

Marshall Proposed Academic Program (499 words)

The National Highway Traffic Safety Administration estimates that 25 percent of all traffic accidents can be attributed to driver distraction. This testifies to the fact that of all the information that enters our eyes at any given moment, only a fraction enters our awareness. What neural mechanisms underlie this phenomenon? I want to study how the brain creates subjective visual awareness. In this area of research, the need to move from looking at isolated brain regions to understanding distributed networks of brain activity is becoming increasingly clear. Doing so will, I believe, require scientists to have a variety of research tools at their disposal, each of which has unique applications in the study of neural events.

In order to gain this kind of broad practical education, I would like to spend the first year of my academic program in the Oxford Neuroscience MSc program, a one-year taught course, and to follow that with a second year conducting research in the lab of Geraint Rees at University College London, a leader in the cognitive neuroscience of visual awareness. As a Cognitive Science major at Yale, I have prepared myself for future interdisciplinary study in cognitive science through coursework in psychology, neuroscience, computer science, and linguistics. I have significant research experience, having worked in labs on issues of attention, memory, and language in older adults, the neuroanatomy of Alzheimer's disease, attention and cognitive control, and the development of attention to eye-gaze in infants. Until now, however, my research experience has been primarily in the area of cognitive psychology, and I have limited practical experience in the techniques of neuroscience research. I wish to enter the Oxford Neuroscience MSc program in order to gain the skills that will allow me to build on my previous work, with a focus on neural mechanisms.

The Oxford program is unique in both the breadth of the topics it covers and its focus on the acquisition of technical skills. These enable students to approach problems in neuroscience using the most relevant research tools available, including single-cell recording, transcranial magnetic stimulation, event-related potentials, functional magnetic resonance imaging (fMRI), studies of neuropsychological patients, and computer modeling. In a traditional graduate program, I would be unlikely to have the opportunity for formal training in this range of laboratory techniques.

In my second year, doing research in Dr. Rees's lab at UCL's Institute of Cognitive Neuroscience would give me training in cutting-edge fMRI techniques that can be used to study networks of brain activity. The scientists in this lab are pioneers in the study of visual attention and awareness and are using fMRI in new ways to study the neural mechanisms of visual awareness. I would especially like to learn their method of multivariate analysis. I have contacted Dr. Rees, and he has offered to work with me to create a project proposal for work in his lab.

My second choice academic program is simply to begin at UCL with Dr. Rees working toward the MPhil degree for two years.

Describe an academic program you might apply to.

In the categories below, list personal characteristics that qualify you for the program you described on the previous page.

Your Background	Your Character	Your Future Goals	Things Others Can Say about You

## Rhodes Personal Statement (997 words)

I learned three things in my first hour at the Orleans Public Defender's Office: the directions to the Iberville housing project, the importance of reading statements aloud to our often-illiterate clients, and the fact that everyone wants their day in court. Although going to trial wasn't a secure avenue to justice for my clients—the poorest residents of New Orleans—it offered a rare opportunity to feel control over their own lives. My experience advocating for clients victimized by economic deprivation, political disenfranchisement and social exclusion revealed to me the profound injustice of poverty in a land of plenty. More importantly, it showed me the vital role social policy plays in building stable communities. As a child, my experience with domestic violence showed me how injustice feels and taught me the power of individuals to advocate for those in need. As a college student, working with indigent clients in a combative legal system demonstrated how poverty perpetuates injustice on a systemic scale. And by working in social policy as a practitioner, I hope to craft needed reforms to U.S. benefit programs, providing Americans experiencing poverty with resources that empower them to lead fulfilling, productive lives.

My public defense clients were trapped in the criminal justice system, but their stories demonstrated how crime is deeply intertwined with poverty. Often, the system locked up the most visible victims of social disrepair. My client "Sam" was repeatedly failed by the social contract before being incarcerated. I met Sam, a middle-aged black man, in a cramped cubicle inside the Orleans Parish Prison. He was accused of selling drugs. Visiting Sam's home in the 8th Ward, I saw broken sidewalks, abandoned businesses, and school windows hidden behind iron bars. His parents showed me high school graduation photos while sharing stories of police harassment and employment discrimination. Sam may have been guilty, but it was clear to me that inherited poverty and entrenched racism had crippled his opportunities for fulfilling employment. Sam illustrated the immense difficulty of breaking cycles of poverty, especially in an era (and region) of retrenched welfare benefits. As my clients—all repeat defendants, many younger than myself—and the persistence of New Orleans poverty made clear, my legal work empowered individuals in crisis but direct service is an incomplete tool for creating systemic change.

