



The Challenger

The Newsletter of the MU McNair Scholars Program

September 2008

Writing a Personal Statement

One of the first things the McNair Scholars Program has students concentrate on is their personal statement for graduate school. The personal statement, also called a graduate school essay, a statement of interest, or a statement of purpose, is the student's chance to describe his or her ambitions and aspirations in his or her own words. Everything else in the graduate school application is from an outside perspective including the letters of recommendations, transcripts, and test scores. The personal statement gives the student a chance to explain or highlight specific areas that are important to graduate school. It allows a student to show a deeper, personal commitment to the field.

Graduate admissions committees review hundreds of applications so it is important to have a short, one to two page personal statement with a hook to catch their attention. A hook illustrates one's personal connection to an intended path; an anecdote or unique perspective of one's academic career. The introduction is the chance to make the reader want to read the rest of the essay. However, it should be brief and not off-the-wall, since it may present a different picture than intended. Keep in mind, this is not a report or a term paper. Instead, the personal statement is not only a chance to get into a graduate school of interest but also to be awarded fellowships and other forms of financial aid at that institution.

The majority of the personal statement is a chance to describe experiences, past research, professional goals, and motivation for pursuing this interest. These all illustrate influences and are an opportunity to demonstrate the desire and determination to pursue a higher degree. The essay is also an opportunity to explain any gaps or discrepancies in one's academic record. Often times this explanation shows growth as a student and a commitment to be successful in the post-baccalaureate career.

The goal is to come across as a mature student who has thoroughly thought out the personal statement. Take time in developing it. There will be multiple statements, each one catering to each specific institution. Emphasize the potential to contribute to the field. Do not lie or pander to the graduate admissions committee. They will see through this

and it will only hurt one's chances. Additionally, make sure to follow the directions addressed in the questions posed, staying within any restrictions in length for the essay.

Finally, the conclusion is an opportunity to reaffirm what you have written and to tie everything together. However, don't restate and summarize what is already written. Instead use it as a chance to narrow the focus and relate it all back to the central idea. Leave the graduate admissions committee with a positive view of you.

[parts adapted from sciencecareers.org and Writing a Personal Statement by Howard Adams]



2007-2008 McNair Scholar Renae Mayes examines a point on his personal statement to her mentor, Dr. Michael Mobley, Educational, School, & Counsel Psychology. Ms. Mayes is now a graduate student at the University of Maryland.



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Tips on Fellowships

Make Time: It may seem like a large task, but break it down into smaller tasks and it can be much easier. Start early! It takes more than one-weekend or even one-month. Planning ahead of time can create a stronger application.

Examine the Past: What have previous winners done? Are there any winners from Mizzou? Has the fellowship committee changed the process at all? Often times the official website will give more information than other sources. Visit it and find out the true purpose of the award.

Narrow Your Focus: Stay up to date with the latest research in your field. In order to be clear on what you want to pursue, you need to be on top of the current literature.

Your Idea: For research based fellowships, make sure your interest of study follows logically from existing lines of inquiry. This builds on your narrow focus and allows for a more rounded application.

Know your Audience: Where does your application go after you submit it? Have you written clearly and adequately articulated your desire. Reduce the use of technical jargon. Many fellowships are not graded by those that are fluent in your specific topic.

Overall goal of application: Most fellowships goal are to fund you, not your research. You must demonstrate that you can conceptualize and present a strong potential research path.

Answer Each Area: Make sure you answer each area of the fellowship application. Are they focusing on potential for research or the potential scholar? Don't neglect areas of the application that seem obvious to you. Remember, the readers don't have a clue as to who you are.

Prepare your Recommenders: Be able to show that many faculty members have invested in your success. Fellowship committees see recommenders commitment to your success and know that you are worthy of an award. Some angles include having each recommender concentrate on individual aspects of your qualifications. In addition, give your recommenders writing samples, even a copy of your fellowship application draft.

Apply!: One thing every fellowship awardee has in common is that they applied. Many fellowships go un-awarded because people didn't apply. For some fellowships, let the committee decide you aren't eligible. There is one guarantee, if you don't apply, you won't win.

(Parts adapted by Tomorrow's Research: Career Advice for Scientists by Michael Kiparsky)

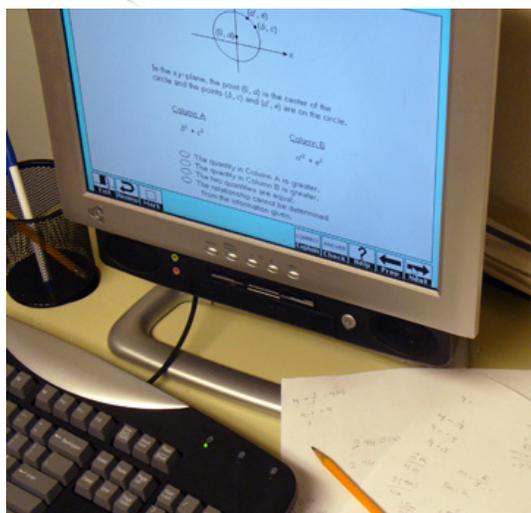
Fellowship Sources

- **Scholar Resource Site** (mcnair.missouri.edu/scholarresource) includes a compilation of fellowships that may be of interest to McNair Scholars.
- **MU Fellowship Office** (fellowships.missouri.edu) has listings of nationally competitive fellowships as well as additional resources.
- **Community of Science (COS) Funding Opportunities** (fundingopps.cos.com) is a searchable database which MU subscribes to that contains many fellowships including those not well known.
- **MU Graduate School Fellowship Database** (gradschool.missouri.edu) includes internal and external fellowship opportunities.

