

**COMPETITIVE
PERSONAL
STATEMENTS**

**EMILY DAINA SARAS, MS
ESARAS@FSU.EDU**

ABOUT ME



Emily Daina Saras, MS
PhD Candidate in Sociology
esaras@fsu.edu

RELEVANT JOB EXPERIENCE

- Ascending CEO (Q1 2022), Current Chief Strategy Officer at Knowli Data Science, a women-owned analytics and research firm in Tallahassee
- Former: Assistant Director of The Office of National Fellowships at FSU

AWARDS AND FELLOWSHIPS

- P.E.O. Scholar Award
- Phi Kappa Phi Love of Learning Award
- Segal Education Award (AmeriCorps)
- Massachusetts Promise Fellowship (AmeriCorps)
- Central European University Masters Fellowship
- Smith-Mundt and Fulbright-Hays Grants from US Embassy, Lithuania
- Fulbright Fellow
- Goldman Undergraduate Research Grantee



ABOUT THE PERSONAL STATEMENT

WHAT IS A PERSONAL STATEMENT?

- A tailored snapshot of you
- A writing sample
- A critical thinking exercise
- Your first personal impression to a committee
- Helps breathe life into your application package
- Offers evidence of how you, your mindset, your projects, and your goals fit with the mission of the fellowship

WHAT *ISN'T* A PERSONAL STATEMENT?

- Your resume in narrative form
- A regurgitation of your project plan
- A stream-of-consciousness response
- Something “unique and creative” (like a series of haikus or a piece of original sheet music)... it won't answer the question, and committees have seen all the “gimmicks” before!
- A complete representation of you as a person

WHAT'S THE GOAL OF A PERSONAL STATEMENT? HOW DO I ACHIEVE IT?

An opportunity to **show with examples and detail**, not just tell the summary and facts

How do you achieve this?

- Do NOT use *explicit language*: “You should award me this fellowship because I am XYZ.”

WHAT'S THE GOAL OF A PERSONAL STATEMENT? HOW DO I ACHIEVE IT?

How do I achieve this?

- Do use *authentic and implicit language*: use the narrative form to *demonstrate your fitness* for the fellowship by revealing:
 - How and what you think,
 - Who you are – such as interest, personal qualities, skills, abilities, and attributes,
 - What experiences have shaped you, and helped you develop,
 - What has contributed to and helped you discover who you are now, and
 - How you fit within the program's mission, bridging your narrative to the opportunity.

GETTING STARTED: BEFORE DRAFTING!

ABOUT THEM!

Research and Brainstorm before beginning to draft:

- **What is the program looking for in ideal candidates?**
 - Carefully read the program's promotional materials for mission, vision, values, current research, etc.
 - Talk to current fellows/awardees who succeeded in acquiring the award
 - Speak with organization representatives about what they are seeking
- **What is the award committee specifically asking for?**
 - Read the question prompts carefully and annotate them!
 - Make note of every point needing an answer... you will need to address answer EVERY aspect of the prompt
 - Speak to how you meet the specified qualifications
 - Speak to how your values/goals/aspirations match those of the organization


GETTING STARTED: BEFORE DRAFTING!

ABOUT YOU!

Reflect and Brainstorm before beginning to draft:

- What are 3-5 personal characteristics or qualities that you need to demonstrate to the committee or reviewers to ensure fit?
- What are 2-3 personal experiences, challenges, or impactful moments you **need** to highlight for the committee, that may not be clear elsewhere in your application or help “tie together your full story” with commonalities and connections?

...More prompts at the end of the slide deck! 😊



SAMPLE STATEMENT PROMPTS

WHAT IS THE GENERAL SHAPE OF A PERSONAL STATEMENT?

- Before thinking about content, think about FORM.
 - What is the **task** at hand?
 - What does the prompt **specifically ask for**?
 - What elements should be contained in a personal statement?
 - How should it be structured?

NSF GRFP

Personal Statement

Please outline your educational and professional development plans and career goals. How do you envision graduate school preparing you for a career that allows you to contribute to expanding scientific understanding as well as broadly benefit society? Page limit - 3 pages

Describe your personal, educational and/or professional experiences that motivate your decision to pursue advanced study in science, technology, engineering or mathematics (STEM). Include specific examples of any research and/or professional activities in which you have participated. Present a concise description of the activities, highlight the results and discuss how these activities have prepared you to seek a graduate degree. Specify your role in the activity including the extent to which you worked independently and/or as part of a team. Describe the contributions of your activity to advancing knowledge in STEM fields as well as the potential for broader societal impacts (See Solicitation, Section VI, for more information about Broader Impacts).

