

Telling Your Story. Selling Yourself

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



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Introduction

In order to win fellowships, you need to make the reviewers love you and trust you. The best way to grab their attention is by telling a compelling story.

Our Brainsteering Program will help you show the reviewers that you are the protagonist they should 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

However compelling your research is, it simply is not enough to make you stand out against other applicants. You need to create a story about you and your research in a narrative that engages them. A good narrative 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 life to gain a deeper understanding of your path. Place those events in a structured plot, and describe them with some dramatic flair.

Love

"There has to be an empathetic strike between the reader and the protagonist. There has to be something said or known that connects the readers 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.

Reviewers need to know two things before they can love you:

- (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.



Patrick's Motivating Event

Q: What event convinced you that you had to pursue graduate studies?

A: I got an undergraduate research grant to study in Paris with a Foucault specialist at the archive of Foucault's work. I had this fantasy that I would sit in cafes and read philosophy. But the reality was that I was really lonely, and my stilted language skills made it really hard to meet people. Even though I didn't smoke, I carried cigarettes and a lighter so I could hang out in the smoking area outside the dorm to speak French with people. I ultimately found fulfillment in my isolation when I realized I was working on documents that very few people would ever see. I gained insight into how one of the most celebrated 20th century philosophers thought and worked through philosophical questions.

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 your goals in terms of the kind of institution where you want to work
2. Tell them 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.





Patrick's Preparation

Q: What was the most difficult research that you undertook, and what made it hard?

A: Collecting samples of actual disagreements that people had outside of academic contexts. When we set out to interview and record disagreements, people changed their behavior—they didn't disagree with peers naturally in the experiment.

Q: Describe how you dealt with it.

A: We had to reevaluate our data collection methods. We determined that it would be nearly impossible to get “natural” disagreements, so collected data about people's attitudes toward disagreement. I had to learn methods of Conversation Analysis from linguistics to make my transcripts methodologically sound.

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:

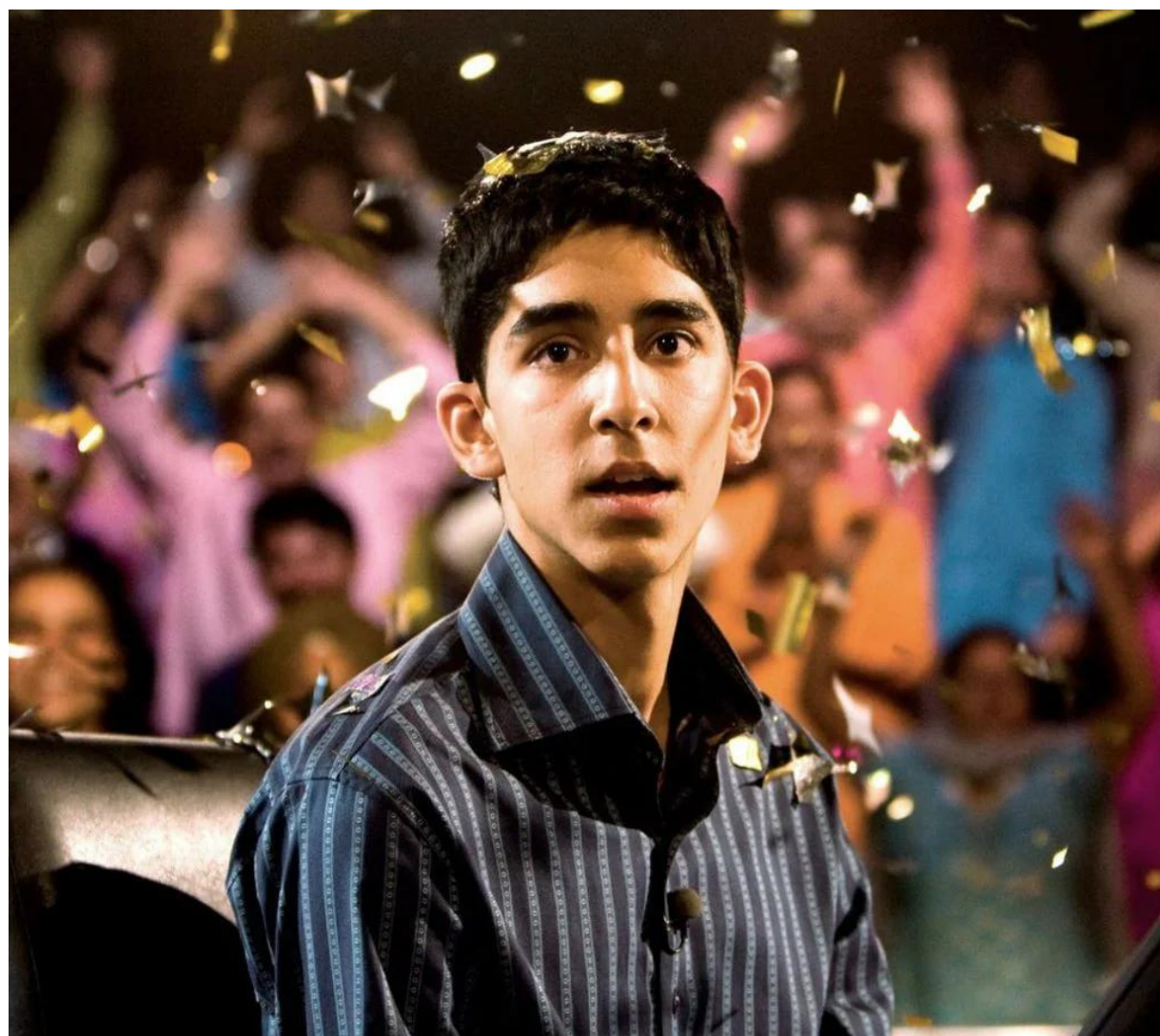
1. Technical skills
2. Research project management skills
3. Communications skills

“The only source of knowledge is experience”

ALBERT EINSTEIN



Plot and Narrative



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

Make 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

Conclusions

Craft a compelling story using our brainsteering approach and one of six recommended plots.

Follow the storyboards to create a persuasive document.

Manage the process following a 12-station roadmap.

TO WIN YOU NEED TO:

- Select and describe events that show your motivation, preparation, and goals.
- Set those events into a memorable plot that demonstrates your merit.
- Demonstrate the broader impacts of your work.
- Make your document so easy to read that reviewers can't miss any details.
- Get dazzling letters of reference.

Start Now!

**Email for sample
worksheets and videos**

grfp@brainsteering.org

**"Success is a science; if you have the
conditions, you get the result"**

OSCAR WILDE