

## My Experience Applying for the NSF Graduate Research Fellowship

I tried to better familiarize myself with the NSF Fellowship as early as possible (basically, as soon as I found out about it). Just because you cannot apply until your senior year does not mean you cannot get a head start by finding out before then how to work your way towards winning a fellowship. I prepared for the process for the most part by following the steps I listed on the previous page.

Once I knew about the fellowship, I read sample essays from past winners to look for inspiration for my own essays. On the writing side, I thought it was a great idea that some of the samples include section headers in both of the essays and decided to use this feature in my essays as well. Additionally, reading other essays doesn't just help with writing them. If you are an underclassmen, learning what types of programs other students became involved in for research (Intellectual Merit) and outreach (Broader Impacts) to warrant winning the fellowships can be a great way to find out about new programs that you didn't know about, but might want to participate in before you graduate.

I started writing my personal statement the summer before my senior year. By September, I had a draft that I had looked through and re-written a few times. Meanwhile, I began to brainstorm research ideas in September and after discussing a variety of possibilities with my research advisor, I finally chose a topic to write about in early October. In retrospect, I wish I had settled on a research idea and started writing the Proposed Research essay much earlier. Since I mainly worked on it in October, I ended up spending a ton of my free time that month finishing it up.

As soon as I had a finished draft for either essay, I asked several people – including my research advisor, a professor in a totally different field, and several grad students with experience applying for the fellowship – to read over the essays and give comments. The earlier you do this, the easier it is to digest the comments and make the necessary tweaks to perfect your essays. If you don't wait until the last minute, you can also get a second round of comments if you wish.

I looked through the comments on my essays and made tweaks up until the third to last day before the fellowship application was due. On the day before the fellowship was due (~27 hours before), I clicked the submit button.

\*\*\*One last thing about recommendation letters:

You will need to create an account with NSF, where you need to enter your personal information and also add your recommenders. It's best to do this at least a month before the deadline in order to make sure that your recommenders are aware of the deadlines and what they have to do for their letters.

The NSF Fellowship provides an FAQ page for letter writers. Give this to each of your recommenders. Don't just assume they will find it. Also, it is a good idea to have your recommenders read over your essays (At least one of them should also be one of your proofreaders.)

Your recommenders should be aware that they should comment on both criteria (Intellectual Merit and Broader Impact) whenever possible. Even if all of your recommenders do not write about both criteria, at least one of them should do this. If applicable, it is better if more than one of them do so.

You should also have your recommender(s) with the closest relation to your proposed research write about its feasibility and if applicable, how your past research experience makes you prepared and qualified to carry out your proposed research (this should be applicable!).