NSF Fellows are expected to become globally engaged knowledge experts and leaders who can contribute significantly to research, education, and innovations in science and engineering. The purpose of this statement is to demonstrate your potential to satisfy this requirement. Your ideas and examples do not have to be confined necessarily to the discipline that you have chosen to pursue.

FULBRIGHT FELLOWSHIP

✓ Personal Statement

The statement should be a 1 page narrative that provides a picture of yourself as an individual. It should deal with your personal history, family background, influences on your intellectual development, the educational, professional, and cultural opportunities (or lack of them) to which you have been exposed, and the ways in which these experiences have affected you and your personal growth. Include your special interests and abilities, career plans, and life goals, etc. It should not be a recording of facts already listed on the application or an elaboration of your Statement of Grant Purpose. It is more of a biography, but specifically related to you and your aspirations relative to the specific Fulbright Program to which you have applied.

Do not repeat information from other parts of the application.

Adhere to the proper format:

- Length is limited to a maximum of one single-spaced pages. The application system will not allow statements longer than one page to be uploaded.
- Use 1-inch margins and Times New Roman 12-point font.
- At the top of each page include:
 - On line 1: Personal Statement
 - On line 2: Your Name, Host Country, and Field of Study
 - Do not include information in headers, footers or margins

BOREN SCHOLARSHIP / FELLOWSHIP

Essay 2- Motivation & Public Service Careers

The second essay has a maximum length of 800 words for the **Boren Scholarships** application, and 1000 words for **Boren Fellowships** application. The essay should be single-spaced, except where spaces are used to separate paragraphs (recommended). The prompt for the second essay is:

Please discuss the following points in one integrated essay, giving equal attention to each point. You can discuss the points in any order.

- *Think about a previous experience that has led to growth or a personal quality. Reflect upon it and describe how it will assist you in preparing to spend significant time overseas studying a critical foreign language and culture [**+ for Fellows:** and, if applicable, conducting your proposed research].*
- *Explain how the country and language you selected will help you achieve your career goals, including your plans to fulfill the federal service requirement. Be specific. If appropriate, you may also include relevant past academic, extracurricular, volunteer, internship, and professional experiences.*
- *As you will be committing to working for the federal government for at least one year, describe what makes you interested in federal service and what you will bring as a leader in the federal workforce.*

The purpose of the second essay is twofold: it is an opportunity for applicants to describe their preparation for long-term, immersive overseas study, and to convince selection panelists of their motivation for and commitment to careers in public service.

Applicants will be familiar with essays reflecting on how a previous experience has led to personal growth from applications for degree programs and other scholarships/fellowships. When selecting an experience to highlight in the second essay of the Boren Awards application, applicants should seek to demonstrate their adaptability, resilience, and/or maturity. Although no prior international experience is required for the Boren Awards, the essay should assure selection panelists that the applicant is prepared for the challenges inherent to long-term study and life in a foreign context.



STATEMENT STRUCTURE

WHAT IS THE SHAPE OF A PERSONAL STATEMENT?

- Every application might have different length or content requirements.
- Here is a general structure that works well for MOST personal statement prompts.

ANECDOTE

THESIS

ADDRESSING PROMPT DIRECTLY

CONNECTING TO THE FUTURE

THE FIRST PARAGRAPH: THE ANECDOTE

Relevant Anecdote: show us who you are and your perspective.

What is the “friction” or **transformational moment** of this anecdote?

End with your **THESIS STATEMENT**: the one sentence summary.

Try this formula, then personalize:

“As a _____ recipient, I aim to ___(connect to anecdote’s purpose)___ by ___(action you will take, purpose of award)___.”

ANECDOTE

THESIS

ADDRESSING PROMPT DIRECTLY

CONNECTING TO THE FUTURE

THE SECOND PARAGRAPH(S): THE DETAILS

- Address the point(s) of the prompt directly in one or two paragraphs.
- Does the prompt ask you to describe your qualifications? Do so – but consider covering some in depth, rather than all in depth.
- Does the prompt ask you to describe your project? Do so with detail, but avoiding jargon – many reviewers are very educated, but may not specialize in your field.
- Does each “point” or “argument” of your personal statement align with the mission, values, purpose, and ethos of the award or program?

