Personal Statement: Pre-Writing Questions
Graduate Writing Center
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Personal statements are required for most grant and fellowship applications. They provide a picture of you as a researcher and outline your career goals. They demonstrate to reviewers that you are a qualified candidate whose work is aligned with the funding agency’s mission. They can draw on personal history, family background, and intellectual development, as well as relevant educational, leadership, or cultural experiences. These examples illustrate what drives your proposed research project and professional endeavors.

Most commonly, personal statements will need to go through several rounds of revision before arriving at a solid final draft. It would be the rare essay indeed that is ready to go at first or second draft. With this idea in mind, this resource should help you brainstorm content for an initial draft of your personal statement. Respond in as much detail as possible to each question below, and you can sort through your responses later to find those that seem most relevant and compelling.

**Background:**
- What are some key experiences—both negative and positive—that have shaped your life, career, and research interests? How have they inspired you to change or persevere? Can you think of one or two significant moments when you became very clear about the kind of research and career you wanted to pursue?
- What experiences motivate your research? How long have you been motivated to conduct research?
- What fascinates you about your research? What makes it compelling to you?
- What in your academic background makes you the researcher you are today? What are some examples of these influential experiences?
- What pressing research problems, social needs, or local and/or international issues capture your attention? How do these issues inform or relate to your research project?

**Experiences and Skills:**
- How have past volunteer, work, service learning, or study abroad experiences changed your thinking about either your research or your research-oriented career goals?
- What personal and/or career-oriented strengths do you have that make you a qualified applicant? What are some examples that showcase these strengths?
- What leadership skills and unique characteristics do you bring to your field? What are some examples of these skills and characteristics and why are they important within your field?
- What kinds of recent experiences do you have working in a team and/or independently? Did you take on some kind of leadership role and what was the outcome?
• What were the key questions, methodology, findings, and conclusions in past research experiences? How did this research contribute to scholarship? Would, or did, this research interest non-academics?

• How have you helped others? Did you work with an individual or group to address or work through a problem of some kind?

• Who are your mentors? What lessons have you learned from working with them?

• Remember that if experiences don’t necessarily seem relevant at first glance, you can always argue for their relevance in specific ways. For example, being the captain of your high school cheerleading squad may not seem immediately relevant to your academic career goals, but if those goals include running a research lab, the leadership and teamwork experiences you gained with that squad may indeed prove helpful.

Future Goals:

• What research-focused higher education, industry, or government career are you most interested in pursuing? Why? How might this career give you an opportunity to further develop or expand upon your research project?

• What kinds of contributions—in terms of research, education, and outreach—would you like to make in your career? Why?

• How will receiving the fellowship or grant contribute to your research and career goals?

• How do your research agenda and career goals align with the funding agency’s mission and priorities?

Resources:

A Ford Fellowship Program web page linking to some general resources on fellowship writing: http://sites.nationalacademies.org/PGA/FordFellowships/PGA_050509

A brief discussion of the personal statement, hosted by the Online Writing Lab at Purdue: https://owl.english.purdue.edu/owl/resource/642/01/

A few “dos” and “don’t dos” from the NIH: http://nihgrants.blogspot.com/2012/06/worst-personal-statement-ever.html