



Chapter 4: Selection Criteria

Strong Watson Nominees exhibit a collection of Person markers that, together, evidence “unusual promise.” Only after being convinced by the Person does the Selection Committee look at the other side of the equation, the Project. This differs from many academic fellowships in that we fully expect the Project to change in new contexts; indeed, we require no formal research output. To make the point, a board member once said, “We’re not looking for a polio vaccine; we’re looking for Jonas Salk.” Our investment is in people, not projects.

Once the Selection Committee is convinced by the Person, they look for specific Project markers. Taken together, a strong Person and Project make for good Fit and an excellent Watson Nominee. This 3-marker approach – Person, Project, Fit – is applied to every nominee during the selection process, with the recognition that markers will present differently across the wide range of students and projects that are the Watson Application Community. Below are the Person, Project, and Fit markers. Each Person marker includes a supporting question (Q:).



Person Markers

Leadership: The capacity to command a following for what one thinks, does, or creates. The individual has – often with others, not always – brought a significant action to sustainment. Beyond managing processes, they see opportunities in challenges and motivate solutions. Leadership may also be seen in authorship.

Q: What has the individual done/created/organized that wouldn't have happened without them?

Because Watson’s Vision is to create more humane and effective leaders, this is the first marker.

Responsibility: The ability to follow through on commitments without supervision. The individual is accountable to themselves and others.

Q: How has the candidate shown ownership in his work or community?

Integrity: Strong ethical character and trustworthiness.

Q: How has the individual exhibited honest and principled behavior?

The fellowship is an honor-bound program that requires a high-degree of self-governance.



Emotional Maturity: Inner stability, a grounded individual. They are thoughtful, relate well to others, and are honest with themselves.

Q: When faced with difficult personal challenges how does the individual respond?

Imagination: The power of framing new and striking conceptions. The individual has the vision to integrate ideas into forward-thinking action.

Q: How does the individual think beyond apparent boundaries?

Independence: Self-reliance; freedom from the influence, guidance, or control of others.

Q: When has the individual carved a personal path to a meaningful end?

Resourcefulness: The ability to deal effectively with problems using what is available. They do a lot with a little and achieve more than could be expected.

Q: How does the individual advance when resources are scarce?

Courage: They show a boldness of spirit, and persevere in pursuit of a purpose. They are unafraid to support the underdog or unpopular.

Q: How has the individual overcome moral, emotional or physical challenge?

Project Markers

Organic: The project grows from the nominee's background, interests, and activities. The most organic projects show deep, tangible investment. We are not looking for the project to have been completed once before but need to see convincing engagement in the themes that underpin the interest. Recent topics bubbled up from a junior-year class or recent activity require applicants to "catch us up", that is, show depth and capability without the benefit of longstanding interest. It is possible, but we don't see many of them.

Inspiring: The project is deeply meaningful to the individual's life and will provide the energy to sustain and propel the nominee through the ups and downs of the year.

Open: We often say that "Watson is wide." The project should take advantage of the Fellowship's unique latitude, its flexibility and permission to stay curious, even fail. The project should reject linear achievement and professional advancement as its central aim.

Bold: Provided a project is realistic, applicants are encouraged to push the envelope. To stretch. Stretch will look different for everyone. Someone who has lived abroad several times for extended periods, exploring aspects of the topic, independently, should be able to convey how the Watson would be a significantly new—transformative, not just additive—experience.



Realistic: Without institutional affiliations, Watson Fellows have little support structure in the field. Given this independence, the project must balance boldness with pragmatism. The project should demonstrate that the nominee isn't wearing rose-colored glasses and is thinking in feasible terms. "What is achievable, given my subject matter, my preparation, my contacts, my funding, my skills?"

Connected: While the Watson Year is independent, the project is intended to be experienced with others. As part of the application process we strongly advise candidates to contact inspiring institutions and thought-leaders, as well as communities and individuals in-country, to build connection and insight. The committee should see that nominees have a plan to thrive during the year.

3-Dimensional: A Watson Project should convey a broad approach with multiple plans. These plans may be conveyed through a diversity of questions, cultures, groups, sectors, people, functions, and novel ways to challenge the project topic.

Three Project Types

The foundation and our partners have identified three project types that require a second-level of inquiry.

Identity Some projects are self-focused. The project seeks others like the nominee. If the project narrowly seeks personal understanding, it is important to discern whether wider views will be explored. Could the project be completed in the nominee's home country, or hometown?

Justice Some projects are motivated by justice, but the Watson is not a social change or development grant. Nor does the Watson lend itself to biases about what should be "fixed" in other cultures. If the project seeks to right a wrong or if there is a clear agenda, will the nominee stay open and embrace disparate views and people?

Pain Some applications are conceived from painful personal experience. Some projects seek the hardship of others. Is the nominee prepared to engage with their own pain or the pain of others for a year, in unfamiliar communities? Does the nominee have the emotional maturity to connect with others while keeping their own health and safety top of mind?

Fit

The Fit marker is expressed in two ways.

- How well the Person fits the Project: The more organic the better.
- How well the Person fits the Watson Mission: The fellowship must be in service to creating more humane and effective leaders.