ANECDOTE

THESIS

ADDRESSING PROMPT DIRECTLY

CONNECTING TO THE FUTURE

THE FINAL PARAGRAPH: THE FUTURE

- Connect to the future – and your future.
- How will this award take you and your career to the next level?
- What will you achieve after this award?
- Why is NOW the right time for you to pursue this project, or receive this award?
- How will an investment in you “pay off” for the program after you win?

ANECDOTE

THESIS

ADDRESSING PROMPT DIRECTLY

CONNECTING TO THE FUTURE

LET'S TALK ABOUT THE ANECDOTE

Relevant Anecdote: show us who you are and your perspective. Tell us about a transformational moment. End with your **THESIS STATEMENT**: the one sentence summary.

The mission of Peace Corps deeply resonates with my own personal ambition of actively investing my time, energy, and passion towards making a positive impact in the lives of other people. It has been a dream of mine for several years to become a Peace Corps Volunteer- to contribute to some sort of lasting betterment of the world. Though, for many years, I couldn't quite visualize specifics of where or how I might do so.

- What do you learn about this applicant?
- What worked?
- What could be improved?

ANECDOTE

THESIS

ADDRESSING
PROMPT
DIRECTLY

CONNECTING TO
THE FUTURE

LET'S TALK ABOUT THE ANECDOTE

My commitment to education equity research is grounded in my experiences serving as AmeriCorps Massachusetts Promise Fellow at a non-profit in Boston's South End. I was tasked with designing and implementing a college preparation program for racial-ethnic minority teens from low-income backgrounds. On paper, my role appeared simple: to motivate teens to pursue their dreams of going to college. Within the first few weeks on the job, however, I quickly understood how earning a high school diploma alone was an incredible achievement for these students, considering their lack of adequate resources and support both at school and at home. During that year as an AmeriCorps Fellow, I saw firsthand how systemic social inequality and injustice lead to lower academic, workforce, and economic outcomes for today's young people. This experience has motivated me to pursue my career in education, identifying evidence-based best practices for mitigating education disparities and improving student outcomes.

- What do you learn about this applicant?
- What worked?
- What could be improved?

ANECDOTE

THESIS

ADDRESSING
PROMPT
DIRECTLY

CONNECTING TO
THE FUTURE

LET'S TALK ABOUT YOUR ANECDOTE

Brainstorm:

- What are transformational moments that inspired your current academic trajectory?
- Can you talk about a time in which one of your fundamental understandings about your work, research, or life perspectives changed?
- Were you ever faced with a difficult decision that relates to your work or research? What were the challenges? What was the tipping point?
- Can you talk about EXTERNAL actions and interactions with others to talk about INTERNAL development?
 - For example, learning from a moment of volunteering that changed your perspective is far more “active” and “powerful” than describing how reading a book changed your mind.

ANECDOTE

THESIS

ADDRESSING
PROMPT
DIRECTLY

CONNECTING TO
THE FUTURE

YOUR SECOND PARAGRAPH(S): THE DETAILS

- Address the point(s) of the prompt directly in one or two paragraphs.
- Does the prompt ask you to describe your qualifications? Do so – but consider covering some in depth, rather than all in depth.
- Does the prompt ask you to describe your project? Do so with detail, but avoiding jargon – many reviewers are very educated, but may not specialize in your field.
- Does each “point” or “argument” of your personal statement align with the mission, values, purpose, and ethos of the award or program?

ANECDOTE

THESIS

ADDRESSING PROMPT DIRECTLY

CONNECTING TO THE FUTURE

YOUR SECOND PARAGRAPH(S): THE DETAILS

**Brainstorm:
YOU + NEED + NOW**

- **Why do YOU need this award – and why should they select YOU?**
 - Why are you a good fit for what they need?
- **Why do you NEED this award?**
 - “Need” is a flexible word.
- **Why do you need this award NOW?**
 - What about this upcoming year to win is important? Why is it the right time in your career? Why is it the right time in the current academic / sociopolitical landscape?

