What does it take to win an NSF Graduate Research Fellowship?

Telling your Story, Selling Yourself
Contents

Introduction 3
Love 4
Trust 6
Plot Narrative 7
Conclusion 8
INTRODUCTION

To win fellowships you need to make the reviewers love you and trust you. You do that by telling a compelling story.
We’ll show you how to become the protagonist they want to root for.

“Recent breakthroughs in neuroscience reveal that our brain is hardwired to respond to story; the pleasure we derive from a tale well told is nature’s way of seducing us into paying attention to it.” Lisa Cron, Wired for Story

Just giving the reviewer information isn’t enough to make them interested in you or your research. You need to set your story in a narrative that engages them. A good story offers reviewers an arc of events and a protagonist they can identify with. A great story engages and excites them.

Find the turning points in your personal and professional lives to gain a deeper understanding of your path. Place those events in a structured plot, and describe them with some dramatic flair.
“There has to be an empathic strike between the reader and the protagonist. There has to be something said or known that connects the reader to this person you’re going to ride through the story with.”  -Michael Connelly

Describing events within a structured plot helps reviewers connect with you personally—to create the love that makes them want you to win. Before they can love you, Reviewers need to know two things:
(1) what motivates you; and
(2) what are your goals.

You need to make the reviewers see themselves in you—by telling stories about situations in which they can imagine themselves doing the same thing you did.

We use a “brainsteering” worksheet to help you identify specific events that show how you meet the review criteria.
YOUR MOTIVATION

Your motivation paragraph(s) must do the following:

1. Describe a concrete event.
2. Describe how your reaction to it set you on your path.
3. Conclude with a sentence that foreshadows your career goal and sets up your first steps towards it.

“Wanting something is not enough. You must hunger for it. Your motivation must be absolutely compelling in order to overcome the obstacles that will invariably come your way.”

Les Brown

YOUR GOALS

To share your goals:

1. Frame them in terms of the kind of institution where you want to work
2. Tell us why that institution is the place to achieve your goals
3. Describe how you’ll integrate teaching, research and outreach in that setting.
4. Envision and describe your long-term success
TRUST

Making the reviewers love you is step one. Now you need to make them trust that you can execute your research project. Your work plan is part of that— but you also need to showcase your preparation.

PREPARATION

You may not realize it, but you’ve developed three kinds of skills. Catalog them, with particular attention to the ones you’ll need for your research project:
1. Technical skills
2. Research project management skills
3. Communications skills

“The only source of knowledge is experience.”

-Albert Einstein
Choosing the right plot is key to capturing reviewers’ attention.

There are six basic plots—two each of fortune, character, thought.

Most people could tell their stories effectively using more than one of these. The one you choose depends on your life history and the events that are most engaging.

Example: The Sentimental Plot
A Plot of Fortune

**Protagonist:** Sympathetic underdog. Odds are stacked against them, but they make it through.

**Cause/Effect:** An event causes the protagonist to struggle, followed by events in which they push through in spite of it all.

**Can be effective for:** People who struggled with circumstances (such as low-GPA, slow progress, changed majors) because of poverty or illness; first generation students whose families didn’t value education, etc.

**Select events that:** Strengthened you without your realizing it at time

**We want the reviewers to feel:** Hope you’ll survive, fear you won’t make it

**At resolution:** We want them to feel relief that you got your just reward

**Example:** Slumdog Millionaire, The Big Sick
CONCLUSION

Use brainsteering to find events that illustrate your motivations, preparation and goals.

Choose a plot with an engaging arc and sympathetic protagonist.

These are just the first steps in your successful application process.

Go on to put all the pieces together in a stand-out essay designed to WIN.

“Success is a science; if you have the conditions, you get the result.”

Oscar Wilde