TIPS FOR WRITING A WINNING ULG PROPOSAL

Undergraduate Language Grants support intensive summer language study for students for whom intensive language study is central to the achievement of academic or professional goals. Understanding this aim of the program is key to writing a successful ULG proposal. Reviewers are not simply looking to fund valuable experiences for students with strong academic records and a love of other cultures and languages; they want to fund students who plan to continue studying and use the language. They want to enhance students’ ability to do things: to conduct research, to write honors theses, to compete for fellowships, to pursue careers in which language skills are critical assets.

GETTING STARTED

What this means for you as an applicant is that you’ll need to think carefully about your short, medium, and long-term goals and how those relate to your interest in summer language study. If you don’t yet have specific goals in mind, this is the time to start thinking about them. Indeed, aside from the grant money itself, much of the benefit of the proposal writing process comes from the chance to reflect on your goals and to imagine the possibilities that could open up for you as a result of a summer of intensive language training.

Think beyond the obvious: In one sense, the goal of intensive language training is self-evident: you want to improve your language skills. But why do you need those skills? What will those skills allow you to do?

Think beyond academic credit: The program you choose should provide the equivalent of a year’s worth of classroom language training, and any academic credit you receive for it may well help you complete your degree or your language major/minor. However, the goal of finishing your degree won’t distinguish you as an applicant. Reviewers want to know how you plan to use the additional skills you will gain, perhaps in the year immediately following your return (e.g., specific higher-level courses you want to take, a research project you want to engage in, or a Fulbright application you want to be a more competitive candidate for) or further down the road.

FURTHER QUESTIONS

The overall proposal should make a clear and compelling case for funding your proposed summer language training, and in order to so, it will also need to anticipate and answer questions that reviewers will implicitly ask:

Why you?
Avoid the trap of arguing for the value of intensive language training in general. Your readers will be predisposed to believe that foreign language training, especially immersive learning, is important and beneficial, but they can’t fund everyone. So don’t waste valuable space making general arguments about the value of intensive language study. Your readers need to know why they should fund your language study. The committee wants to fund students who are likely to successfully complete the program, who intend to continue their language-study beyond the summer, and who intend to use the language skills in the pursuit of specific goals. The best way to convince them that you fit these criteria is to give them specifics about your experiences, plans, and goals.
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Why this language?
There are a lot of languages one could potentially study, so your reader naturally wants to understand why you have chosen this one. It can sometimes be a tricky question to answer, though. You may well have fallen in love with Italian the first time you tasted gelato, but that’s not going to convince a reviewer to give you money to study it this summer. Pointing to your life-long love of all things French can help you demonstrate your passion for the language, and noting that you’ve studied German since 8th grade can underline your commitment, but the most powerful arguments will be forward-looking: “I plan to apply for a Fulbright next year to study politics in Sao Paolo” is more compelling argument for a summer of intensive Portuguese study than is “I have rooted for Brazil in every World Cup since I can remember.” You don’t have to avoid the quirky personal reasons completely—they can add color and personality—just don’t expect them to do the heavy lifting. The best answers to “why this language?” really answer the question “what will this language allow me to do?”

Why intensive summer study? Why this summer?
Northwestern has a lot of language instructors and offers a lot of language classes during the regular academic year, so your readers want to know why those are not sufficient for meeting your goals. There are many excellent reasons for more intensive study over the summer—NU doesn’t offer the language you want, you need to make faster progress in order to take certain advanced classes, you need training in a specific dialect or vocabulary, etc.—but readers want to know your reasons. Likewise, intensive summer language study is an option for you as a freshman, a sophomore, or a junior. Why is it important for you to do it this summer?

Consider the alternatives: There’s more than one way of advancing your language skills, and reviewers want to know that you’ve thought of these. If language immersion is so important to you and your goals, why not study abroad during the academic year? Traditional study abroad often accomplishes the same aims as summer intensive programs but with greater depth, but there can be legitimate reasons for not doing a quarter or year abroad. Make sure the reviewers are clear as to the relationship between your program and other completed/proposed study abroad experiences, and if you can’t do other study abroad experiences, tell them why not.

Why this particular program?
ULGs can be used for studying at any language program that meets qualifying criteria, and it is up to you (in consultation with your faculty advisors) to choose the program. The ULG committee wants to know that the program is high quality and a good fit with your aims, and your proposal should directly address these issues. What are the aims and composition of the program you have chosen? What specific aspects make it especially appropriate for your goals? How do plan to take advantage of its offerings?

For more information about applying for an Undergraduate Language Grant, visit undergradresearch.northwestern.edu/ulg. If you would like additional support for your ULG application, please submit an Advising Request via the web site to schedule a one-on-one meeting. Take a stab at the proposal, even if you are not sure what you are doing and think it might be terrible; it provides the perfect jumping off point for your meeting. Advising appointments become more restricted as the grant deadline approaches, so make every effort to contact the Office of Undergraduate Research as early in the process as possible.