To improve lives sustainably in poor communities, we need welfare, education, and housing reforms that enable people like Sam to pursue self-directed goals—studying for a GED or completing an apprenticeship—that increase social mobility. Oxford’s multidisciplinary education in social policy will build on my real-world understanding of the multifaceted experience of poverty, providing a strong vantage point to engage with the ethical, economic, and design details of policies across nations. American programs take a primarily economics-based approach to policy, but Oxford’s emphasis on ethics will enable me to question assumptions about the role of government and the impact of capitalism. In Oxford’s unique program, I will evaluate poverty policy around the world while mastering sophisticated research methodologies. Pursuing an MPhil in Comparative Social Policy positions me to learn strategically from Britain’s inclusive welfare policies and craft structural interventions in U.S. poverty that increase autonomy and quality of life for poor Americans.

My New Orleans clients taught me that system-level changes are important to ending generational poverty—but of all the things poor people can’t afford, control over one’s own future is hardest to go without. I’ve seen through my work in electoral politics that the lack of political clout available to lower-income citizens further blocks avenues for change. As Fellowship Director for Students for a New American Politics (SNAP-PAC), a student-run political action committee, I work to increase these citizens’ access to politics. By providing paid campaign work to poor and minority students, SNAP-PAC empowers people traditionally underrepresented in politics to hold their government accountable. Although diversifying political activism is important long-term, electoral politics are a slow road to systemic change.

The limitations of direct service and the protracted timeline of electoral politics as strategies for alleviating poverty drew me to social policy. As a 2013 Yale Law School Liman Public Interest Fellow, I worked closely with Roosevelt Institute Fellow and Columbia Professor Georgia Keohane to research and analyze poverty policy, from socially-responsible business models to public-private financing tools for nonprofit work. Drafting policy papers for White House briefings and international conferences with

Professor Keohane, I focused specifically on incentive-based human development initiatives known as “conditional cash transfers” which promise to reimagine cities’ approach to poverty.

At Roosevelt, I grappled with an ethical dilemma policymakers have struggled to solve: balancing a nation’s obligation to provide for its citizens against concerns about overreaching state power. I’ve engaged this question at Yale, particularly through my senior thesis, which assesses the use of disciplinary governmental power in U.S. welfare reform and the Affordable Care Act. As an activist and Women’s Studies major, I’ve worked across disciplines to develop a nuanced perspective on the state’s power to shape behavior, identity and values through social policy: for example studying the GI Bill’s influence on post-war gender roles. Oxford’s Social Policy and Intervention Department, with its strong faculty focus on gender, provides an unparalleled environment to extend this analysis. I hope to work closely with Professor Mary Daly, who specializes in gendered components of the welfare state, social exclusion, and the politics of care, as her research is parallel to both my thesis and my planned dissertation topic: the relationship between identity and social exclusion in the U.S. and U.K.

To ensure that choosing a jury trial isn’t the only way the poor have a voice in their futures, I want to craft innovations in welfare policy that equip all Americans with the resources to pursue their goals. Prepared by the MPhil in Comparative Social Policy at Oxford, I will apply my knowledge of structural anti-poverty interventions while working as a U.S. policymaker in a government agency, challenging institutionalized inequality and securing a future where justice and opportunity do not depend upon privilege.

## EDITING PERSONAL STATEMENTS FOR STYLE

Style allows you to manage the effect your writing has on the people who read it. You want your words to feel forceful, and you want the way you write to convey a positive impression of you, the writer. (Rhetoricians call this your *ethos*.) The content is the most important part of your statement, as your character and experience are the most compelling indicators of your promise as a professional in your chosen field. But your style can help you manage how the reviewers of your application experience that content. While far from comprehensive, the list below offers some strategies for making your writing feel clear, lively, and forceful.

