

"NSF has funded more than 60,000 graduate fellowships dating back to 1952." - [USC Press](#)

I was a successful first-time applicant in [2023](#) (the first-year of my PhD).

1 Five Tips & Best Practices for Writing

1. Read read read the solicitation and ensure all requirements are satisfied. Particularly, the definitions in the review criteria.
2. Formatting to improve readability for reviewers
 - (a) Have headers and effective header names
 - (b) Use bold, underline, and italicize sparingly. Write like reviewers will read your entire essay
 - (c) Maintain flow via idea organization within paragraphs and sentence linking
3. While addressing all review criteria, be persuasive. Try integrating some of the terms used in the solicitation
Example. "potentially transformative" and its variations
4. Frame the broader impacts of your research to align with your application year's federal budget areas if relevant to your research
Example. NSF priorities on page 116 of the [2023 US Federal Budget Report](#)
5. Get lots of feedback
 - (a) Even though my personal statement was adapted from my PhD application essay, I cycled through 25+ revisions sessions
 - (b) From many people: writing center, peers in various fields, mentors, friends, and PI

2 Three Additional Tips for USC PhD Students

1. Attend the Graduate School Fellowship Bootcamp for NSF, Ford, and other major national awards
 - (a) Eligibility: incoming, 1st year, or 2nd year PhD students
 - (b) Application: CV and 2-page draft personal statement
 - (c) Commitment: 10-day in-person intensive writing workshop in early august (before classes start)

- (d) Benefits: workshops; I got to do peer feedback sessions with PhD students from various disciplines like urban education policy, math, history, ocean sciences, psychology, gerontology; Eligible for a \$1,000 research grant upon completion
- (e) Deadline: Mid July

Note. For incoming PhD students, feel free to email me so I can forward the application link once it comes out

2. Visit the [Engineering in Society \(EiS\) hub](#): Academic Writing and Speaking Tutoring for Viterbi Ph.D. Students (I go there often for other materials so I may see you there!)
3. Check out the 1-day online External Fellowship Award Bootcamp hosted in mid-Sept by VASE
 - (a) In spring semester, there is also a bootcamp for advanced PhD students applying to a wider range of opportunities

3 My Application

My essays and reviews:

- [Personal Statement](#)
- [Research Proposal](#)
- [Reviews](#)

Some stand-out aspects of my personal statement writing with respect to [past examples](#):

1. [My personal statement introduction](#) (the most edited paragraph in the entire application)
2. Intellectual Merit in a sandwich format (paragraph on current work, past work in chronological order, paragraph on current work) instead of all paragraphs in chronological order
3. Broader impacts as a proposed initiative while weaving in how my past experiences help me to carry it out instead of describing only my past broader impacts initiatives

My letters of recommendation:

1. PhD advisor (addresses Intellectual Merit)
2. PI in undergrad (addresses Intellectual Merit)
3. Professor for whom I took two classes and served as a TA in the last semester of undergrad (addresses Broader Impacts)

Two-word advice: Start Early

- I estimate the time I spent on the application was equal to a 4-unit undergrad technical course with finals between late Sept to early Oct