present your experiences outside of lab can either make or break your application. Memorable applications are those which have a consistent theme; essentially, you need to create a character and then align your outreach activities to support this character. Just like we remember strong characters from the novels we read, reviewers will remember a strong character in the applications they read (rather than a list of credentials and activities).

**Create a character:** So what is a character exactly? Here's how to think about it:

1. Think of a character as your potential career: a professor at a small liberal arts college, an industry researcher, a scientist with his/her own startup company, etc.
2. Choose a character which aligns with your own goals.
3. Then think of the fellowship you are applying to and their mission statement. The NSF supports basic science research, the NRSA supports health and human science based initiatives, etc.
  - a. You must make sure that your character aligns with the goals of the fellowship. For example, don't say you want to be a research physician if you are applying to the NSF, or a management consultant if you are applying to the NRSA, etc.

**Support your character:** The character/potential career you choose is mostly likely based on your experience with your community outreach efforts. Perhaps you realized that you have a passion for teaching after being a TA for a semester. Or you found that you are skilled at engaging with the public about advanced research topics after joining a science outreach group. Use these experiences as evidence that you will be prepared for your potential career and support your character.

1. Think about your potential career's necessary skills. What will you need to do on a regular basis?
  - a. Professor: teach, write for grants, engage with other scientists and the public, mentor graduate students, etc.
  - b. Industry leader: work on a team, mentor other scientists, present to non-scientists, think of science as part of a bottom line in a company, etc.
  - c. Policymaker: strong writing and speaking skills, ability to distill advanced knowledge into digestible portions, interest in a wide variety of fields, etc.
2. What in your community outreach activities supports that you are ready and capable of taking on those duties?
  - a. Pick and choose your best/relevant experiences (don't list all of them).

- b. Choose one or two specific skills that you learned/practice from each experience (i.e. teaching, speaking to the public, leading a team) that will help your career.
  - i. Give specifics when applicable: leadership roles, numbers (crowds you have spoken to, improvement in attendance numbers, etc.), etc.
  - ii. Note that your activities do not need to be all science related. If you have strong speaking skills through debate team, it's worth mentioning and relating that you will apply them to your scientific endeavors.
3. What will you continue to do to further your training to be ready for your chosen career? What other groups at your institution will help strengthen your character?

Your character will most likely have a lot of overlap with your previous research experience. When thinking of future groups you could do to improve your training, also think how you may incorporate your own research in these activities (e.g. public engagement, teaching younger students, etc.). Creating a cohesive story that joins the two parts will make a stronger application, and show that you have long-term goals beyond just doing your research proposal.

***An aside on previous research-heavy personal statements:*** You can still create characters even if your personal statement mostly focuses on research! Use the same elements as what was discussed above, but tailor your characters to your ultimate research goals. For instance, propose a research topic you would like to study as a postdoc or professor based on your experiences: if you have a background in a biology lab and an engineering internship, you could poise yourself well as a multi-faceted professor. Again, every statement you propose should have strong evidence that you are qualified to do this future work.

***Some final questions to think about:*** How do you fit in with other people who have received the fellowship? How will you promote the fellowship mission statement? How will you represent their institution? Fellowships are like job applications. You should seem like an asset to the program, much like you would a company. Every experience and skill you list needs to be relevant and impactful.

## Writing the story

This tutorial discussed many elements about writing a fellowship which taken as a whole, may seem intimidating. In reality, once you start writing, it is a fairly intuitive process. Take a few points each time you write; then once you edit, go back and see if you address the others as well.

Content is king, but delivery can determine what the reviewer retains. Reviewers often have to read several applications like yours in very little time. Make it easy on them. In terms of writing, here's what to keep in mind:

- Don't feel obligated to write your story chronologically. Write your story based on a consistent theme, with as few breaks as possible.
- Use active wording, rather than passive voice. It will make your sentences more concise, make you seem more proactive, and strengthen your overall message.
- Use paragraphs as mini-stories:
  - Topic sentence and wrap-up sentence should be representative of the entire paragraph. If a reviewer only reads/remembers those two sentences, it should convey the entire paragraph's point
  - One idea per paragraph! For previous research, one lab experience per paragraph. For community outreach, one skill per paragraph (e.g. all the activities which showcase teaching OR one teaching experience which truly showcases a wide range of skills)
  - Keep paragraphs 3-6 sentences long. No one likes a one-page paragraph

- Graphics can improve your application, but they should a) use less space than if you tried to explain the same concept in words and/or b) improve readability considerably. Create your graphic like a textbook's: well-formatted and easy to understand with minimal captions.
- Edit, edit, edit. Have many people help you with your application, both in your field and outside of it. Your fellowship will go through many iterations. But remember: you are the one submitting this document, so you are the final editor and you tell the story you want to tell.