

Hints for Students applying for Fulbrights
NIU Campus Deadline: September 11, 2020

Please read this handout carefully! The information in here comes from watching several different national review sessions and from working with Fulbright applicants for ten years, so it's valuable advice that can help you significantly as you prepare your application.

For all students applying

Start early, at least by April or May! Research your host country a lot; also research the university where you hope to study or conduct research. Contact the Chicago consulate of your prospective host country, if there is one, to get more information about the country. Know why you want to go to the destination country; know how this project will fit into your educational program and anticipated career. Establish connections early and get confirmations (hard copy; not fax or e-mail) well before the application deadline. If there are any professors at NIU who are from your host country (and there may be at least one), try to meet with them to get ideas and guidance about making contacts there. Meet with faculty in your major to ask for their guidance and critiques.

The process of developing your idea is crucial. Please think clearly and critically about what you want to do, why you want to do it, and how you will do it. *Clear thinking precedes clear writing.* If you need help with thinking clearly about your idea and your goals, please talk with me, with your professors, and/or with the Writing Center (see below).

After you've developed your idea, there are two most important parts to the actual application: your two essays, which are the personal statement and the proposal or program description. Again I emphasize the need to think critically about what you are writing. At every turn ask yourself, "Why do I think that?" "Why did I say that?" "Will my reader understand what I've tried to communicate?" Try to be a good reporter: interrogate your witness (yourself) and write up your report. Remember that your external reviewers will likely not be specialists in your area, so ask yourself if a French professor reading your essays over Thanksgiving break will truly understand what you've written.

Write grammatical, well-structured essays. After you've got reasonable drafts of the two essays (two-page program proposal and one-page personal statement), take them to the Writing Center for assistance in making them as clear and concise as possible. Please see their homepage: <http://uwc.niu.edu/uwc/> Also talk with your faculty advisor(s) about your proposal and get feedback. Don't be boring; lively writing is valued. *Follow directions:* the personal

statement is an essay on your intellectual and personal development to this point.

In your proposal, specific plans count a lot. Your project needs to be good for Goldilocks: not too big, not too small, but just right. Talk about what you can contribute; don't talk so much about me, me, me. Demonstrate familiarity with your prospective host country and its priorities and needs. State clear goals. Demonstrate some enthusiasm! Nothing great was ever accomplished without enthusiasm. Make sure you know and describe clearly your reason for applying; this can be very significant to the reviewers. The feasibility of your project is one of the most significant factors. A vague or overly ambitious project proposal will not be funded.

The first paragraph of your proposal should state clearly the what, where, why and how of your project. This effectively becomes a one-paragraph abstract of your project; you can then use this paragraph as the abstract which is required in another section of the application (page 1A). (This is really important, which is why I've printed it in bold type.)

You should also demonstrate knowledge of your field of study and of the needs of the host country. If there could be any apparent concerns over the feasibility of your project or about your ability to carry it out, please address these directly in your program statement.

In your personal statement, be aware of your honest weaknesses; demonstrate intellectual honesty and sophistication. Mention your major and minor in your statement, because they're not clearly indicated in the application form. Describe any personal challenges that you've overcome (health, family issues, economic problems, etc.). Rising above these challenges counts a lot. Describe any distinguishing characteristics, anything that makes you stand out or seem different from others. Little details can make you stand out, such as different experiences, different perspectives on US (immigrating here when little, growing up multicultural, moving around US, etc.). Describe your campus and community activities, especially hobbies such as dance, music, etc.; it's important to show that you have demonstrated leadership ability in campus or community groups or activities. Please demonstrate you will be a great ambassador for the US when you're in your host country. Also demonstrate that you have the maturity and experience to adjust well to your host country. This is your only chance to introduce yourself to the unknown external reviewers; remember that grants are often given to people, not necessarily to the greatest ideas.

Run spell check when composing these essays in Word! If you use words from the language of your prospective host country, check to make sure you've

spelled them and used them correctly (but using such words is not the best idea, because non-specialists will review your proposal). Watch your register in writing your essays. Include the pronunciation of your name if it may not be obvious to others. Get recommendation letters from professors who can write strong letters for you. One lukewarm letter can eliminate your application from serious consideration. Share with each professor the tips on recommendation letters at the end of this handout.

Do not neglect the foreign language report; this is required regardless of whether you speak the language of your host country. Take care of this early in the process rather than leaving it to the end.

For students applying for TAships

A project is necessary, such as a research project or a community service project. The project must not be overwhelming; it needs to be something that can be completed in the remaining 20 hours/week after teaching. Thesis or dissertation research is considered reasonable. Do not assume that you will only be teaching! You must have a project which will enable you to connect with the host community. Some ideas appear in the applicant newsletter on the Student Fulbright website.

Make sure you mention that you want to teach in the future. Students who don't mention this explicitly are downgraded by reviewers.

Language proficiency in the language of the host country is more important for reviewers than the Fulbright website indicates. These reviewers were more critical regarding language proficiency than the consulate was (they were working with applicants for TAships in France, however).

Demonstrate your understanding of current US popular culture. Demonstrate that you have experience working with elementary or secondary students (e.g. at camp) or that you have teaching or tutoring experience. Teaching experience is a huge plus.

Get a recommendation letter from a professor teaching the language of your host country.

Specific plans for teaching are valued, such as using videos, using Harry Potter books, etc. But make sure whatever you plan is feasible; "using technology" in a French lycée wouldn't work, for example.

Majors are valued over minors (i.e., French language majors are ranked higher for TAships in France than are French language minors).

For faculty writing letters of recommendation

Letters of reference are much more significant in the Fulbright process than in University admissions. The external reviewers look to their faculty colleagues on the student's campus for insightful recommendations.

If there's any area in which you can say the candidate is the "best I've ever encountered", or "in the top 1% of students in 35 years of teaching", please include this in your letter. Lukewarm and/or short letters are a significant negative. If this is all you can write for this particular student, please be honest and tell the student so. **One lukewarm or short letter means that a student may as well not apply for the Fulbright.**

In your letter, please assess whether the student will be a good ambassador for the US in the host country. Will he/she adjust well? Be mature? If there are broader cultural influences which would affect a student's project proposal or personal statement, please mention those in the letter. For example, students from some cultures might find it difficult to write at length about their strengths in the personal statement; mentioning this in a letter of recommendation might be very helpful.

Please also answer the following questions in the recommendation letter:

- Is the applicant's project feasible?
- Does the applicant have a solid affiliation in the host country? (not needed for English teaching assistantship applicants)
- Does the student have the needed language skills?
- Has the applicant demonstrated the ability to carry out the proposed project?

Please be very specific! If you believe something about an applicant, please describe how you have arrived at this judgment, and give an example of something excellent the student did to inspire that opinion on your part. Once you've written the first draft, please review the letter in a spirit of critical thinking, asking yourself why you hold the opinion you do about the student. If your letter doesn't answer that question, please insert more information.

Fulbright online: <http://us.fulbrightonline.org/applicants>

For more information, please contact the Fulbright Program Advisor, Dr. Taylor Atkins, Department of History, 753-6699 or etatkins@niu.edu