

## Guidelines for Writing Fulbright Personal Statements

The Fulbright U.S. Student Program awards 1,500 grants each year. Applications require a statement of proposed study and a personal statement—a kind of intellectual autobiography, often with a central focus or theme, in which you discuss your academic credentials and accomplishments along with selected and revealing life experiences. Your personal statement, approximately one page single-spaced, should distinguish you from one of the other 4,500 applicants. You can achieve your goal by

- Revealing the person behind the experiences and academic accomplishments and credentials
- Illustrating that you can be a representative “ambassador” for the program and your country
- Showing that you have the adaptability and character traits suited for this experience
- Showing how you have prepared—or continue to prepare—for the program
- Conveying your sincerity, integrity, ethics, and, more generally, strength of character
- Demonstrating your intellectual ability, creativity, and analytical and problem-solving skills
- Demonstrating your written communication skills

### *I. Audience and the Writing Situation*

Understanding your reading audience and familiarizing yourself with the writing situation will help you select appropriate subject matter and generate a high-quality essay. Consider what features of the writing situation may influence your readers’ response. Learn all you can about your readers and the Fulbright program and its philosophy. As you plan and develop your essay, keep these ideas in mind:

- The Fulbright Program offers you and other recent graduates invaluable international and cross-cultural experience. You have the opportunity to **1)** live with the people of your host country and participate in their daily activities and experiences; **2)** gain a greater understanding of their values and beliefs through one-on-one interactions, work, and community involvement; and **3)** promote international cooperation and fellowship between the United States and other countries.
- Committee members will read your essay with the Fulbright mission and philosophy in mind. Senator William Fulbright “viewed the program as a much-needed vehicle for promoting „mutual understanding between the people of the United States and the people of other countries of the world”” (“Fulbright/Fulbright Scholar Program”).
- Members of the Fulbright selection committee include professors, former Fulbright winners, and business and professional leaders—a group of intelligent but non-specialist readers.

- Committee members will read other application essays in addition to yours. Late in the day—after reading many essays—tired, bored readers will have little patience for predictable storylines, encompassing statements, clichés, insincerity, and gimmicks. So don't waste their time—be specific, make every word count, and get their attention with a strong opening sentence.

## ***II. Topic Selection***

Readers do not have a set agenda or criteria for what makes an appropriate or ideal topic. However, they do want, from all writers, honest, authentic, thoughtful essays that reveal the person as well as their relevant activities, accomplishments, and academic qualifications. While your particular qualifications and experiences make you and your essay unique, several characteristics and thematic patterns seem particularly relevant for this kind of essay. The following observations, suggestions, and caveats should help you generate a quality piece of writing:

### **General Comments & Suggestions**

- Avoid summarizing information or writing a resume in paragraph form. As noted on the “Personal Statement” page of the Fulbright site, the essay “is more of a biography [really, an autobiography], but specifically related to you and your aspirations relative to the Fulbright Program” ([https://us.fulbrightonline.org/preparing\\_personalstatements.html](https://us.fulbrightonline.org/preparing_personalstatements.html)).
- Discuss “concrete” experiences that illuminate your qualifications; avoid abstract ideas and general topics.
- Focus more on experiences from the last four years, since you began college, than on the preceding years, though you can, as many applicants do, include a meaningful example or two from when you were younger. Avoid, however, statements like the following one: I’ve wanted to be an environmental scientist since 2nd grade.
- Avoid focusing on religious themes and experiences. The Fulbright Commission, a government agency, cannot use religious criteria or information as part of their decision-making.
- Focus on academic and professional goals and interests. Note how the Fulbright experience will prepare you for graduate school and your professional life.
- Include an explanation for poor grades or a weak academic performance, but do so briefly and in a positive way. Explain the situation and avoid making excuses. Focusing on achievements or strengths may be the best antidote for academic blemishes.

### **Personal Strengths, Qualities, and Interests**

- Write about a topic that you genuinely and deeply care about—one that reveals your interests, your personality, and your passion:
- Reveal the kind of person you are—show your personality or character traits; reveal strengths and weaknesses; illustrate how you have grown or changed; demonstrate your character and ethical sensibility.

