



Writing Well

Drafting Successful Fellowship Applications

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Objectives

Today we'll cover:

- How to plan a fellowship application by studying the funder, the award, the application components, and the review criteria
- “Best practices” for tone and style when writing application materials
- What makes writing clear, concise, and compelling
- Strategies for reviewing and revising applications
- Other tips and tricks for developing high-quality application materials

Understanding the funder and the award

Developing strong applications begins with studying the particular opportunity.

- What is the funding organization? What are its missions and values?
- What is the “point” of the fellowship/award? What end goal does it have?
- Is it funding you, your research, or a specific activity?
- What are the application components? What supplemental documents are needed?
- What are the review criteria, and who are the reviewers? *Know your audience!*
- Ask: Do I fit this award? And, just as importantly, *does it fit my goals?*

Understanding the funder and the award

What fellowships/awards are you
interested in?

Planning

Make a quick reference sheet to keep primary award info handy:

Award: Golden Key Graduate Scholar Award

Deadline: December 23

Mission/Vision/Key words:

“commitment to leadership and service”

“integrity, collaboration, innovation, respect, diversity, excellence, and engagement”

Application Components:

5-page personal statement

500-word short answer

CV/Resume

Transcripts

Online application/questionnaire

Recommenders: 1 needed; have lined up by October 15

Schedule:

First draft of personal statement by: October 15

First draft of short essay by: October 20

Have CV ready by November 15

Begin Online Application by end of October

Planning

First things first:

- Why me, why now, and why this award?
- Develop four or five bullet points that answer those questions
- Talk it over with friends, colleagues, mentors, OGFA, RWC, etc.
- Free write (and worry about length later)
- Write the parts you know
- Outline and assign proportional “weight”
- **Avoid reading too many samples**

Planning

Use application instructions to **create a checklist** to guide your planning and drafting:

Example: ACLS Mellon Dissertation Fellowship, Research Statement

Content: “A concise statement describing your research project is required. The narrative statement should explain, briefly but specifically, what you plan to do and why, as well as describe progress already made. Discuss the significance of this work within your specific and general fields. Please balance the description of specific work plans against an overview of your goals and the contribution this project will make to the field(s) it engages. Title your proposal in a brief, descriptive way and label sections of your narrative as appropriate to assist readers. Be sure to explain terms that might not be familiar to those outside your field or subfield.”

Review Criteria states: “The quality of the proposal will be reviewed with regard to its methodology, scope, theoretical framework, and grounding in the relevant scholarly literature.”

Planning

Use application instructions to **create a checklist** to guide your planning and drafting:

Example: ACLS Mellon Dissertation Fellowship, Research Statement

Content: “A concise statement describing your research project is required. The narrative statement should explain, briefly but specifically, **what you plan to do and why**, as well as **describe progress already made**. **Discuss the significance of this work within your specific and general fields**. Please balance the description of specific work plans against **an overview of your goals** and **the contribution this project will make to the field(s) it engages**. **Title your proposal in a brief, descriptive way** and **label sections of your narrative as appropriate to assist readers**. Be sure to **explain terms that might not be familiar to those outside your field or subfield.**”

Review Criteria states: “The quality of the proposal will be reviewed with regard to its **methodology**, **scope**, **theoretical framework**, and **grounding in the relevant scholarly literature.**”

Planning

Use application instructions to **create a checklist** to guide your planning and drafting:

Have I addressed:

- What I plan to do and why?
- Progress already made?
- My overall goals for the project and its relevance to my career?
- Significance and contribution of my work?

Have I included:

- A title?
- Section headings?
- Definitions for any technical/field-specific terms?
- An overview of my methodology?
- A description of the work's scope?
- Explanations of the theoretical framework(s)?
- A discussion of the relevant literature?

Planning

Think about the application holistically

Many applications will require multiple written components as well as an application form. You want to minimize redundancy across the application components. Use redundancy for emphasis.

Think about cohesion across the application

Everyone has more experiences, more qualifications, more to their story than could ever fit into one application. Be strategic about what you include, so that each experience/topic relates to the others and is relevant to the specific award.

Tone and Style

Remember that overall, your application is a public document meant to persuade strangers. Tone and style send important messages to readers about your personality, your maturity and seriousness, and your level of preparation. Despite being called a personal statement, you don't need to feel compelled to share intimate details or to relate experiences you'd rather not share publicly.

Tone and Style

General “Best Practices”:

Avoid creative, funny, or cute approaches.

Reviewers have seen them before, and they’re rarely as cute or funny as you think they are. This is a place to show that you can follow directions and present information clearly.

Avoid platitudes.

Don’t tell the reviewers how prestigious the award is—they already know that. Don’t tell them how honored you’d be to win—submitting the application is evidence enough of your desire to win!

Tone and Style

General “Best Practices”:

Keep it positive: Keep the tone affirming of you and your experiences

Bad: “I didn’t really know what I wanted to do in undergrad, so I bounced around between majors and then settled on engineering because I had enough credits to graduate.”

Good: “I took a wide range of courses and explored many topics during my undergraduate education, which helped me hone my interests and find my home in Mechanical Engineering.”