1. **Use verbs to express the action in a sentence.** Gerunds and suffixes like *-ment*, *-tion*, and *-ence* turn verbs into nouns (called nominalizations). Though you won't be able to eliminate all nominalizations in your sentences, your writing is typically clearer, livelier, and more concise when these concepts are expressed as actions rather than things. This is especially true in sentences where nominalizations are the subjects of verbs.

As you edit: Circle the nominalizations in your paper (note that not all *-ing* words are gerunds). Work through them one at a time, checking to see if your sentence can be revised to feature the verb form of the nominalization.

2. **Replace forms of *to be* with more active verbs.** Action makes prose feel lively, and verbs are the site of action in a sentence. Because some things just *are*, you won't be able to replace every form of *to be*. But in sentences that aren't making a claim about how something *is*, strive to convey the action with a strong verb.

As you edit: Circle all forms of *to be* in your paper (*is, are, was, were, be, been, being*), and see if you can replace each with an active verb.

3. **Limit your use of adjectives and adverbs.** Writing tends to feel more vivid when it uses actions and details (verbs and nouns) to convey information instead of description (adjectives and adverbs). Be especially suspicious of adjectives and adverbs whose primary use is to intensify the thing they're describing (e.g. devastating loss, ran quickly). A powerful adjective or adverb typically generates some tension with the word it modifies. Compare "killing me softly" with "killing me fiercely."

As you edit: Circle the adjectives and adverbs in your essay. Delete the ones that are doing the least work; revise others to make your description more surprising or imagistic.

4. **Be concise.** Expressing the same information in fewer words can often make your writing feel more forceful.

As you edit: Work through each paragraph and sentence, asking yourself: "If I deleted this, what would be lost?" More specific concision strategies include:

- i. Delete words that mean little or nothing. (*kind of, really, actually, in order to . . .*)
- ii. Delete words that repeat the meaning of other words. (*true and accurate, each and every, first and foremost . . .*)
- iii. Delete words implied by other words. (*terrible tragedy, final outcome, period of time, accurate manner . . .*)
- iv. Replace a phrase with a word. (*in the event that/if, are in a position to/can, an increase in the number of/more . . .*)



- v. Change negatives to affirmatives. (*not different/similar, not often/rarely, not allow/prevent . . .*)
- vi. Delete useless adjectives and adverbs. (*very, absolutely, interesting . . .*)
- vii. Replace words with punctuation. (*"for example," "that is," "therefore" &c. can be replaced with a colon; a semicolon can replace "and" between two independent clauses*)

5. **Proofread!** You are a hard worker and a careful scholar who pays attention to detail. Your writing should reflect this. Typos can make you come across as sloppy or less invested in the application than you really are.

As you edit: Read your statement aloud. Perform it slowly, enunciating every word. This intense focus on the written text can help you catch typos and awkward phrasings. When we read, we hear the words of a text in our head (called subvocalization). Reading your statement aloud can help you experience it as your readers will.

Also try: Have the computer read your text back to you. On a Mac, highlight the section of text you'd like read back and hit ⌘+ESC. The website [naturalreaders.com](http://naturalreaders.com) will read back any text that you paste into its textbox.

## **Writing Essays for National Fellowships - FREQUENTLY ASKED QUESTIONS**

N.B. These questions were asked after each workshop we held. If you have a specific query that is not answered here, please feel free to get in touch with us: [fellowships@yale.edu](mailto:fellowships@yale.edu)

### **What exactly is “character”?**

Character is what the story you tell in your statement *shows* about how you operate in the world – how you approach problems, how you respond to setbacks and how you engage with others. Consider how readers would describe you after reading your statement – extroverted, honest, curious, diligent, resilient, generous, self-aware, leader. Obviously you want the best parts of your character to shine through, but it’s more important that the character your statement conveys be rich than that it embody any specific set of values.

### **How intimate of personal information is it okay to give? I would say a lot of my motivation comes from difficulties and dark spots in my life. I don’t know whether readers want to hear about crises of community/religious/sexual identity or mental health.**

It is okay to mention personal challenges in your statement, but most of your focus should be on how you responded to those challenges and the ways they continue to influence your character and goals. Whether the experience you describe is highly personal or not, what happened to you won’t show nearly as much about your character as what you did with it.

