

Requirements for Writing Fulbright Application Essays

Applicants for Fulbright Fellowships must write two essays. The first is the statement of grant purpose (hereafter SGP); this must explain what you plan do to during your award year. The second is a personal statement (hereafter PS); this is an intellectual biography in narrative form, in which you tell stories and offer vignettes that will; its purpose is to give the reader a sense of your intellectual development, to provide good reasons why you (rather than someone else) should be selected for this award, and to paint a fuller and more complete picture of yourself using information not available elsewhere in your application.

Before you write your two essays, you should review the tips on the Fulbright Web page: <http://us.fulbrightonline.org/applicants/application-tips>. If this direct link does not work, simply go to <http://us.fulbrightonline.org>; click on Applicants, then Application Tips, then choose your kind of award.

RULE NUMBER ONE

Our most important piece of advice is this: **“Show, don’t tell.”** In other words, avoid making general claims about yourself — I’m enthusiastic, I’m interested in foreign cultures, I’m a great teacher — and instead, write about those aspects of your life that have led to these things, or that demonstrate these things. Saying that you are interested in cross-cultural issues, for example, won’t necessarily convince the Committee, since it’s the kind of thing that’s easy to say (and that everyone is likely to say, because they know it’s important for getting a Fulbright). On the other hand, if you tell a story about a time in your life when you were thrown into a cross-cultural situation, and then go on to describe how you handled it, you’ll demonstrate your abilities in this area in a way that is particular to you. This not only provides more solid evidence than simply announcing your interests and abilities; it may also the Committee something by which they might remember you (and thereby differentiate you from the large number of other applicants in their stacks).

This means, by the way, that you should not write sentences that merely express your “interest in” or “fascination by” or “desire to” or “admiration of” anything. These are all good sentiments to have, of course, but they are not reasons to award you a Fulbright — in fact, everyone who applies to this program will have these things. Instead, you should tell a story about how your interest in something developed, or offer a narrative description of yourself becoming fascinated with a particular idea or country or language, or provide enough of a description of some particular person, place, or thing to demonstrate your admiration. Do not follow your story by saying something along the lines of “This shows my significant interest in ... or “that I am fascinated by...”; if this fact doesn’t come out in the telling of the story, then you haven’t told it well enough. Your admiration, interest, fascination, passion, enthusiasm, and should come out in your telling of the tale.

Please attend carefully to this all-important piece of advice. If you don’t, you’ll get a lot of drafts back from us on which we will have written, “READ RULE NUMBER ONE.”

THE REST OF THE GENERAL RULES (GR)

GR 2. Learn about your country. Do enough research that you can demonstrate that you understand the cultural and professional challenges of living and there. You cannot say “I don’t yet know much about [your country here], but I am looking forward to learning about it” — this simply will not do. **If you want a Fulbright, take the time to learn more than superficial details about your host country.** You do not need to have been to the country (though it can help if you have); but you *do* need to read about it in depth. We require all Fulbright applicants to read a complete book about their proposed country. We also require that they read their country’s description **carefully** and follow up on anything that it requires or suggests (such as learning some of the language before you go).

GR 3. Avoid writing anything that could be said by any applicant to your program.

This is a very competitive award — far more so, in fact, than getting into a college like Hope, or even a more selective institution. On average, fewer than one out every five applicants gets an award, and most of those who actually finish the application process tend to be fairly well qualified already. Thus, you absolutely must find ways of differentiating yourself from the crowd.

GR 4. Do not repeat things that are found in other places in your application. Your readers may be reading one hundred applications; don’t annoy them by merely duplicating information. They will already have your transcript and your list of honors and awards; don’t mention these unless you are building a story from them.

GR 5. Avoid broad generalizations. Do not say, for example, that “cultural diversity is very important” or that “everyone should learn a second language.” True as these may be, they don’t help you stand out. Instead, offer an illustrative example — tell a story about how you became convinced of the importance of learning a second language, rather than just saying that it’s a good idea to do so.

GR 6. The previous rule applies to descriptions of your own life as well. Avoid broad generalizations about your experiences, unless you go on to explain them. You gain little from writing, for example, “My time in Antarctica changed my life,” unless you explain *how* it changed your life, and how that change is relevant to your application. Again, a story about some aspect of your time in Antarctica would be much more useful in this context.

GR 7. Do not make explicit statements of religious witness. The Fulbright Commission is a government agency, and cannot take religious affiliation into consideration. Your essay is short; do not waste space including things that the Fulbright Commission is not allowed to consider. Moreover, you may be unfortunate enough to have someone on your committee who is biased against some particular religious perspective (or all of them) — in which case, he or she will already be concerned that you are at Hope College. Please do not give such persons more fuel for their fire, no matter how misguided you think it may be!