Don’t be arrogant: It’ll come off as immaturity or naivete

Don’t oversell your claims. Don’t put down other applicants. Avoid saying your work will “revolutionize the field.” Avoid setting lofty and unattainable goals.

- If you’re asking for a year of funding, don’t describe ten years of work. (Or, if you’re applying for a \$2,000 grant, don’t describe \$20,000 worth of research.)
- Reviewers generally need to know that your project is **feasible** and that you have **measurable outcomes**.

Tone and Style

General “Best Practices”:

Be kind to your reader!

Think about things like paragraph length, what the text looks like on the page, whether your narrative is disjointed/hard to follow. Remember, they’re reading stacks of similar documents.

Make it easy to find information!

Stick to the general order in the prompt—it’s what they expect. Use strong topic sentences and consider boldfacing key points, so that readers can skim. Reviewers may want to return to your essay for a quick refresher.

Tone and Style

The “Three C’s” of effective writing:

Compelling: well-written, specific, feasible, authentic

Clear: keep paragraphs focused, craft strong topic sentences, define terms, reduce/avoid jargon, use strong verbs, and use passive voice sparingly

Concise: reduce “wordiness,” consider what level of detail readers need, don’t be a thesaurus

Tone and Style

Clear and concise writing means eliminating ~~any and all~~ unnecessary words

Example:

I will conduct my research from the fall of 2022 to the spring of 2023. In that period of time I will do tasks x, y, and z. (28 words)

Tone and Style

Clear and concise writing means eliminating unnecessary words

Example:

I will conduct my research from the fall of 2022 to the spring of 2023. In that period of time, I will do tasks x, y, and z. (28 words)

I will conduct my research from ~~the~~ fall ~~of~~ 2022 to ~~the~~ spring ~~of~~ 2023. In that period ~~of~~ ~~time~~, I will do tasks x, y, and z.

I will conduct my research from fall 2022 to spring 2023. During that period, I will do tasks x, y, and z. (22 words)

During my research from fall 2022 to spring 2023, I will do tasks x, y, and z. (17 words)

Tone and Style

“In order to” and “ways in which” are common phrases, but they add unneeded words

Example:

I will study zooplankton **in order to** discover **the ways in which** they provide foundational biomass for the world’s oceans. (20 words)

I will study zooplankton to discover how they provide foundational biomass for the world’s oceans. (15 words)

Tone and Style

Common phrases that can be replaced by one word

The reason for
For the reason that = Because
Due to the fact that = Since
Owing to the fact that = Why
In light of the fact that
On the grounds that

As regards
In reference to
With regard to = About
Concerning the matter of
Where ___ is concerned

Is it crucial that
It is necessary that = Must
There is a need/necessity for = Should
It is important that

Is able to
Is in a position to
Has the opportunity to = Can
Has the capacity to = Might
Has the ability to = May
The possibility exists that = Could
It could happen that
It is possible that
There is a chance that

Tone and Style

Reducing unnecessary words: avoid these common redundant phrases

Evolved over time = evolved

General public = public

General consensus or consensus of opinion = consensus

Past history = history

Time period = period

Basic fundamentals = fundamentals or basics

Actual fact = fact

Absolutely certain = certain

Collaborate together = collaborate

End result = result

Final outcome = outcome/conclusion

Major breakthrough = breakthrough

Future plans = plans

New innovation = innovation

Tone and Style

Think about combining sentences if doing so would shorten them while keeping the meaning clear.

Example:

I will spend the year working as an instructional fellow at the Western School for Science and Technology. The Western School is an organization that promotes science and technology education for underrepresented populations. (33 words)

Tone and Style

Think about combining sentences if doing so would shorten them while keeping the eyes clear and not creating a run-on sentence.

Example:

I will spend the year working as an instructional fellow at the Western School for Science and Technology. ~~The Western School is an organization that promotes science and technology education for underrepresented populations.~~ (33 words)

I will spend a year working as an instructional fellow at the Western School for Science and Technology, and organization promoting science and technology education for underrepresented populations. (28 words)

Tone and Style

Avoid flowery prose; don't complexify a simple statement.

Bad: It has come to my attention that there is a vast proliferation of undesirable vegetation surrounding the periphery of this facility. (21 words)

Ideas?

Bad: An abundant amount of pyroclastic igneous materials provide a semi-circular border around the landscape elements that contain flowering shrubs. (19 words)

Ideas?

Tone and Style

Avoid flowery prose; don't complexify a simple statement.

Bad: It has come to my attention that there is a vast proliferation of undesirable vegetation surrounding the periphery of this facility. (21 words)

Good: I have noticed weeds growing around the building. (8 words)

Bad: An abundant amount of pyroclastic igneous materials provide a semi-circular border around the landscape elements that contain flowering shrubs. (19 words)

Good: Pumice provides an edging for the plantings. (7 words)

Tone and Style

Consider the level of detail needed to convey the point to your readers:

Bad: I devoured my noontime meal of crisp-baked wheat-based dough; cooked, mashed chickpeas blended with tahini, lemon juice, and garlic; coagulated dairy product; and orange root vegetables. (26 words)

Better: I ate my lunch of crackers, hummus, cheese, and carrots. (10 words)

Best?: I ate lunch. (3 words)

Ask: Does it matter if readers know what elements comprised my lunch?

