Writing Fellowship Essays

Well-crafted Essays Are Essential

Your application essay is part of a complete portfolio that includes recommendation letters, transcripts, resumes, and other supporting documents. This application package should give a complete overview of your academic, service, and leadership qualities, as well as an insight into your personality, character, interests, and skills. Note that some fellowships require more that one essay, with each discussing a particular aspect of your interests and goals.

Most review committees are not specialists in the particular academic or professional field in which you are applying for graduate study and fellowship support. Thus, you should write for an educated, intelligent, and general audience, not a panel of specialists. Use terminology that can be understood by someone outside your field; avoid professional jargon and the academic passive voice; don't over-use rhetorical devices. Your presentation should present a direct, honest, and enthusiastic overview of you, your interests, and your goals. Your essay should create an image of you that closely relates to the criteria stated in the fellowship description. Read the published application materials carefully and highlight points that you can emphasize in your essay. Your essay is an opportunity to demonstrate your writing skills while subtly revealing your personality and positively distinguishing yourself from the many other applicants.

Note that most essays are limited in length, so plan on many revisions and re-writes. Start early and allow yourself to write at least three versions, then combine, edit, and revise to arrive at a final essay that conveys your distinctive voice. Ask your friends to read and comment on your essays, then re-write and edit based on their critiques. Your faculty advisors and recommenders, as well as professional contacts, can be an important resource of advice and critiques on these essays. Comments from several readers will also help you prepare for interview questions that you might be asked based on your essay.

• Make sure that your essay is accurate and that you will be able to elaborate and intelligently discuss anything mentioned in your essay and supporting materials.

• Committees seek unique, outstanding candidates; be diplomatic, but not overly modest in your writing.

• Don’t guess at unstated criteria that a selection committee might seek; certainly, do not fabricate a personality to meet stated (or assumed) criteria.

• Your essays are samples of your writing, thinking, and communication skills. All the rules of good writing (clarity, conviction, grammar, rhetoric) apply. When you have a strong initial draft, review your writing with an advisor at the Texas State Writing Center; the writing advisors there, with experience in essays from many disciplines, can give you solid, helpful critiques. Make an online appointment at http://www.writingcenter.txstate.edu/ or by phone at 512-245-3018.

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