

Telling a Story: The Secret Ingredient to Getting an NSF Fellowship

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The National Science Foundation (NSF) Graduate Research Fellowship Program (GRFP) provides 3 years of generous funding for graduate students in the STEM or STEM education fields. The GRFP is one of the most esteemed and competitive fellowships a graduate student can receive, so it is no surprise that 16,500 students applied in 2015, with only 2,000 receiving the award.

“OK, so how do I get one?” Unfortunately, this is not an easy question to answer. You can find many blog posts and websites outlining tips and tricks for applying; however, what exactly distinguishes the winners from the other accomplished applicants is not always clear-cut. One factor — in the STEM fields, at least — may be the underappreciated art of telling a story with your writing. With grant money dwindling, the ability to tell a story may be a critical aspect of receiving funding. A story goes beyond simply listing events and connects these events to each other in a clear, coherent manner. In doing so, the story provides a structure that holds meaning and leaves the reader with no doubt about why it has been told. When it comes to your NSF application, telling a story makes it easy for the reviewers to believe that your previous experiences combine to support the argument that you fit the ideals, goals, and purpose of the NSF GRFP.

I will outline several ways to tell a story with your application. While this article is tailored to the NSF, the tips may be useful for other grant applications.

Read the program solicitation: If you know what they are looking for, you can tailor your application to maximize your chances.

The reviewers know the program solicitation backwards and forwards. So should you. The NSF reports that the GRFP is “a critical program in NSF’s overall strategy to develop the globally-engaged workforce necessary to ensure the nation’s leadership in advancing science and engineering research and innovation.” While three pages for a personal statement may seem like a lot of space, it is not enough room to detail each and every one of the activities you have been involved in. Trying to squeeze information in too tightly can make your application difficult to read, which is one of the last things you want when a reviewer has numerous applications to evaluate. If you know what the NSF is looking for, you can focus on your experiences that relate to their goals. Highlight how your experiences and your future aspirations align with the NSF’s mission for the GRFP.

The NSF is funding YOU: Don’t underestimate the importance of the personal statement.

Unlike many grants, the NSF Fellowship is funding you, not just your research. The award is given to students who “have demonstrated their potential for significant research achievements in science and

engineering” (NSF, 2015). They are trying to support the next generation of researchers who will impact not only their fields, but their communities as well. Broader impacts are about the scope and potential influence of your research. This is a space to let yourself shine. Use the personal statement to showcase your experiences that fit into the overarching theme of your application — ideally a theme that ties in the NSF’s stated mission and goals! It’s not just about telling any old story; it’s about telling a story that supports your claim of deserving the NSF Fellowship.

Avoid empty words: How does your academic life provide proof that you will achieve the things you claim?

Think about writing a manuscript for a peer-reviewed journal — every single claim you make must be backed by previous research. The same applies for your personal statement. Stating your ambitious goals and future plans is great, but the key is backing up your claims. For example, anyone can say “I want to become a tenured professor,” but not everyone can provide compelling evidence for why this is possible for them. Drive your message home by clearly stating your goals, providing the evidence, and then stating your goals again.

Weave it all together: Your personal statement and research proposal should not be on opposite ends of the spectrum.

Part of the intellectual merit of your research project is based on your merit to do this work. In other words, your project should not come out of left field. Try to make your personal statement and research proposal a part of the same story. For example, if you have experience in two separate topics or methodologies, it may be beneficial to combine them for your proposal. Although you want to show how you will be moving forward, proving your foundation of knowledge also is critical. The relevant experiences you describe in your personal statement and your current and future interests can be easily, even if subtly, connected to your research proposal. A coherent story is critical; align your experience, your interests, and your future research together.

Not everyone is a born storyteller: Seek out assistance from unexpected places.

When it comes to academic writing, creativity is sometimes abandoned in the favor of rigid reporting (Schimel, 2012). A university’s writing center, often staffed with English or journalism graduate students, can be a great resource, and not just for grammatical help. Even slight structural changes or reordering of sentences can help ensure coherence and flow in your story. Whether it’s at the early stages or after many drafts, getting input from someone whose writing training emphasizes telling a story can be very beneficial.

Although this emphasis on telling a story with your application may not seem intuitive, practicing this type of writing may be useful for things beyond fellowship applications (e.g., writing articles for peer-reviewed journals or press articles meant for the general public).

My final piece of advice is this: No matter how low you may think your chances are, apply. Simply preparing your application is a good experience to have. Applying for funding can be a main aspect of a researcher’s life, so the more experience you have, the better. And if at first you don’t succeed, try, try

again. The reviewers often give constructive feedback that can be used toward applying again or even applying for other fellowships. What do you have to lose?

References

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