

# NSF Graduate Research Fellowship Program

(insights)

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## **V- The Personal Statement**

(Note: NSF no longer has this as a separate essay, it is now combined with the personal statement essay. Because these two essays address different topics and demand different styles, it is still useful to consider these separately. )

Applicants generally spend way too much time on the personal statement at the expense of more important components of the application (such as the research proposal). Most importantly, the personal statement needs not to be overly creative or artistic. You want it to be memorable and unique but don't try to be something you are not. Too many students spend weeks stressing about that perfect opening sentence, when in fact, the personal statement's introduction is probably the last thing you should write in your entire application to ensure it properly introduces your "application package".

The easiest way to tackle this essay (especially if you don't feel like you have an incredible life story) is to *just write*. Write as many pages as you can and then edit. We repeat: *just write*. Never say "Oh this is a boring detail." If you think it, write it. The first rule of creativity is you need lots of ideas to get a good idea. So start writing.

### **What makes a great personal statement essay:**

**Genuine.** Nothing worse than cliché filled personal statement. "I have always wanted to be a <fill in the blank> scientist..." Why do you want to go to graduate school? Why did you choose your line of research? Don't tell say it's because your parents expected you to get a doctorate or that you just magically loved doing research since you were 5 years old (unless you truly did, more on that next). It takes time to write something genuine about oneself. You must write for long enough for yourself to be comfortable enough to be transparent on the page (see the *just write* comment above). That's what you should aim for.

**Keep the personal short.** While you want to write about life experiences that make you unique. Don't dwell on them for more than a sentence or two. You just want the reviewer to remember you in case (s)he needs to argue why you should win the fellowship. Dedicate the rest of the essay showing how your life experiences prepared you for a value-adding research career.

**Don't tell, demonstrate.** The majority of applications will state many honorable things such as wanting to help the poor and increase diversity. But unless you can demonstrate it

(and back it up with letters of recommendation) it's all hearsay. If you are passionate about diversifying the academic world of higher education show that you have a track record of diversity-related initiatives. If you are passionate about teaching, show some of the creative teaching methods you used to get people excited about something (this can be math or how to hula hoop).

**What are your credentials?** This follows up on the previous point. You want to use this essay to show the reviewer you have the basic aptitudes to be a value-adding academic. Think about your intellectual and extracurricular backgrounds that provide additional evidence that you would be a good colleague to have. Do you speak multiple languages? Did you take interesting out-of-major classes? Do you have an unusual hobby? Don't overlook any experience that might set you apart and could tie into your other essays.

**Diversity.** This tends to be a delicate subject, regardless of your heritage or personal background. People might think that if you are from a historically underrepresented group you are all set. Just mentioning that you are of an underrepresented group does not show how you will enhance the diversity of the academic world. Diversity is a committed effort, you don't diversify an institution just by showing up. You must specifically address the ways in which you will diversify academia and research institutions. This can be through your appreciation and pursuit of diversity; because you have access to certain communities that are underrepresented; or through your diverse undergraduate training relative to your graduate degree (i.e. English major going for a physics Ph.D.)

**Honesty.** It goes without saying you shouldn't fabricate your life story. But more importantly, if you have never been involved in diversity initiatives for example, you shouldn't try to be someone you are not. Instead, mention how applying for this fellowship has really made you appreciate diversity as an integral component for a vibrant academy and you want to become more involved in the future.