



University of Michigan Library Undergraduate Research Award

Tips for the Personal Essay

From the evaluator's perspective, the personal essay is the **most important** piece of your submission. Note that the personal essay carries more points in your score than the project itself. The panel of reviewers for the Research Award will use your essay as the initial qualifying step in the evaluation of your submission.

The personal essay is your opportunity to reflect on the research process, to communicate the specifics of that process and to give a sense of how your ideas and methodology *changed and responded* as your research progressed. Accomplished research relies not only on comprehensive searches and methods, but is an iterative process in which the initial and intermediate results of those searches and methods shape the final product.

The panel is interested in the growth both of your project and of your skills as a researcher. The following questions might help to prompt your reflections. You do not necessarily need to answer all of these questions; but do address each of the four topics. This essay should be 750---1000 words in length.

Developing the Topic

- Consider the ideas that first sparked your interest in your topic. Where did you go with those initial ideas? That is, what kinds of searches did they inspire, and what were the results of those searches?
- Did those results prompt your further research? Did you reconsider key terms, search methods, or even the topic itself?
- What were your preconceptions about the topic, and how did you find yourself modifying them as you continued your research? Above all, how did your thinking about the topic change over time?

Research Strategies

- Over the course of your work on this project, what new strategies did you develop for finding and using relevant information?
- How did those new strategies build on or improve the research strategies you already had? What can you do now that you couldn't before?
- Did a librarian help you develop these new skills? If so, how did he or she do this?
- Serendipity is an important part of research, too; which discoveries did you make by chance, and which through planned search?

Library Research Resources

- What resources did you learn about in the course of your research? For instance, what are the primary research databases and other finding aids in your

topic area? ("Finding aids" refers to bibliographies, catalogs, reference books, subject experts, online discussion lists, Web sites, etc.) Which were especially useful, and which were not? Why and why not?

- Were there databases or finding aids *not* usually associated with your topic area that turned out to be useful? If so, which ones and why?

Finding and Evaluating Information

- What did you learn about finding and evaluating information about your topic and its associated field?
- Are there sources that, before you started, you would have used, but that you might now find inadequate? Which ones and why?
- How did you handle sources that were relevant to your topic, but that represented an alternative viewpoint?