



## Successful Fellowship Recipients Offer Their Suggestions

1. Read multiple previous applications from successful fellowship awardees. Even unsuccessful applications can offer insight into fundable projects, approaches to persuading the reviewers, and technical requirements of the application process.
2. Start planning and writing with plenty of time – both for you to write a strong proposal and for your committee members to write stellar letters of recommendations.
3. Before deciding to apply for a fellowship, check the funder’s web site or contact a program officer to get as much information as possible. For example, last year Fulbright funded 50 percent of graduate applicants to Germany but only two percent of applicants to New Zealand. With a choice between the two countries, chose Germany. That said, write a strong proposal and you can apply for even the “stretch” fellowships.
4. Know the application requirements.
5. If you view your application as a “shot in the dark,” then determine a way for it to “emerge from the shadows.” Demonstrate its originality and innovation – but make sure you describe a project that the reviewers will perceive as possible, do-able
6. Cultivate relationships with faculty based on your shared intellectual enterprise. Don’t let faculty’s busy schedules or slight differences in interests deter you. Faculty *can* write glowing letters. Know which faculty “has the clout to write one sentence that has [the impact] of an eight-page letter” written by anyone else.
7. Start your application with a captivating contradiction or puzzle. Ask yourself, “How bored might the readers be after reading dozens or hundreds of application?” Make it interesting. [Several years ago I read a fellowship application that began, “Think of Walt Whitman. Now think of Walt Whitman dancing.” I won’t forget that successful application – the student competed successfully for Northwestern University’s top fellowship for doctoral students. ]
8. Describe your project with a concise and engaging phrase. Reviewers will recall and refer to your project in a memorable way as they discuss it.
9. Write a persuasive story, coherent with your background. Be realistic; demonstrate that your project is feasible. “And you know this *why*?” Show that you have the skills needed to complete the proposed project. Show that you have preliminary research that serves as foundation for the proposed project.

10. Write a basis, even generic, fellowship application; then rework it when specific fellowship RFAs [request for applications] come along.
11. Highlight your preliminary efforts on the proposed project and how your subsequent work will build on the initial work. Clearly show how the requested funding will contribute to the project.
12. Consider the audience; if yours is a small subfield, readers may be in your discipline but not in your specialized area. Some applications require a personal statement; others a cover letter. In these two documents use less technical, “jargony” language in your writing. In the initial review stages and especially with large numbers of applications, a broader audience will all read the personal statement; in later stages of review, you’re more likely to have specialized readers reviewing your proposal.
13. Make sure your application conveys your passion for the project. Describe how you will contribute your unique background or experiences or talents to this project to persuade the reviewers to award the fellowship to you. Demonstrate that you are the best person to do this research.
14. Technical requirements often include a page limit for the application. Observe the rules but be creative in ways to incorporate additional information. Often the budget is not counted in the total page limit, so include additional information with a budget explanation. You’ll gain space for more substantive details of your project in the narrative.
15. Fellowships that let you travel to do research also want to know that you’ll be a good ambassador to the countries you visit. Come across as a good person to represent the funding agency and the United States. It doesn’t hurt to sound “appealing.” (After I won my fellowship I attended a reception for successful applicants. The selection committee mentioned unsuccessful applicants whose attitudes or personalities would not have made them “good ambassadors.”)
16. Some fellowships have additional purposes and criteria. NSF, for example, asks you to respond to this: “How will your research promote diversity in the field?” So be prepared to write about more than just your research.
17. Be confident in your writing and interview – but not cocky.
18. When you complete a draft of your application, ask as many of your committee members and previous fellowship award winners as possible to read it and offer suggestions. The more feedback the better --especially from colleagues not in your specialty. These early readers will catch the “nonsense” in your ideas and writing.
19. Schedule writing for your best hours of the day. Don’t still be writing “when you are dying.” Get it done early enough to be able to revise later.

20. Some fellowships have a two-part selection process that includes an interview after the initial review of written applications. If your application makes it to the interview stage, be thoroughly familiar with what you wrote. I wasn't -- and it was embarrassing. [Also be prepared to describe how your project has evolved since you submitted the application. All projects change to some degree over time; the interview committee will expect that you have progressed in your thinking if not actual research and will ask about any changes or new ideas in your project.]
  
21. Get *some* funding. [It's good experience to write applications, and being successful will bring recognition – as well as the appreciation of those who would be funding you otherwise, i.e., your program or the graduate school.]

Note: The students listed below successfully competed for Ford, Fulbright, Javits, Mellon, National Science Foundation (NSF), Social Science Research Council (SSRC), and Wenner Gren Fellowships. They were panelists at a fellowship application writing workshop at Columbia University's Graduate School of Art and Sciences and offered their advice to fellow graduate students in the social sciences and humanities. Their suggestions have been compiled and edited, including some additional information, and then reviewed by the panelists. I thank them for allowing their suggestions to be shared. **Gregory Baggett**, History; **Erin Hasinoff**, Anthropology; **Justine Hoffman**, Music; **Patience Kabamba**, Anthropology; **Laura Paler**, Political Science; **Nathan Perl-Rosenthal**, History; **Jyoti Raghu**, Religion; **Anna Ratner**, Art History; **Chiara Tessaris**, History; **Rebecca Weitz-Shapiro**, Political Science; **Lindsay Weiss**, Anthropology