- Demonstrate your ability to get along and work with other people of all ages and from all backgrounds; show your appreciation for cultural differences and unique individuals and personality types.
- Focus on jobs, campus activities, and other experiences that demonstrate leadership or leadership potential; describe experiences that show your ability to teach, support, and help others, including classroom teaching, tutoring, mentoring, and coaching.
- Focus on experiences that illustrate your independence, maturity, emotional stability, and ability to adapt to new situations and environments.
- Illustrate your intellectual curiosity and your desire to learn about new places, cultures, and peoples.
- Describe your creativity, your aesthetic sensibility, and your accomplishments in art, music, theater, or film.
- Show modesty, restraint, humility, and compassion. Avoid presenting yourself—inadvertently, of course—as the “Ugly American.” Don’t be too self-assured, overly-confident, or self-congratulatory.

### **Cross-Cultural Information and Experiences**

- Discuss family history, particularly experiences, stories, and anecdotes that focus on immigration, place of origin, cultural heritage, ethnic identity, multiculturalism, and cultural and political diaspora.
- Discuss travel experiences, study-abroad and mission programs, and other cross-cultural experiences in this country and overseas. In particular, note if you have traveled or studied in the host country—or in that part of the world.
- Demonstrate your knowledge of your host country—about its history, political affairs, current events, social mores, cultural life, and geography and environment.
- Demonstrate your knowledge of foreign policy and international affairs, cultural anthropology, global economics, or world history.
- Highlight cross-cultural experiences that reveal your understanding of cultural barriers and “bridge-building” between different peoples and cultures.
- Demonstrate your language competency. Note your proficiency in a language or a number of languages. Identify language-learning experiences—in the classroom and in another country.
- Show that you will be a conscientious “ambassador” for the Fulbright program and its philosophy.

### ***III. Content, Organization, and Development***

- Narrow your topic and develop a theme or connecting thread throughout your essay. Refrain from discussing too many experiences and topics, thus reducing your essay to a resume in paragraph form.

- Include a governing idea, thesis, or life-lesson that reveals your ability to reflect and think critically about your life and experiences.
- Show, don't tell. See, for example, the following statement, which was excerpted from Dr. Karen Kelsky's advice blog for young professors on the job market. The subject matter is different from what you'll be writing, but the concept of **show, don't tell** remains the same:
  - "I am committed to the mission of liberal arts, and I ensure that my classroom is a space for creative expression and critical thinking alike."

While this statement may seem descriptive, it's really not—it doesn't show us how the writer is a) committed to the mission of liberal arts, or b) how she ensures that her classroom is a space for creative expression and critical thinking alike. Now, read this version:

- "I stress creative and critical thinking in all my classes. For example, to develop creative writing skills, I give students regular writing prompts. To train them in critical analysis, I design a sequence of in-class debates on topics relevant to the course topics; subsequently, students have to produce a position paper, drawing on those debates."

This is a little stronger, but it's still telling rather than showing. What kinds of writing prompts? What kinds of debates? Here's a third revision:

- "I stress creative and critical thinking in all my classes. For example, to cultivate creative writing skills in my Critical Theory students, I give them writing prompts—in five minutes, they have to improvise a conversation Foucault and Derrida might have had at a cocktail party, or write an ad for a missing pet from the perspective of Wittgenstein. To train them in critical analysis, I design in-class debates and other collaborative assignments on topics relevant to the subject of the course. In my Deviance and Control class, students debated whether gossip is a form of bullying, while in my Literature and Psychology seminar, students had to do a clinical intake of Hamlet to evaluate him as a potential patient."

You don't have a great deal of room in your grant proposal and personal statement, so you need to choose your examples judiciously. These documents require that you learn the art of balancing detail and concision.

- Choose from any number of appropriate organizational strategies and methods of development. The following pattern, common in many essays, includes a number of characteristic components arranged in a particular order that resembles a chronology:
  - Applicants commonly contextualize their topics or begin with life-revealing anecdotes or experiences—at a time before high school or college—that illustrate how they first became interested in an activity or subject.
  - Applicants then focus on the experiences—after high school—that make them worthy Fulbright candidates. They discuss, among other things, academic experiences, research experiences, language experiences, cross-cultural experiences, and extra-curricular leadership experiences. Applicants

might develop two or three paragraphs focusing on one of these topics in each paragraph.

- Some writers include another paragraph—either the penultimate paragraph or the last paragraph—that emphasizes additional preparation, such as improving language proficiency, learning about the host country, filling in gaps in their education, or doing relevant volunteer work.
- Applicants commonly conclude by focusing on life after their Fulbright experience—that is, on graduate school, on professional goals and aspirations, and on the commitment to promoting the values and beliefs of the Fulbright mission and program.

