



Discern Your Interests and Goals

One of the most important ways to prepare to apply for national fellowships is to develop self-awareness of your interests and goals. Below you'll find some questions that you can ask yourself to help you in your discernment process. Thinking through these types of questions will help you not only to find fellowships that fit your needs but also to determine what opportunities you should pursue in order to accomplish your goals.

- What are your academic interests or personal passions?
- Why are these things important to you?
- Why should people in your community, nation, or global society care about these things?
- What are your goals for the future?
- Do you want to attend graduate school? If so, what do you want to study and where?
- Do you want to learn a foreign language? If so, which language(s)?
- Do you want to undertake a research project? If so, what would be your research question? What methods would you use to answer it?
- Do you want to serve a particular community? Which community would you serve, and in what way would you serve them?



Plan Ahead

Though the requirements for each fellowship are different, there are some general steps you can take to make yourself a competitive fellowship applicant. Consider doing the following, depending on where you are at in your college career:

- **Seek opportunities to develop your leadership skills.** The summer before your first year you could participate in a [Leadership Seminar](#). You might join one of the many [clubs and organizations](#) on campus and get involved in the leadership team. You could apply to be a [Sorin Scholar](#) at the end of your first year and help organize campus events.
- **Participate in service opportunities on campus and in the surrounding community.** On campus you might think of tutoring other students. There are also multiple opportunities to volunteer in South Bend and the surrounding community. The Center for Social Concerns (CSC) has [multiple resources](#) to help you find somewhere to serve. The CSC also offers [summer service learning opportunities](#) around the United States and abroad.
- **Excel in your academic courses.** Many fellowships have written or unwritten minimum GPA requirements, so it is important that you perform well in your classes. This will also help you stand out to professors.
- **Get to know professors.** Professors are very important resources in terms of mentoring and letters of recommendation. It is important that you get to know them and they get to know you. This means going beyond talking after classes. Attend a professor's office hours. Invite them out for a coffee. Ask to assist them with their research projects. The better a professor knows you, the more help they will ultimately be to you.
- **Explore your opportunities for undergraduate research.** Plan a scholarly discernment project. Take on an internship or research apprenticeship. Perform your own independent research project or creative endeavor. Attend or present at a conference. Study a language abroad. CUSE's [Undergraduate Research and Experiential Learning](#) team can help you learn more about these types of opportunities.

The important thing to remember when taking advantage of these opportunities is to have an ultimate trajectory in mind, based on your interests and goals. These things are much more impressive when united by a common mission or theme.



Know Your Funder

Know who they're looking for. Make sure you fit the eligibility requirements. Study the profiles of previous recipients: who won and why? Are you the kind of person they would choose?

Familiarize yourself with their mission. This will clue you into what kinds of skills or experiences you need to highlight. For example, the Truman Scholarship's mission is to recognize juniors with exceptional leadership potential who are committed to careers in government, nonprofits, or education. Knowing this mission tells you that you need to highlight your leadership experience and preparation for a career in public service.

Know your audience. Knowing who will read your statements clues you in on *how* to write them. Your audience could be a panel of scholars in your field, government officials, or the members of a professional organization. Knowing who you're addressing will help you determine the appropriate language, tone, and even the content of your application.

Understand their selection criteria (often noted on their website). The selection criteria are the rubric by which your statements will be assessed. As you develop your statements, you can "grade yourself" based on these criteria.

Watch the webinar. If the fellowship program has a webinar, watch it and take notes before you start writing.



The Personal Statement

In writing a personal statement, **you must answer the specific prompt provided by the fellowship program.** That said, all personal statements share some common features. Generally defined, a personal statement is an *intellectual autobiography* that *explains your motivations* and *connects them to your goals*. It tells a story about your past actions and what inspired them, and it points to your future. In some sense, you can think about it as you would think about applying for a job: you want the job, and you use your past training and skills to land it.

1. Telling a Story about Yourself: As an intellectual autobiography, the personal statement tells your story. Depending on the opportunity, it will be either scholarly or professional. It should present the best possible picture of yourself by highlighting your unique attributes through your skills and experience, leadership potential, knowledge, service, the challenges you overcame, and/or your personal development. It is not a list of these things or a rehashing of your CV. Rather, it describes *key background* that has prepared you for the opportunity and made you the perfect fit.