Tone and Style

Avoid passive voice (unless using it for purpose)

Passive: **Object** -> **Verb** -> **Subject**

Active: **Subject** -> **Verb** -> **Object**

Lack of actor/subject:

Mistakes **were** made.

Beams **were** subjected to different levels of shearing force and load concentrations.

Wordiness:

The bricks **were** installed in a horizontal design by **the team of workers**. (13 words)

Workers **installed** **the bricks** in a horizontal design. (8 words)

Tone and Style

Use strong verbs. Avoid nominalizations.

Nominalizations are nouns created from verbs or adjectives. They often result in clunky phrasing and can make it difficult for readers to interpret the action of the sentence.

We **were able** to carry out a **process of data collection**.

We **collected** data.

We **discovered that** result x **had an occurrence** every fifteen seconds.

Result x **occurred** every fifteen seconds.

We **performed an analysis** on the data.

We **analyzed** the data.

Tone and Style

Nouns	Verbs
Intention	Intend
Intervention	Intervene
Distortion	Distort
Evolution	Evolve
Interference	Interfere
Discrimination	Discriminate
Decision	Decide
Assumption	Assume
Collection	Collect
Investigation	Investigate

Some common nominalizations

Revision tip: search out words that end in “-ion.” Check whether they could be reworded as a verb.

“We reached the conclusion that we had too many nominalizations in the essay.”

“We concluded that we had too many nominalizations in the essay.”

Tone and Style

“Show, don’t tell”

I am committed to active learning environments and strive to create opportunities for my students to engage the course material. I follow Lendol Calder’s “uncoverage” model when designing my survey courses and focus on teaching discipline-specific skills rather than on covering the full temporal sweep of the survey. Over the course of the semester, students learn to analyze academic arguments and primary sources through a series of writing assignments.

Do you have any idea what this person’s teaching actually looks like?

Tone and Style

“Show, don’t tell”

I focus on building discipline-specific skills in my survey courses by engaging students in in-class workshops to analyze academic articles and primary sources. Typically, I structure courses so that each week progresses through a sequence of an overview lecture on Monday, a primary source workshop on Wednesday, and an article analysis on Friday. Over the course of each week, students work together to synthesize the lecture, article, and primary source for a short reflection paper due each Monday before class. The final paper for the course asks students to further synthesize four of their reflection papers (along with four articles and four primary sources) to answer one of the course’s five big questions.

This paragraph *shows* readers what it looks like in this person’s classroom.

Tone and Style

Define your terms, then be consistent with them

If you're writing about "ecological restoration of a coastal wetlands," you're going to write those words a lot. Don't fall into the trap of thinking you need to vary your terms to keep it interesting—you'll only confuse readers.

So, if you use "ecological restoration," don't switch to saying "rewilding" or "landscape renewal."

If you're using "coastal wetlands," don't start saying "marshland" or "intertidal zone."

Tone and Style

Let's look at some examples!

Reviewing and Revising

Revising is part of writing. Most successful fellowship applications go through **six to ten drafts** before submission.

You should **share your drafts** with colleagues, advisors, OGFA, RWC, etc.

You can also develop strategies to enhance your own ability to review and revise.

Reviewing and Revising

Ideas for reviewing:

- Reverse outlining and comparing to your checklist/proportional outline
- Print out/switch screens
- Read out loud
- Pull out key sentences and review them individually

Reviewing and Revising

Checklist for review

- Does each paragraph have a point/focus?
- Is each sentence *doing something*?
- Have I varied my sentence structure?
- Does it look OK on the page?
- Have I avoided jargon and defined my terms?
- Have I removed “throat clearing language” (“I think,” “I believe,” “With respect to,” etc.)
- Have I minimized passive voice?
- Do I have strong verbs?
- Have I emphasized key points?
- Is there too much repetition across application components?
- Could my grandmother/father, etc. read this and understand it?
- Would my advisor think it represents my work well?

Credits / Resources

John A. Dutton, *Writing Personal Statements Online*: <https://www.e-education.psu.edu/writingpersonalstatementsonline/>

<https://writingcenter.uagc.edu/writing-clearly-concisely>

<https://writingcenter.unc.edu/tips-and-tools/conciseness-handout/>

<https://writingcenter.unc.edu/tips-and-tools/style/>

<https://writingcenter.gmu.edu/guides/writing-concisely>

<https://writingcenter.gmu.edu/guides/advice-for-writing-personal-statements>

<https://writing.wisc.edu/handbook/assignments/grants-2/>

<https://gwc.gsrc.ucla.edu/workshop-videos/grant-hum-soc-sci>

<https://gwc.gsrc.ucla.edu/resources/writing-fellowship-and-grant-proposals>

Ford Predoctoral Fellowship materials: <https://www.heidiwaite.com/post/ford-foundation-predoctoral-fellowship>



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