**Please Note:** Not all applicants use this organizational template, and some applicants emphasize certain sections more than other sections. Moreover, these sections may be less defined or transparent if authors use a narrative strategy.

- Begin with an “attention-getter”: an anecdote, an example, a vivid description, a meaningful statement, a thoughtful question, a metaphor, or some other “technique” that captures the attention of readers and, as noted above, reveals the main point of your essay. Be “concrete,” specific, detailed, and do not bore readers with an introduction replete with generalizations, abstract statements, or trite observations.
- Make the first sentence a compelling one.
- Note, too, that a number of applicants include long opening paragraphs with extensive background information that contextualizes their topics.
- Provide support material in your body paragraphs as well: details, examples, and anecdotes are a must. You sell yourself, support your claims—whatever words you want to use—when you include adequate evidence or support in each paragraph throughout your curriculum vita.
- Include thoughtful insights about your experience. In other words, in addition to describing and detailing what you have done, reveal what you have learned and what insights you have gained—about yourself, about a subject, about an experience.
- Develop a thoughtful relevant conclusion—one that adds to your discussion and brings it to a close. The best advice is to stop when you’re finished; don’t tack on a needless summary or add a paragraph of generalizations and empty statements. Often you can end with the preceding paragraph and bring it—and your essay—to a close by adding a memorable sentence or two. As noted above, many writers end by focusing on what they plan to do after their Fulbright experiences.

#### ***IV. Language, Style, and Tone***

- Use concrete and specific language; avoid general and encompassing statements. Instead of saying that you value social equality or diversity, show what you have learned and generate specific statements and explanations for why you value these ideals.

- Choose words appropriate to your audience—a group of thoughtful but non-specialist readers. Avoid jargon—unless necessary—and explain esoteric terms and disciplinary-specific vocabulary.
- Develop a tone that strikes a balance between being too personal or too academic. Avoid stilted, overly formal, and pedantic language.
- Avoid clichés, sentimental language, and platitudes. For example: “I felt unbound joy and hopefulness when a homeless person thanked me for the meal on Thanksgiving.”
- **Write concisely.** Because of page limitations, every word counts, so work with an experienced editor to eliminate superfluous words, phrases, and sentences. Follow these suggestions:
  - **Condense phrases by using a single word**—“Obviously” instead of “It is obvious that”; “Because” instead of “On the grounds that.”
  - **Eliminate nominalizations** (verbs and adjective used as nouns)—“Victimize” instead of “Victimization.”
  - **Condense verb phrases by using a single word**—“Consider” instead of “Give consideration to”; “Understand” instead of “Have a great understanding of.”
  - **Edit unnecessary adverbs used as intensifiers**—“Finished” instead of “Completely finished.”
  - **Eliminate unnecessary relative pronouns** (that, which, who, whom)—“The book I quoted was missing” instead of “The book that I had quoted was missing.”
  - **Eliminate redundant words**—“Ready” instead of “Ready and able”; “Willing” instead of “Willing and eager.”
  - **Minimize the use of expletive constructions** (short statements that start sentences and include “to be” verbs)—“We want” instead of “There is a desire for”; “We hope” instead of “It is to be hoped.”
  - **Combine two or more sentences and omit unnecessary repetition**—“John went to the store on Saturday to buy eggs and milk” instead of “John went to the store on Saturday. He bought eggs and milk.”
- Whenever possible, use the active voice—for example, “The attorney won the court case”, not “The court case was won by the attorney.”
- Your tone should be genuine and convey sincerity and honesty. If you “sound” inauthentic or insincere, readers may make more general assumptions about your character and integrity.

- Because the personal statement focuses on you, use the first person singular pronoun, “I,” but keep it to a minimum, particularly at the beginning of sentences. And eliminate the “I thinks,” “I believes,” and the “I feels.”
- Vary sentence length and types: **Simple sentences** with one independent clause; **Compound sentences** with two or more independent clauses; or more **Complex sentences** with one independent clause and at least one dependent clause.
- Avoid populating your writing with lists (i.e. “I am smart, dependable, and energetic”). Remember, your goal is to *show*, not to *tell*. You likely don’t have enough space to show how you are smart, dependable, *and* energetic, so pick the most important word (in the context of what you are trying to say) and use evidence/examples to support your statement.