



## Student Considerations for a Competitive Gilman Essay

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The U.S. Department of State's Benjamin A. Gilman International Scholarship is a grant program that enables students of limited financial means to study or intern abroad, thereby gaining skills critical to our national security and economic competitiveness. When crafting your personal statement and project proposal, it is important to understand what it is that Gilman is looking for in an awardee and how to demonstrate that quality in an effective way. The following tips will give you a better understanding of the criteria valued by Gilman, as well as giving you direction on how to construct a compelling and competitive case for your application.

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1. A "Merit" Award – The Gilman Scholarship is a **merit** award. However, the scholarship does not have a GPA requirement. What does that mean? It means that "merit" is a flexible term and does not just refer to a 4.0 GPA. Think about why you deserve this award, what you have done to earn it. What have you done that would **merit** recognition? For some, that might be a perfect 4.0 GPA. For others, maybe a working mom, it could be that you are successfully (if not perfectly) balancing school, work, and family. If you have a low GPA, it is important to explain why.
2. Diversity and Identity – Reviewers do not know anything about the candidates' demographics except their age and their indicated sex. One of the primary criteria for consideration is increasing the diversity represented in study abroad, but the **reviewers reading your essay do not know if you are a diverse student unless you explicitly tell them.**

What qualifies as a "diverse" student? Gilman is very flexible with what qualifies. Examples include (but are not limited to):

- a. Students of color
- b. Hispanic and Latino
- c. First Generation
- d. First time / first in the family abroad
- e. LGBTQ+ identifying.
- f. Community college transfers
- g. Single parents (especially with young children)
- h. Non-traditional (i.e. older than the 18-22 range, or works a full-time job)
- i. STEM majors
- j. Students with disabilities, including mental health.
- k. Heritage seekers, naturalized citizens



- I. Any personal circumstances that have challenged you or made the earning of a degree more challenging.
3. Country Choice – Which country you choose is very important. There are three major considerations for reviewers.
1. **Diversity of destination.** Most student study in Western Europe and Australia/New Zealand. Students who are apply outside of these locations will be reviewed more favorably (but not always).
  2. **Reason behind your choice.** There must be a good reason for the country you choose. That could be your personal circumstances (a student who uses a wheel chair may need to go to a more developed country, even though a less developed location would be more “diverse”) or the demands of your major. Students in STEM fields, double majors, nursing, and education are all programs that have the most difficulty studying abroad. It could be that there are not many offerings outside of Europe for your major. Whatever the case may be, you need to make sure the reviewers understand **why** you are going to a particular location.
  3. **Length of program.** Again, explain why you chose the program. If you work full-time, you might not be able to afford sacrificing that paycheck for an entire semester. If you want to become fluent in the language, that might explain why you chose a year-long program, even though it’s more expensive.
4. What not to talk about in your essay:
- a. Sight-seeing, shopping, extra travel.
  - b. How “fun” and “exciting” and “life-changing” the trip (it’s a program not a trip) will be.
  - c. Scholarships or funding that you have already earned. You will mention this when you list the amount of anticipated aid you will receive. It should not be mentioned in your essay.
  - d. If you have already traveled extensively, do not mention this unless it is very important to your story.
5. **Critical Language Study** – If you plan to study one of the languages listed below, you are eligible for additional scholarship funds. **You must mention this in your essay.** Tell the reviewer that you plan to study a “critical need” language and why.
- |             |            |         |
|-------------|------------|---------|
| Arabic      | Indonesian | Russian |
| Azerbaijani | Japanese   | Swahili |
| Bangla      | Korean     | Turkish |
| Chinese     | Persian    | Urdu    |
| Hindi       | Punjabi    |         |

Similarly, you should mention your major/minor (especially if it is a non-traditional major for study abroad) and how the program is **essential** to your field of study.



6. Follow-On Service Project – This essay is less important than the personal statement, so focus more of your energy on crafting a great personal statement. However, this essay is still very important. Here are some tips:
- a. Remember the purpose of the project.
    - i. Inspire others to study abroad.
    - ii. Promote the Gilman Scholarship
  - b. Projects must be specific and feasible.
  - c. Target audience should not be too broad (example: all UA students) and should not be too specific (example: my language class of 10 students)
  - d. Get permission first! Gilman applicants stand out when they have already talked to someone about their project. Example: *I want to hold weekly Gilman info sessions for prospective students. I have gotten approval from International Services, and we agreed on the dates of January 1 – March 2, 20##.*
  - e. Be creative! Stand out. PowerPoint presentations are common in proposals and will not leave an impression on reviewers.
7. The BIG question – Ultimately, reviewers need a compelling case in order to award funds. Make sure your essay can answer this question:

***Do we (the reviewers) see a good justification for why the applicant is going abroad and a clear sense of direction for the student's future?***

**Questions to submit your essay for review: [studyabroad@jsu.edu](mailto:studyabroad@jsu.edu)**