



Office of Fellowships

<https://www.amherst.edu/academiclife/support/fellowships>

Christine Overstreet, Director

212 Converse Hall/home
coverstreet@amherst.edu, X2536

Suzanne Spencer, Assistant

213 Converse Hall/home
sspencer@amherst.edu

Reflection Questions for Personal Statements

Most national foundations ask candidates to write a Personal Statement as part of their fellowship application. While this essay provides a welcome opportunity to distinguish yourself as a candidate, the prospect of writing it can seem daunting. In college, students become adept at many kinds of writing – explaining scientific processes in lab reports; summarizing secondary literature; analyzing viewpoints; discussing the merits of a work of art; and arguing and supporting a thesis statement. This kind of essay is different, and the approach to writing it starts with asking yourself some questions.

In a personal statement, you are asked to describe what drives you intellectually and personally. To do this, you must spend time reflecting – carefully considering your past choices, current activities, and future goals. Listed below are some questions designed to help you do this. You might consider spending some time each summer or between semesters reviewing these questions and recording your responses. Consider these questions in any order you like, choosing the categories that appeal to you the most first. Once you’ve answered the questions, look for threads – connections between your experiences, strengths, influences, and goals. By the time you need to write a personal statement, you will have plenty of material from which to draw in order to address the specific fellowship’s essay prompt.

Intellectual Influences

- What writers or articles in your field of study have made you think differently, and how?
- Who were/are your favorite professors or courses in college, and why? How has each influenced you?
- What was the most interesting paper you ever wrote in your major, and what makes it so?
- What book, play, article, or film do you think everyone should read or see? Why?
- What is the single most important concept you have learned in college?

Academic Development

- What are some of the big questions in your field and how are researchers tackling them?
- What study or laboratory skills have you honed to date?
- Have you done any independent research or study? Briefly describe any independent work you have done and what you learned from it. Write about your specific role in the research and the skills you used/developed.
- What classes will you take between now and the time the fellowship takes effect? Why did you choose them?
- Have you done or do you plan to do a thesis or capstone project? What is it about? Why did you choose to do independent work instead of taking more courses?
- If a thesis is not part of your plan, why not? What skills, content, or experience will you gain from pursuing more coursework instead of doing independent work?
- Have you ever presented at a conference or meeting? How did this experience challenge or inspire you?
- Did you take any classes that were “outliers”? Why did you take them? What did you learn? How did they influence your perspective in your major field or otherwise?

Goals – Inspiration and Motivation

- What are three possible directions your future could take, career-wise? In five years? Ten years? Twenty?
- Do you think of yourself as a person with a mission? What is it? Is there something you want to fight for?
- Have there been turning points or shifts in your goals or intended path? What was the occasion?
- Are there life experiences or people who have influenced your goals? How?
- What causes are you committed to, and why? How do you show your commitment right now?
- When does time disappear for you? What does this tell you about your passions and values?
- What public and what private figures do you admire the most? Why? What qualities impress you?

Worldview

- What do you think about how the world works? Do you think there is a benevolent master designer behind it? Or do think things happen randomly? How does this shape your approach to your own life and choices?
- Do you identify with a particular political party? Why? Have your views changed on this while in college?
- What issues/problems in society do you think most need addressing?
- What good do you think is happening in the world? What is happening that makes you mad? Frustrated?
- What would you like to fix and how would you go about it?

Interests

- What do you do besides study? What are your hobbies, jobs, and extracurricular activities (student organizations, athletics, art, music)? What do you get out of doing these things?
- What do you daydream about?
- What have you become interested in through work or volunteer experiences?
- What kinds of books (for pleasure reading) appeal to you? Why?
- What is your favorite place to be? Inside? Outside? Alone? In the company of others?
- What kinds of music/film/games/sports appeal to you? Why?

Attributes

- What characteristics enable you to succeed when you're trying to do something hard?
- What are your shortcomings? How do they relate to your strengths?
- How would you describe the way you interact with others? Do you like this about yourself? Want to change?
- When you want to convince others to do or join something, how do you go about it? If you wanted to spearhead a campaign, how would you get others on board?
- When have persuaded, inspired, or led others? What did you learn about yourself and them?
- To what extent do your current commitments reflect your most strongly held values?
- What about your ethnicity, gender, nationality, religion, family make-up or other identity markers has shaped you? How? What have you embraced or rejected? Why?
- What makes you quirky? What makes you predictable? What makes you laugh?
- What do you wish others could know about you that they can't see from the outside?
- Do you enjoy competition? What do you like about it? How does it make you feel?
- When collaborating on a project, what role do you typically take on? How do you contribute to group work?
- Has there been something in your life, apart from school, that has required you to persist? How so?

Life Experiences

- Have you had special life experiences—an unusual upbringing, a disability, extraordinary responsibility – that have shaped you? How so?
- Have you taken risks? How did they turn out?
- What experiences as a volunteer or traveler have influenced your choices academically or personally?
- What is your family like? How do you think your family has shaped who you are?

Accomplishments

- What have you accomplished so far that you are most proud of?
- What have you done that demonstrates significant drive or perseverance?
- What skills or attributes helped you accomplish these goals?
- What has changed as a result of your involvement in it?

You certainly won't have to answer all of these questions in one personal statement! But by reflecting over time, you will discover and be able to describe what really makes you tick. This is what makes a personal statement personal! More than a recitation of accomplishments or recap of your academic record, a strong personal statement is a *narrative* that tells the reader who you are, what motivates you, and where you are going. Of course, before you draft your personal statement for an application, **read the specific prompt** provided by the fellowship foundation. Make sure you are answering the question(s) *they* are asking! And once you've written your essay, don't stop thinking about these questions.

Reflecting on your journey throughout your life will help you *find* the meaning, and *make* the meaning.