ANECDOTE

THESIS

ADDRESSING PROMPT DIRECTLY

CONNECTING TO THE FUTURE

YOUR FINAL PARAGRAPH: THE FUTURE

Try filling in this sentence,
and then expand:

“Upon return/completion
of award, I will ...”

How will the investment in
you and your work pay off
in the long term, for you
and for “them”?

ANECDOTE

THESIS

ADDRESSING PROMPT DIRECTLY

CONNECTING TO THE FUTURE

YOUR FINAL PARAGRAPH: THE FUTURE

Upon completion of my PhD, I aim to continue my analytical research career, contributing to the development of state and federal programs and policies that will eliminate educational and early-career employment achievement gaps. I plan to maintain an active academic publishing and teaching career, while also publishing practitioner-oriented texts and workbooks that share evidenced-based best practices for reducing STEM inequalities from K-12 through graduate education. Committed to making a strong local impact at community colleges and universities here in North Florida, I hope to contribute to wider regional and national dialogues about mitigating inequalities in education and the early-career workforce.

- What do you learn about this applicant?
- What specific future plans were discussed?
- What clear benefits may come from selecting this applicant?
- What worked?
- What could be improved?

ANECDOTE

THESIS

ADDRESSING
PROMPT
DIRECTLY

CONNECTING TO
THE FUTURE

YOUR FINAL PARAGRAPH: THE FUTURE

I aspire to be a Peace Corps Volunteer not only because it would allow me to be a change agent in a field that I feel so passionately about, but also because it would allow me to be shaped by so many new cross-cultural experiences and relationships. I have an all-consuming desire to serve, to learn, to listen, to have my boundaries broadened, and to use my energy and talents as impactfully as I possibly can. I hope that through the Peace Corps I can not only practice each of these exercises daily as a volunteer, but that eventually as a returned volunteer I can put them to better use as a more experienced and knowledgeable global citizen.

- What do you learn about this applicant?
- What specific future plans were discussed?
- What clear benefits may come from selecting this applicant?
- What worked?
- What could be improved?

ANECDOTE

THESIS

ADDRESSING
PROMPT
DIRECTLY

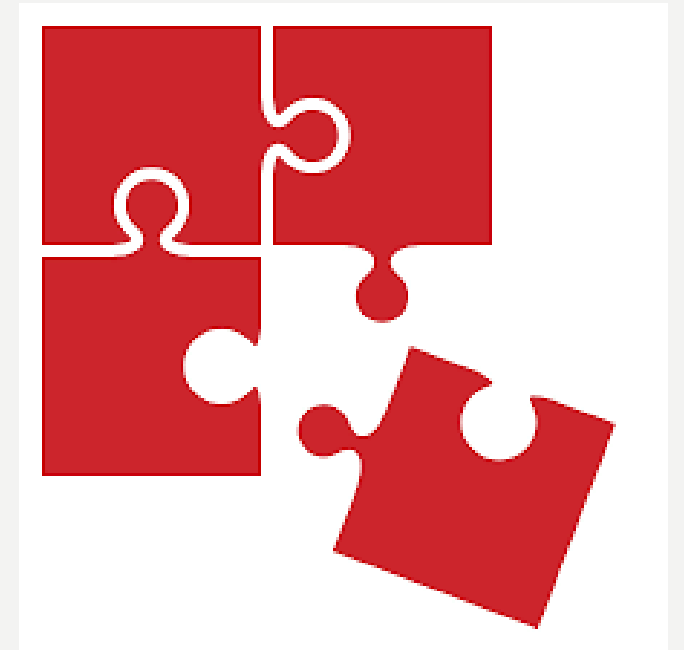
CONNECTING TO
THE FUTURE



**LET'S TALK
ABOUT FIT**

FIT, MISSION, AND SCOPE

- Understanding how an organization may want to fund “you” – not just your ideas – is key
- What does this program fund / support?
- What are its mission and values?
- Do some research on your own, and be honest:
 - what **fits well**
 - between your project/you and the organization?
 - what **doesn't fit well**? That's okay! Just focus your attention on what **ALIGNS**.





PRO-TIPS FOR SUCCESS

IMPORTANT POINTERS!