Specific Fellowships of Interest

- **GEM Fellowship** (gemfellowship.org) aims to address the shortfall of American engineering and scientific talent.
- **The Paul & Daisy Soros Fellowships for New Americans** (pdsoros.org) is for new immigrants or children of immigrants. All majors are eligible.
- **Ford Foundation Diversity Fellowship** (www7.nationalacademies.org/FORDfellowships) for minorities considering the professoriate.
- **National Science Foundation Graduate Research Foundation Fellowship Program** (www.nsfgrfp.org) for science, technology, mathematic and engineering students at the early phase of research.
- **The George J. Mitchell Scholarship** ([us-irelandalliance.org/mitchellscholarships](http://irelandalliance.org/mitchellscholarships)) graduate scholarship to study in Ireland.

The Graduate Record Exam



How do I know if I need to take a subject test?

Some fields require you to take a subject test. The best way to find out is by examining the schools where you'll be applying. They should list if they are requiring them or not. In general the subject tests are: Biochemistry, Cell & Molecular Biology, Biology, Chemistry, Computer Science, Literature in English, Mathematics, Physics, and Psychology. To register for the subject test, refer to the registration form in the GRE bulletin.

How does the computer-based general test work?

At the start of the test, you are presented with test questions of moderate difficulty. As you answer each question the computer scores that question and uses that information, as well as your responses to any preceding questions and information about the test design, to determine which question is presented next. As long as you respond correctly to each question, questions of increased difficulty will be presented. Conversely, after an incorrect responses questions of lesser difficulty will typically be presented next. This means that different test takers will be given different questions. Items that are more difficult are given more weight in the score. One benefit of this system is that fewer questions will be asked in order to score your test.

Since the computer scores each question before selecting the next one, you must answer each question when it is presented. For this reason, once you answer a question and move on to another, you cannot go back and change your answer. The computer has already incorporated both your answer and requirements of the test design into the selection of the next question for you.

It is imperious to start early in preparing for the GRE. In addition to taking a practice test, scholars also have the option of participating in a month long GRE Preparation Class with instructors trained by Educational Testing Service (ETS), the organization that administers the GRE.

The GRE computer based general test may be taken year-around. However, in preparing applications for graduate school, it is recommended that the GRE is taken prior to November 1st of the senior year. This gives prospective institutions enough time to consider the complete application and offer an acceptance, as well as financial aid, in a timely manner.

How do I register for the GRE?

All McNair Scholars are given a fee reduction waiver. You will need to fill out the registration form located in the GRE Bulletin. You'll need to allow 4 weeks for the processing of this form. You'll then receive an Authorization Voucher. Upon receipt of the voucher, you may contact the testing center of your choice and schedule the test.

Where do I schedule to take the test?

If you wish to take the GRE here at the University of Missouri, you may contact Testing Services at 884-0911. Register early to receive your preferred test date. Although you may take the test year round, October through January are busy months to take the test. Testing Services has a limited number of spaces available for each day. For other testing sites, **please read the entire GRE Bulletin**. You may also visit their website at www.gre.org/cbtttest.html.

More GRE Prep

- **Educational Testing Services** (ets.org) The writers of the GRE have helpful test preparation materials and sample tests.
- **Free Rice** (freerice.com) For each correct answer, 20 grains of rice is donated to the UN World Food Program.
- **GRE Preparation Tests** (english-test.net/gre) Contains a variety of sample preparation questions.
- **A.Word.A.Day** (wordsmith.org/awad) Sign up for a daily newsletter from linguaphiles and explore past words they've highlighted.
- **GRE PowerPrep** (McNair Resource Site) Download the software that mimics the actual test.



Upcoming McNair Events

A look at a few of the upcoming workshops and events for McNair Scholars

— Workshops —

- Statement of Purpose and Developing a Curriculum Vitae** (Oct 9th)
- Senior Retreat** (Oct 18th)
- Etiquette Dinner** (Oct. 16th)
- Ronald E. McNair Day** (Oct. 26):
- Financing Graduate School** (Oct 30)
- Graduate Admissions Follow-up** (Nov. 13)

— Special Events —

The Compact for Faculty Diversity (Oct 24-26; Tampa, FL) Two McNair Scholars, after being nominated and selected, will attend this conference, whose goal is to increase the number of minority students who earn doctoral degrees and become college and university faculty.

17th Annual National McNair Conference (Oct 31-Nov 2; Delevan, WI) Five McNair Scholars will present their research and also attend workshops, seminars, and panel discussions related to the graduate admissions process.



The Welcome Picnic was the first event the 2008-2009 McNair Scholars participated in. Here they were able to meet with other scholars and learn what the year had in store for them.

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