

Gilman Essay Review Guide

Courtesy of Dr. Meredith Malburne-Wade

What Is It?

The Gilman Scholarship aims to increase the number of students in the U.S. who have access to study abroad/internships abroad. It provides up to \$5,000 for study/intern abroad programs lasting 21 days or longer or up to \$8,000 to study abroad programs lasting 21 days or longer that include the studying of one of 15 critical need languages (Arabic, Azerbaijani, Bahasa Indonesian, Bangla, Mandarin, Hindi, Japanese, Korean, Persian, Portuguese, Punjabi, Russian, Swahili, Turkish, Urdu). For the up to \$5,000 awards, language study of any kind is welcome but not required.

Although 25-30% of Gilman applications will receive funding, the essays are the driving force of the application and thus the biggest pitfall in the process.

What Is Involved in an Application?

- Brief online application form
- Transcript
- Certification from CGE and Financial Aid regarding study abroad and financial need
- 3 essays (the essays comprise 95%+ of the decision-making process for Gilman)

Essay 1: The Personal Statement

- The personal statement cannot exceed 7,000 characters, including spaces; special formatting (bolding, underlining, italicizing) will not convey in the Gilman application.
- The personal statement **MUST** address **ALL** of the following questions:
 - (1) How will studying or interning abroad help you achieve your future academic or professional goals?
 - (2) Why did you select your specific program and host country?
 - (3) How are you academically prepared to be a successful scholar abroad? If you have faced significant academic difficulties, tell us about those and how you are overcoming them.
 - (4) What examples of knowledge, skills, and experiences will you draw on to meet the challenges of going abroad?

What to look for in the personal statement

- Look for a **clear, detailed overview and description of the study/intern program abroad**. Readers come from all over the country: they have no insight into the study abroad program being proposed, and the only information in the application itself is the name of the program and the number of days it includes. **The number one error in the personal statement is not giving a clear description of the program.** (Where is it? How long is it? What classes/activities will be pursued? How many credits is this worth? Will it fulfill major requirements, gen eds, or electives?) **The only information the reader has is what the writer provides in this statement.** If you as a reader/consultant are not clear on the program being described, Gilman readers won't be either.

- Look for **specific ties to the academic and professional goals** (which means the writer must state their academic and professional goals). The more detailed the answer, the stronger the essay.
- Look for **specific reasons for the country and program choice**. (Does this program fulfil part of the major? Is a language being studied? Are there possible future professional ties to this location? Is there a personal/heritage tie to the location?) As a Gilman reader, I look for excitement and clear details that show the writer has thought about this program/country.
- Look for **specific descriptions of the applicant's academic preparation for the program**. This means the writer needs to identify **what skills/abilities will likely be needed for the program and how s/he developed them**. For programs that provide courses related to the major, it's normal to talk about the preparatory courses they've taken that will help them succeed. For more general/gen ed/elective programs, it's typical to talk about study skills, time management skills, the ability to seek out resources, etc.
 - It is common in this section to talk about academic challenges as well. It's okay if the student doesn't have challenges, but if they have lower grades on their transcript in a particular subject or particular semester, explaining those challenges (and what they are doing to overcome them) is useful.
- Look for the applicant to **identify specific challenges they might face followed by a discussion of how they might overcome those challenges** (time management, isolation, not speaking the language, introversion, first time out of the country, etc.).
- It is very common for answers to bleed into one another. The reasons for choosing a program (2) might be strongly related to their professional goals (1), for example. As long as all questions are answered, it's fine for them to overlap!
- It's not necessary for a clear "thread" or "thesis" in the personal statement, but it certainly helps. If an applicant can step back and find a trait, goal, or objective that unites the statement, it tends to read more convincingly.

Essay 2: Community Engagement

- The community engagement essay cannot exceed 3,000 characters, including spaces; special formatting (bolding, underlining, italicizing) will not convey in the Gilman application.
- The community engagement must address the following questions:
 - As a U.S. citizen, how will you represent and share what it means to be an American during your program? How will you seek opportunities to become more culturally engaged and have meaningful interactions with people and cultures different from your own during your abroad program?

What to look for in the community engagement essay

- The writer needs to outline how they define being an American or being an American abroad. What values, characteristics, traits, or behaviors do they wish to uphold and convey? How will they convey these traits?
- The focus here, however, is **how the applicant will engage in the community**. This engagement does not need to be all-consuming, but it does need to be intentional. Can the applicant talk about the way the program engages with the local community? (Some study abroad programs, for example, include internships or daily interactions with medical facilities, townspeople, local businesses, etc.) Can the applicant suggest activities they do here in the US that they can also do abroad? For example, applicants write about attending local church services, volunteerism,

singing in a choir, joining a local conversation club, playing sports, joining a hiking group, etc. The activities don't need to be tied to the program; they just have to show that the applicant is interested in engaging in the local culture in some capacity.

Essay 3: Follow-on Service Project

- The follow-on service project essay cannot exceed 3,000 characters, including spaces; special formatting (bolding, underlining, italicizing) will not convey in the Gilman application.
- The community engagement must address the following questions:
 - In no particular order, describe your Follow-on Service Project in more detail: What is your project and how will it increase awareness of study abroad and the Gilman Program among your peers in your home or campus community? Identify and explain why you chose the specific community you will be reaching. How will you integrate the impact of your experience abroad into your project? With which campus departments, student organizations, or community organizations will you collaborate?

What to look for in the community engagement essay

- Gilman requires all recipients to conduct a follow-on service project upon return to the US. This project should promote study abroad and/or Gilman in some way.
 - Applicants should absolutely review the Gilman website: they offer many examples of past projects.
- Whatever the applicant chooses to write about, they must clearly identify an audience and a clear reason for that audience. An applicant may talk about presenting a PowerPoint to a class that attracts a lot of students in their major, for example. If so, they should also discuss why they have chosen to present in this class: do students in that major have a difficult time studying abroad? Is the study abroad program being discussed especially relevant for this major?
- Applicants often (but not always) talk about speaking to those in their major/minor fields, speaking to those in their extracurricular organizations, speaking through CGE or the fellowships office, or speaking in high schools/middle schools/elementary schools. Performances, blogs, vlogs, and videos are also possible, but they must clearly identify an audience and how that audience will be reached. **Regardless of the medium, the most compelling essays discuss a clear audience and why that audience needs the information. Compelling essays also demonstrate the applicant has started the legwork required (talking to faculty, staff, or other students in preparation of the eventual presentation/performance).**

Overall points

- Specificity is key! The more details the essay contains, the more compelling it becomes for Gilman readers.
- Diversity is also key—if students are comfortable, they should disclose any factors that demonstrate diversity in one of the essays, usually the personal statement or the follow-on service project essay (particularly if the student plans to present to other students who share a similar identity). It is typical, for example, for candidates to discuss their race, ethnicity, gender, first generation status, veteran status, religious faith, STEM major, home state, or other factors in one of the essays as these are all factors Gilman takes into consideration when creating a diverse pool of recipients.