DO:

- Take your topic seriously – humor and sarcasm aren't typically winning strategies in these applications.
- Connect personal stories and life experiences to your personal goals
- Have a generally positive tone in your essay
- Go deep on a few ideas, rather than casually reference a wide range of ideas
- Get feedback early and often – feedback is love!
- Plan to write a few drafts over several weeks (if not months)
- Proofread the heck out of the document(s)

IMPORTANT POINTERS!

DON'T:

- Use gimmicks, like non-standard essay formats or “tricking” the reader
- Focus on the endless possibilities in life and uncertainty about your future. Pick one possible future and write to that. The committee will know that you are doing the work to sort out your future. They will want a complete story of one fully-fleshed-out goal for your project and long-term success.
- Talk about how money itself will motivate you. Try to show how you will put the money to use, or how it will allow you to focus attention on the project.
- Go over word or page limit. They will stop reading, they will notice, and may disqualify you!



SELF- REFLECTION PROMPTS

Thanks to the Office of Fellowships at Amherst College for inspiration for many of these questions: [Check out this resource](#) for additional opportunities for reflection!

INTELLECTUAL INFLUENCES

- What writers or articles in your field of study have made you think differently, and how?
- Who were/are your favorite professors or courses in college, and why?
 - How has each influenced you?
- What was the most interesting paper you ever wrote in your major, and what makes it so?
- What book, play, article, or film do you think everyone should read or see?
 - Why? How did it change your perspective?
- What is the single most important concept you have learned in college?

ACADEMIC DEVELOPMENT

- What are some of the big questions in your field and how are researchers tackling them?
- What study or laboratory skills have you honed to date?
- Have you done any independent research or study?
 - Briefly describe any independent work you have done and what you learned from it.
 - Write about your specific role in the research and the skills you used/developed.
- What classes will you take between now and the time the fellowship takes effect?
 - Why did you choose them?
- Have you done or do you plan to do a thesis or capstone project?
 - What is it about? Why did you choose to do independent work instead of taking more courses?
- If a thesis is not part of your plan, why not?
- What skills, content, or experience will you gain from pursuing more coursework instead of doing independent work?
- Have you ever presented at a conference or meeting? How did this experience challenge or inspire you?
- Did you take any classes that were “outliers”?
 - Why did you take them? What did you learn? How did they influence your perspective in your major field or otherwise?

GOALS – INSPIRATION AND MOTIVATION

- What are three possible directions your future could take, career-wise? In five years? Ten years? Twenty?
- Do you think of yourself as a person with a mission? What is that mission?
- Have there been turning points or shifts in your goals or intended path? What was the occasion?
- Are there life experiences or people who have influenced your goals? How?
- What causes are you committed to, and why? How do you show your commitment right now?
- When does time disappear for you? What does this tell you about your passions and values?
- What public and what private figures do you admire the most? Why? What qualities impress you?

YOUR UNIQUE WORLDVIEW

- What do you think about how the world works? Do you think there is a benevolent master designer behind it?
 - Or do think things happen randomly? How does this shape your approach to your own life and choices?
- Do you identify with a particular political party? Why?
 - Have your views changed on this while in college?
 - Note: this is excellent for reflection but *consider fit with a fellowship* when discussing specific political party affiliation, or other similar topics. Would it enhance fit, would it showcase diversity of perspectives, or disqualify you (or otherwise reduce your ability to fit well) based on a fellowship's set of values?
- What issues/problems in society do you think most need addressing?
- What good do you think is happening in the world?
- What is happening that makes you mad? Frustrated?
- What would you like to fix and how would you go about it?

YOUR EXPERIENCES & ACCOMPLISHMENTS

- Have you had special life experiences—an unusual upbringing, a disability, extraordinary responsibility – that have shaped you? How so?
- Have you taken risks? How did they turn out?
- What experiences as a volunteer or traveler have influenced your choices academically or personally?
- What is your family like? How do you think your family has shaped who you are?
- What have you accomplished so far that you are most proud of?
- What have you done that demonstrates significant drive or perseverance?
- What skills or attributes helped you accomplish these goals?
- What has changed as a result of your involvement in it?



QUESTIONS? WANT TO CONNECT?

EMAIL:

ESARAS@FSU.EDU

LINKEDIN:

[HTTPS://WWW.LINKEDIN.COM/IN/EMILYDAINASARAS/](https://www.linkedin.com/in/emilydainasaras/)