

How to Write a Successful Undergraduate Language Grant Proposal

What can you do with a Undergraduate Language Grant (ULG)?

The ULG gives Northwestern students up to \$5000 to study a foreign language intensively over the summer. It is designed for students *who need to learn a language in order to do something else*: specifically, to achieve their professional or academic goals while here at Northwestern and after they graduate. Northwestern already offers a wide range of language classes during the academic year, so the ULG also focuses on supporting students who *need to study a language intensively during the summer*.

This means that ULGs are not necessarily given to the best language students, or students who have a minor/major in a language. It does not matter whether you are an advanced learner or a beginner, whether you are learning your sixth foreign language or your first, or whether you are a heritage learner. All these points might be important in the case you make: but your proposal will ultimately be judged on how well you make the case that *learning this language will help you achieve other goals, and you need to study over the summer*.

Tone and structure of a ULG proposal

Your grant proposal is an academic piece of writing. The tone should be professional, rather than colloquial. Steer clear of talking about your passions and childhood dreams, and focus instead on the concrete details of your plans for the future. Grant proposals are structured around a series of arguments that build upon one another and are supported with evidence, rather than a narrative that recounts the story about your life and language learning so far.

Argument One: This language is essential for your future goals.

A strong proposal outlines ambitious goals for your future, but also demonstrates that you have thought through what you need to do to achieve those goals. It lays out a plan of action—and, crucially, makes the case for why the first step in this plan is to study this language this summer. A weak proposal talks vaguely about future dreams and aspirations that you hope will someday magically come to fruition.

Start by asking yourself some questions: What are you planning on doing next summer or the year after? What do you hope to do once you graduate? How will learning this language help you achieve that? If you were able to speak, read, or write in this language, what doors would be open to you? Some examples might be:

- You are a Comparative Literature major, and you want to write a senior thesis comparing **Russian** and English 19th century novels.
- You are on the pre-med track, and want to be able to speak to Latino/a patients in the US in **Spanish**.
- You are aiming for a career in the US Foreign Service, and speaking **Chinese** would make you a more competitive candidate.
- You plan on applying for a Fulbright after graduation to do public health research in the Andes, in communities that speak **Aymara** as their first language.
- You plan on applying for an Undergraduate Research Grant next summer to study Community Theater in Paris, so you need to improve your **French**.

Then think backwards from that ultimate goal, to trace the steps you need to take first. For instance, your ultimate goal is to work for the US Foreign Service, so you plan on applying for a Fulbright to go to

China after you graduate; to be competitive for the Fulbright, you plan to write a senior thesis on the Chinese economy; before you write your thesis, you will be taking specific classes in International Studies and Economics. As you lay out this plan in your proposal, you also need to explicitly discuss how *learning Chinese is essential to all of these steps*. The ultimate argument you need to make is that learning Chinese is the one thing you *must* do first, for all the rest of your plans to come to fruition. The more concrete details you can add as you outlines these steps (e.g., specific course names, what your thesis will be on, when you will apply for the Fulbright), the more compelling your plan will appear.

If this sounds intimidating, or you're really not sure yet what you want to do with the rest of your life, keep in mind the fact that no one is going to hold you to this plan if you later change your mind! We won't come and take the grant money back if you decided not to apply to medical school after all, or throw over the idea of being a diplomat to join the circus instead. However, it is important for your proposal that you talk about *specific professional or academic goals*, and that you demonstrate you have *thought through what you would have to do to achieve them*.

Argument two: Why do you need to study this language over the summer rather than the academic year?

Northwestern undergrads have opportunities to learn languages in regular classes during the academic year. Your proposal must, therefore, make an explicit case for why you need to study this language intensively over the summer. Most proposals outline a combination of reasons related to restrictions to the student's schedule over the academic year and specific gaps in the student's current language skills. Examples of schedule restrictions could be: that you hold work-study jobs that take up most of your extra time; or that you are an athlete, dual-degree student, or pre-med student with a heavy required course load. The resume and transcript you submit with your application must support this argument, by listing your jobs or your courses.