2. Your Motivations and Inspirations: As it tells your story, the personal statement explains your motivations and inspirations. It clues readers in on what drove you to pursue your passion, and for what purpose. Many selection committees also want to know your rationale for applying to their specific program. The strongest personal statements are able to connect past experiences and past motivation with the present motivation of applying. By discussing these things, it tells the personal story that the CV cannot.

3. Projecting into the Future: Finally, the personal statement addresses the question of how the opportunity will help you achieve your short-term and long-term your goals. Think of the scholarship as a stepping stone getting you somewhere. How will you continue to benefit from it after the experience is over? The future is always hypothetical, but the committee will want to know that you have a *plan*, and that the plan is logical and feasible.

To sum up, the personal statement is a story about your past that connects the dots with your present and future. It describes what led you to this moment, where you are now (current interests, activities, accomplishments), and where you will go after the scholarship.

Tips for Getting Started:

Try writing a paragraph or two on each of the following questions:

1. What subject are you most passionate about? How did this passion come about?
2. Why did you pursue this passion? What were the milestones and turning points?
3. How do you see the fellowship taking you to the next level, academically, professionally, and personally?

As you write, keep your tone lively, not flat. Avoid vague or generic statements that any intelligent college student could make. Be direct and persuasive, and steer clear of “subtleties” your readers might miss. Finally, let your personality shine!



The Statement of Grant Purpose or Research Proposal

In general, a statement of grant purpose or proposal is about a specific project or opportunity in the future: it explains what you *propose to do*. This can be a research project, course of study, or professional experience.

A proposal is a kind of persuasive writing. You must persuade the committee that what you propose is important, and that you can do it. The selection committee will want to know you can carry out what you're proposing within the allotted amount of time with the given amount of funding, so what you propose must be feasible. While all proposals have features in common, **always address the specific guidelines provided by the fellowship program.**

Research proposals are written to address a clearly-stated problem or issue that motivates your research. The research proposal provides *essential* background information and/or the scholarship necessary for an understanding of the project. It explains the importance of your research to the field and outlines your research plan, showing the steps involved (the "methodology"). Research proposals should be written under the guidance of a faculty mentor who can help you address the research plan and the significance of the project.

Study proposals must convince the committee that there's a compelling reason why you should study a particular subject in a particular program. Typically, a problem or issue motivates the course of study. Thus the question that must be answered directly and persuasively is, *Why must I absolutely study there?*

Professional Experience/Internship proposals prove that you can undertake a specific job by showing what you bring to the table. In this sense, the proposal is very much like a cover letter. It highlights the essential skills and experiences necessary for doing the job. To do this, address each point in the program's 'job description' to show that you are the perfect candidate.

Tips for Getting Started:

Write a paragraph or two for each of the following questions:

1. What *exactly* do you intend to do during the fellowship tenure? Be very detailed!
2. How *exactly* will you do it? Be very detailed!
3. Why is this fellowship *necessary* for you to get it done? Provide specific details.



Obtaining Effective Letters of Recommendation

Understand what kind of recommendations are expected. Some programs give recommenders specific instructions. Others want them to answer specific questions. Know what's expected and communicate this information to your letter writers.

Select the right recommenders. The better they know you, the better. The strongest letters for academic research fellowships come from professors in the field. Since your application highlights your accomplishments as a college student, do not ask high school teachers for recommendation letters.

Meet with your potential recommenders and tell them your plans to apply for the fellowship. Also be sure to communicate the selection criteria. *If the professor understands the selection criteria, he or she will be able to address them in the letter.*

Tell your recommenders why you chose them. This will help them write your letters. For example, if you tell professor X that you chose him because you thought he could speak about your original scholarship or work in a particular lab, this information will help him say just that!

Share a draft of your personal statement and statement of grant purpose well in advance of the application deadline.

Request your recommendation letters at least a month in advance of the deadline, if your recommenders have not written a letter for you before. If they have written one before, then request the letter no less than three weeks in advance, giving them time to tailor it for the fellowship.

Don't hesitate to send your recommenders a gentle reminder in anticipation of the submission deadline, and don't wait until the last moment to do so. Professors are busy people. Chances are they'll appreciate the reminder.