GR 8. Avoid clichés and jargon of any kind. This statement came from an actual member of a National Committee that was evaluating applications to Argentina: “If I read about the tango, gauchos, or Borges one more time, I will lose my lunch.” In other words, don’t talk

about the things that “everyone talks about” with regard to your country. Similarly, don’t use stereotyping language about “the industrious Korean people” or “relaxed Spaniards.” While these descriptions may be based on general cultural tendencies, they are not true of everyone (of course); find a more specific, less clichéd way of talking about them.

GR 9. Get help. No one gets awarded a Fulbright without assistance. Ask for help from your academic mentors, and take your essays to trusted friends who will be blunt with you and give you tough, strongly-worded advice about your adherence to these rules. [Make appointments at the Klooster Center for Excellence in Writing](#) early and often through this process; the Writing Assistants are trained to help with fellowship application essays. Send your draft essays to your Fulbright Program Advisors ([Professors Cunningham and Gibbs](#)) so that you can revise your essays multiple times before they are due. In the early stages, keep these essays in the format that is traditionally used for academic manuscripts: **double-spaced, with 1” margins all around, and saved in a Word file** for easy attachment via e-mail. Also, make sure **the filename has your name in it, and indicates which statement it contains** — “SGP Johnson” or similar. Please don’t become one of the hundreds of wayward files in our inboxes labelled “Fulbright.doc” — we’ll never find it.

GR 10. Put your best foot forward. In their final form, your Fulbright essays will be concise, beautifully crafted, and absolutely perfect with regard to grammar and mechanics. You don’t have to start worrying about this right away, when you’re still coming up with ideas and testing them out; still, you should keep in mind — all through your writing process — that this is a highly competitive fellowship, and that good writing is crucial if the Fulbright Commission is to take your application seriously. Particularly as you finalize your essay (after many drafts), make sure you are writing as well as you can, and edit your work carefully. Think back to the pickiest, most demanding teacher of writing that you have ever had, and write in a way that will make that person happy.

PERSONAL STATEMENTS

The following section concerns the personal statement, and is therefore relevant to all applicants, regardless of the kind of award for which you are applying:

Whether you are applying for a Study/Research Grant or for an English Teaching Assistantship, you will be required to submit a personal statement. This is not a résumé (nor a summary of one). It is a narrative an intellectual autobiography in narrative form. When you write it, keep the following things in mind:

PS 1. Use this essay to talk about the development of your mind, your interests, your ambitions, and your priorities. The details of your childhood are not usually relevant in this essay, even though we call the essay a form of biography; it is an *intellectual* autobiography, which means that it needs to focus on the development of your way of thinking about the world.

PS 2. We strongly advise you to talk about people, books, experiences, and ideas that have shaped your interests, especially as they are related to your proposal. Remember that the Selection Committee will be composed of people with Ph.D.'s who have devoted their lives to education; they will not be enthusiastic about a statement that never mentions a book, a course, a teacher, or an important idea.

PS 3. Remember that the Fulbright Commission will not be able to ask you follow-up questions, so you must explain yourself fully in your essay. Consider carefully the details you choose to include. When a Committee member has read your personal statement, that person should feel something akin to having sat down and talked with you for ten minutes or so. In other words, your essay needs to paint a picture of you as a person, particularly with regard to the way you think and act in the world.

THE STATEMENT OF GRANT PURPOSE — FOR ETA APPLICANTS

Note: this section is only for those applying for an English Teaching Assistant (ETA) award. If you are applying for a research/study award (also known as an “Academic” grant or a “Fulbright Full Grant”), skip this section and go on to the next one.

ETA 1. Explain why you want to undertake an ETA opportunity. In some sense, this is what your essay as a whole should do; it should give the Committee reasons to send you abroad for a year to teach English.

ETA 2. Explain why you are applying to this specific country. This is urgently important, and is a point at which many writers have difficulty. If you have already been to the country or if you have an ongoing academic connection to it (because of your major, for example), then you will have a great deal to say here. If you picked your country out of a hat, then you will need to have heeded RULE #2 above in order to have adequate material to answer this point. Don't try to write your essay without this knowledge. Again, stories about how you got interested in your country are always more successful than mere declarations of general fascination (no matter how enthusiastically worded).

ETA 3. Describe your specific qualifications, training, experiences, and anything else that you will bring to the classroom that will enrich the learning experience of English language learners in your host country. You don't need to be an education major, but you should be able to tell the story of one or two experiences that you had which make it clear that you could take on this kind of work. Tutoring experience is often cited here, but don't overlook other teaching-like experiences that you may have had that would prepare you for this: coaching, camp-counseling, and even small-group work in your own classes might be relevant. Again, don't just say you did it —tell a story about it.