### **Do you suggest writing entirely different statements for each fellowship? If not, how much besides obvious details must you change?**

In short, no. You are who you are and the same themes are going to repeat themselves in any personal statement. The one thing you need to keep in mind is the mission of each fellowship to which you’re applying. What are they looking for and how can you tailor your statement accordingly? Most fellowships give good guidance on their criteria and goals. Once you’ve got one good personal statement, it can be used as a foundation for many others.

### **How much of this is genuinely truthful, and how much is people bolstering their own credentials without much substantial backing?**

All fellowship committees want you to present the most authentic version of yourself through your writing and interviews. An experienced selection committee will see right through attempts to overextend the relevance of your experience or mask gaps in your credentials. Focus on experiences you’ve had and how they drive your interest in your proposed course of study. If your interest emerged late in your academic career, don’t worry. The story of how that intellectual passion emerged will be no less interesting or complex than the stories of candidates studying that field for much longer.

**If you are asked for a policy proposal (e.g. Truman), is such an essay more a chance to show technical knowledge or your character and thinking process?**

When written well, technical knowledge *will* reveal a lot about your character and thinking process. You don't have to choose between one or the other.

**How specific or general does the Marshall fellowship want our UK-US relationship statement to be? For example, should I link it to my field of interest or are they looking for something broader?**

Strive to be specific. A focused answer will convey the most about your character, background, and vision for your participation in the scholarship. More generic answers — ones that aren't specific to you, but could have been written by anyone — won't leave the committee with the information they're hoping to glean from your response. This prompt produces a wide variation in responses (which is what makes it a great question). Linking your answer to your field of interest is fine, but so is focusing on some other aspect of what the "special relationship" is and how you would hope to promote productive exchange between the US and UK.

**How much help can we get from the Fellowships Office on non-Mitchell/Rhodes materials?**

We can help with materials for most other fellowships, but bear in mind that if you are applying to Mitchell and/or Rhodes, your personal statements for other fellowships may well be very similar. So, side with caution in these situations. In the case of Marshall there are other pieces of writing in addition to the personal statement that we can look at before submission.

**Is our résumé often part of the application?**

Yes it is, and a fellowships résumé is something quite different from the kind of résumé you would submit for a job application. Think about using themed headings in the way you present yourself (e.g. Debate/Writing and Journalism/Advocacy/Athletics/Technology/Politics/Performing Arts etc.). You want to give any fellowships committee as full a picture of yourself as possible so you may end up including items on your fellowships résumé that you would not include on a professional CV. We can offer feedback on résumés in advance of deadlines.

**If a fellowship doesn't have an academic program question, how much of a personal statement should be dedicated to listing program requirements, faculty in the departments, etc.**

This will vary based on the program you're applying to and how you structure your statement, but as a guideline, you'll probably want to devote 5-10% of the statement to discussing the academic program. Since you're writing a personal statement, it typically makes sense to focus primarily on how the program is a good fit for you given the experiences you've described. You don't need to get specific about faculty or program requirements, but if you do it will likely be as an extension of an interest or experience you've described in your statement.

### **How can I navigate the balance of personal stories/anecdotes with more professional, CV-esque descriptions?**

This can vary depending on your approach, but generally you want to build the statement around stories and then use those as opportunities to mention relevant professional experience. In many cases the story will do the work of presenting material from your CV. For example, if you write about meeting a client while working in a public defender's office, the story conveys that information from your CV. The goal of the statement is to bring carefully chosen material from your CV to life. If there's an item from your CV that is important enough to include in your statement, your first step might be to think of a story you'd tell about it.

### **How can I maximize the limited word allotment?**

When planning and drafting, consider how much information you think you can convey in the number of words allotted, and then write your first draft without worrying about the word count. This may mean you'll face tough choices about what to cut later, but cutting material from your initial drafts means that the final version will contain only your strongest, most compelling writing.

When revising a draft that is over the allotted word count, you'll want to think along a continuum of bigger and smaller cuts. To make bigger cuts, consider the work each sentence and paragraph is doing for the statement. Consider whether what you say is expressed or implied elsewhere or whether a longer section might be more powerful if replaced by a single sentence, or even a single word. When revising sentences, you'll be working to cut unnecessary words and consolidate longer phrases into something more succinct.

Be careful when trimming words from a statement that is too long. While you want to be concise, the process of compressing a document can disrupt its flow and obscure your voice. It is critically important that the sentences in your final draft flow smoothly and naturally.