While you are making the case that you need to take intensive classes in the summer, you should also demonstrate a degree of self-awareness about your own language learning abilities. Provide details about what you need to learn and how long you expect it to take you.

Below are examples of how to discuss both your need for intensive language learning in the summer and a discussion of your leaning needs.

- You are a comparative lit major planning to write a thesis on 19th century **Spanish** novels. You are currently taking intermediate Spanish at NU. Next year you want to take courses in comparative literature that involve analyze 19th century Spanish texts without translations. Your conversational skills are currently good, but you don't have much experience reading formal Castilian Spanish, and this isn't something your NU classes focus on. You plan, therefore, on taking a text-heavy class in Spain this summer, to get yourself up to the level you need be to take the NU lit classes next year.
- You are a dual degree student in Opera and Biology, so have a very intensive course load. You need to learn **German** to advance your career as an opera singer, and specifically you need to improve your pronunciation. The classes you have managed to squeeze into your busy academic year schedule so far focused on reading and writing. So the only time you'll be able to concentrate on improving your spoken German is this summer.
- Classes in **Quechua** are not offered at Northwestern. You have started studying on your own with a book, but the only formal class you can take is a summer class at Urbana Champaign.

Argument Three: Why is this language course the most appropriate for your needs?

We strongly recommend that you ask a language instructor here at Northwestern for help choosing a good program. The ULG does not recommend any specific language course because a program that works for one student might not be appropriate for another. It is up to you to make the argument in your proposal that the language course you have chosen is the most appropriate for your specific learning needs.

This third argument has to be related to the previous two. For example, if you are already an advanced learner and need to work on your conversational skills, you may need to consider which country to study in based on the specific dialect you want to speak. It is very likely that you will choose your language program based on both practical and academic considerations, so mention both. The cost of a program is an important factor for most students—many language programs run as study-abroad experiences are very expensive. If it is part of your decision making, it is appropriate to mention the cost or affordability of a program.

Remember there is no requirement that you study abroad! You can get ULG funding for a language program based in the US (including in your home town), if it is more affordable and meets your language learning needs. Similarly, you do not have to sign up for a program run by a US university as a study abroad experience. There's nothing to stop you finding a local language school abroad by yourself, and organizing your own accommodation at a youth hostel, Airbnb, or hotel. You must, however, demonstrate that the program is intensive and legitimate, and meets the ULG program requirements listed on our website.

Final Points to Remember:

Know your audience! The Language Grant Committee is made up of faculty who teach languages at Northwestern. You don't need to waste a paragraph convincing them that learning foreign languages is a wonderful thing to do and that it helps college students become more fully rounded individuals. Language instructors already know this! Plus, it doesn't tell them anything about *why you*, rather than the other applicants from Northwestern, should get this particular grant. So, instead, get right to your point: why do *you* need to learn a foreign language this summer in order to achieve *some other goal*.

Likewise, telling the review committee that you "love Spanish" or "are passionate about German culture" is not going to help you build an argument for why *you* deserve the grant more than another student. How would a reviewer be able to weigh how much love *you* feel for the Spanish language, against how much another student *loves* French?!

So what should you say instead? If you are genuinely interested in another country or language, you'll have something to show for it. If you haven't studied the language before or been to that country, you could talk about classes that you have taken, research projects you intend to carry out, or at the very least demonstrate you know something about that place through books you've read, movies you've seen, or pressing news stories that you have followed.

Checkpoints

- The proposal is 2 pages, single spaced, 12 point Times New Roman font with one inch margins.
- We strongly encourage you to work with an advisor at the Office of Undergrad Research, as you are putting together your application.
- A complete application includes a proposal, a resume, an official transcript, details of the proposal language program such as a brochure, and endorsements from two faculty (academic and language)