ETA 4. Offer a few specific ideas about how you might engage with students and help them to learn English. Again, if you don't bring a background in education, note the kinds of experiences mentioned in the previous item for ideas about how you might generate these

examples. To the extent possible, these ideas should be specific to your country, and demonstrate that you understand the kinds of challenges faced by English Language Learners whose mother tongue is the language of the country to which you are applying.

ETA 5. Explain how you expect to benefit from the assignment. Note well: this should not be primarily about how a Fulbright will advance your career, get you a better job, or provide a great springboard for graduate school. It will, in fact, probably do all these things! Nevertheless, this in itself is not a reason for the National Screening Committee to consider spending tens of thousands of taxpayer dollars to send you abroad for a year. You should mention your future plans, but the accent should be on how your Fulbright year will make you a better, more internationally-aware, more culturally-competent person as you pursue these plans. Describe what you hope to learn from your Fulbright experience.

ETA 6. Describe your plans for civic engagement outside the classroom. This is a very important part of the Fulbright experience, particular for the ETA awards. Teaching assignments are part-time, and the Fulbright Commission will want to know how you will spend the rest of your time. More specifically, they will want to know that you are going to go out and get involved with people from your host country, and not just stay in your room and Skype with your friends. You should build on your own interests and abilities, and then do some research about how being involved in these things would differ in your host country than they do here. Explain how you'll find your points of engagement and what you hope to do. Keep all this in the conditional/subjunctive mode, because of course you can't be sure that you'll be placed in a location that will have exactly what you need (an orchestra you want to join, a social services agency where you want to volunteer, a soccer club — okay, never mind, everyplace has a soccer club, except for some cities in the United States). Many people try to focus on what they'd do at their school (start an after-school club or whatever), but we generally advise against this; the Committee knows that you'll get pulled in to do a million things at your school, and they're more interested in how you'll make cultural connections beyond that environment.

ETA 7. Do not make your Statement of Grant Purpose location-specific within the host country, unless specifically requested to do so in the country summary. ETAs will be placed by the Fulbright Commission or the U.S. embassy in the host country; nothing addressed in your statement should be location-specific, since you will not know where you will be based and what particular resources will be available.

ETA 8. Make sure you identify what you plan to do (which will be: teach English in your country) early in your statement of grant purpose. Think of this as the “thesis statement” of your essay. It might be part of the first sentence (if it's a well-crafted first sentence), or perhaps the last sentence in your first paragraph (which would come as a logical culmination of the claims in your first few sentences). The Fulbright Commission should not have to search for an explanation of what you want to do.

ETA 9. Remember that you applying to teach English. This means that general rules 9 and 10 (in the previous section) are *especially* important for your application. Your writing ability will be, in every sense, an important demonstration of your qualifications. Your knowledge of English should be displayed to your best possible advantage.

ETA 10. Some countries provide more specific guidance about proposals for non-teaching projects by ETA awardees. Some countries suggest that your project may include study and/or research relevant to the host country, specific volunteer activities, or a combination of these. **Read your country description carefully to see whether, in your case, this is a requirement;** if so, it will have a section marked “Supplemental Project” (or words to that effect). If you are writing a proposal that includes an out-of-class project, be sure to include the following things:

- An explanation of why your project is appropriate for your country;
- A discussion of the skills and talents you bring to the project;
- An explanation of the way the project fits into your educational or career plan;
- An explanation of the ways in which the project contributes to the Fulbright goal of intercultural understanding and engagement with the host culture.

THE STATEMENT OF GRANT PURPOSE — FOR RESEARCH/ STUDY CANDIDATES

Note: this section is only for those applying for a research/study award (also known as an “Academic” grant or a “Fulbright Full Grant”); it does not apply to applicants for the English Teaching Assistantship. (See the section above for ETAs.)

RS 1. Develop an intellectually-compelling and feasible project or justification for pursuing a graduate degree program. This is the most important factor in presenting a successful application. The first step is to familiarize yourself with the country summary for the program to which you are applying. You should ensure that your Statement of Grant Purpose fits the program guidelines for the host country. There are slightly different expectations for research grants (when you propose a specific project) and study grants (when you pursue a program of coursework); see the website for more details on this distinction, and make sure you know which one(s) are available for your country. When you write about your plans, make sure you identify your project or your course of study very clearly, and that you do so early in your statement of grant purpose; the Fulbright Commission should not have to search for an explanation of what you want to do.

RS 2. Be as specific as you can when you describe your project. You should spend some time thinking hard about what you want to do, and your thoughtfulness should be evident in your statement of grant purpose. It should avoid discipline-specific jargon, and not be more technical than necessary; however, keep in mind that all your readers will be Ph.D.’s and will usually have enough broad general knowledge to understand your field at a general level. They will want applicants to get to the point about the “who, what, when, where, why and how” of the project. The tone should be serious and scholarly, but not overly recondite.

