

Personal Statement Advice

NSF-GRFP Summer Application Prep Series

Guiding questions to consider:

- What's unique, distinctive, or impressive about your story?
- Which details about you would help set you apart from others?
- How did you become interested in science? How did you go about learning about this field? Did you learn anything about yourself in the process?
- What have you learned about your discipline through formal education and professional development (classes, readings, seminars), as well as any relevant work experiences.
- Have you capitalized upon opportunities available to you? What were those opportunities? If you didn't readily have opportunities readily available, how did you seek or create them?
- Why should the reviewers be interested in you?

Your personal timeline: past, present, and future. Be sure to address these questions:

- Why are you pursuing a grad degree, studying science and this particular discipline?
- What are you most passionate about with science? What's the impact you're driven to achieve?
- What are the outstanding research experiences you've had, their impact on you?
- What are some challenges you've had, how have you overcome them?
- What sort of leadership experience have you had (in or out of science)?
- How have you participated in outreach – STEM or otherwise?

Write about your research experience:

- Who is your research advisor/faculty mentor? Did this impact your choice of grad program?
- How did you get involved with research?
- What was your role in the research lab? Were you independent or part of a team? What was your contribution to the larger goals? Use "I" statements to describe your own work.
- What sort of skills and knowledge was gained from your research experiences?
- What were the outcomes of your research experiences? Publications, presentations, recognition, etc.

When writing your personal statement narrative:

- Use a hook to draw the reviewer in and make them excited to read your application.
- Be pithy and succinct – include what is important and necessary, don't be overly verbose.
- Omit unnecessary language, especially technical jargon; use shorter words over longer, more complicated vocabulary.
- Make sure each sentence is purposeful – you only have three pages!
- Keep in mind who your reviewers will be, know their perspective and objective.
- Write in a way that makes it easy for the reader to get the info they need to make decisions.
- Be confident in your writing – your confidence will show.
- Use "I" statements rather than "we," take ownership of research experience, scholarly activity.
- Highlight your role in projects, research, and leadership roles.

Formatting/restrictions/requirements

- 3 pages maximum (includes any images used in the statement).
- Standard 8.5" X 11" page size.
- 11 point or higher font, except text that is part of an image.
- Times New Roman font for text, Cambria Math font for equations, and Symbol font for non-alphabetic characters (it is recommended that equations and symbols be inserted as an image).
- 1" margins on all sides of the page, no text inside the margins (no header, footer, page number).
- No less than single-spacing (approximately 6 lines per inch).

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- Do not use line spacing options (example: “exactly 11 point”) that are less than single spaced.
- PDF file format only.
- Intellectual merit and broader impact narrative must be included under a unique header of the same name.

Intellectual merit & broader impact:

- You must address these under a specific header or your application won't be reviewed.
- See the below matrix, differentiating intellectual merit and broader impacts in your personal statement.

You (Personal Statement)	
Intellectual Merit	<p>This is where you'll discuss the intellectual merit that is associated with your background, not that of your research.</p> <p>Ask yourself:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none">• When/how did I become interested in science? In my particular field?• How have I prepared to conduct research?• What sort of experience do I have in a lab?• How have I exhibited myself as a leader?• What sort of challenges have I had, and how did I overcome them? <p>This is where you'll describe your motivation to be a scientist and leader, your research skills/abilities and experience, and detail your preparation, achievements, and perseverance.</p> <p>This is a space to discuss your future goals – as a scholar, a professional and scientist, and as a leader.</p>
Broader Impacts	<p>This is your opportunity to illustrate how you've stepped outside of your studies/research and impacted a larger community.</p> <p>'Community' can be however you define it, such as a student organization, high school or college campus, volunteer experience, professional organization, etc. Do you identify with these communities?</p> <p>Describe your experiences from your background and personal narrative where you have left a positive impression on a community or an organization. What was that impression? What was your positive impact?</p> <p>Discuss how you've been involved with (or led) outreach efforts, including building a broadening participation in your communities.</p> <p>Take the opportunity to talk about your leadership experience. Be sure to mention any experience you have in communicating science.</p>

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Caution for when writing about personal experience and background:

- Your story is yours – it can be vulnerable and very personal.
- Only share elements of your story that are relevant to your application.
- Fellowship application reviews in most cases are anonymous where reviewers do not see personal, identifiable information; in instances where reviewers do see personal, identifiable details, there are generally confidentiality agreements in place that keep what you share in your application private.
- Remember that your story is yours – only share what you feel comfortable sharing under the circumstances; fellowship applications won't be published or shared broadly and widely, but reviewers will be strangers you've not met.

Proofreading & seeking feedback:

- Identify multiple proofreading partners – faculty mentor, lab colleagues, classmates and fellow students in and out of your discipline, Writing Center consultant, fellowship advisor, etc.
- Your proofreaders may provide spelling and grammar corrections and advice, this is valuable feedback, but you will want their feedback to focus mostly on how your narrative is framed, ideas are conveyed, and the flow of your story.
- When reviewing spelling and grammar, don't rely on word processing software checks; especially with grammar, take time to review each sentence line-by-line to ensure grammatical and spelling accuracy.
- Your proofreading partners who provide feedback might not be scholars in your discipline; however, don't write off their concerns over how your discussion of science is framed; a well-written fellowship application will frame technical projects and experience in a way where a non-STEM individual will understand – they might not understand the methods or the finite details of your experiments and research question, but they should walk away with a basic understanding of what you're trying to accomplish.