RS 3. Identify a scholar or scholars with whom you would like to work. As part of your preparation for applying for this scholarship, you will (in most cases) need to obtain a Letter of Affiliation from an institution of higher education in your host country. Ask your

mentors (in your field of research) here at Hope for help identifying potential contacts. (For a few countries, you are instructed NOT to do this. Read the Fulbright materials for your chosen country carefully.) If you do need a letter of affiliation — and most of these awards do in fact require one — start the process of contacting potential host scholars right away. Once you have established that a scholar is willing to host you, you will need to ask that person to provide a letter, on university letterhead, indicating that you are welcome as a student or as a researcher. Keep this letter safe, and keep track of all e-mail and other correspondence with potential scholars so that you can return to this material if need be.

RS 4. Explain how you will make use of the host institution. For most countries, the Fulbright Commission expects that you will do work within the host institution, and will probably attend university lectures at least part-time. Use your proposal to explain what you would like to study. Use this opportunity to fill in gaps in your education, or to develop your interests in a way related to your research project. Be sure to read the details about your country on the website. To the extent appropriate for your country, include answers to the following questions: What effect will the culture and politics of the host country have on the work? Will the resources of the host country support the project? Are there any possible feasibility concerns that the project could provoke?

RS 5. Talk about the significance of the project you have proposed. Why is it important? What will your work contribute? Don't be overly grandiose in your claims here, but on the other hand, this is no time to be timid. You are applying to go abroad and to undertake a year-long research project, so it should have real scholarly outcomes of some sort.

RS 6. Explain your research methodology and your goals. Do not ignore this requirement. It is important that you demonstrate that you understand how you will conduct your research, and what you expect to accomplish. In the process of doing so, you will also be demonstrating that you have an adequate academic background for this kind of work. Your methodology section should also contain a timeline; you will need to make it clear that you can complete your project within the time period of the grant (usually one academic year).

RS 7. Include academic citations, usually in footnotes. While the Fulbright Commission does not expect a bibliography with your proposal, you need to discuss the scholars and written texts that have influenced your ideas and your proposal. You need to be able to show that you are a serious scholar of the subject area, so think hard about what it means to demonstrate that in your field. Think about the many books and journals you've read that are specific to your field, and write in a way that demonstrates that you can (at least potentially) swim with the big fish!

RS 8. Indicate what contribution your project will make to cross-cultural interaction and mutual understanding. This section needs to say more than simply "it's important to work with people from other countries," or words to that effect. Exactly how will your project contribute to mutual understanding and cross-cultural interaction? What will be possible in your envisioned collaboration with a scholar from another country, which

would not be possible if you stayed in the United States and conducted your research or study program here?

RS 9. Demonstrate that you have sufficient language skills for the project being proposed, for accomplishing the basic purposes of the Fulbright Program. If you do not have any knowledge of the host country's language, what other means have you devised to accomplish these goals? You should consider that, even if a country indicates that English will be sufficient for carrying out the proposed project, for purposes of Community Engagement, at least a basic level of language skill should be obtained prior to leaving the United States for the host country.

RS 10. Research projects require funding. Remember that the Fulbright Commission generally does not fund independent research expenses. If you expect to have research expenses besides your housing, travel, cost-of-living stipend, and health insurance, you will need to address your ability to pay these expenses. Most research applicants eliminate this problem by finding an affiliation with an existing research project in the host country.

RS 11. Check that you have covered all the bases. Here are two checklists for research/study candidates — one or the other will apply to you:

For applicants proposing research projects:

- With whom do you propose to work, and what do you propose to do?
- What is important, significant, or innovative about the project?
- What are the specific research goals and methodologies?
- What contribution will the project make toward the Fulbright goal of promoting cultural exchange and mutual understanding?
- When will you carry out the project? Include a rough timeline.
- Where do you propose to conduct your work, and why was this location chosen?
- Why do you want to undertake this project?
- Why does the project have to be conducted in the country of application?
- How will your project help further your academic or professional development?
- How will you engage with the host country? Give specific ideas for civic engagement.
- What are your qualifications for carrying out this project?

For applicants proposing to enroll in graduate degree programs:

- Why do you want to pursue the proposed program in this particular country?
- What are your reasons for selecting a particular institution?
- Do you have the requisite field-specific background for the proposed program?
- How will you gain a better understanding of the people and cultures of this country? Demonstrate your commitment through volunteer and extra-curricular plans.
- Do you have sufficient language skills to successfully complete the program?
- Do you have the flexibility and dynamism necessary for active involvement in the host country?

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