Submitting a Successful Application for Middle East Studies Center Scholarship Awards (and Applications Generally)

The Middle East Studies Center administers three scholarships for study of Middle East language and area studies at Portland State: the Gary & Patricia Leiser Scholarship in Middle Eastern Languages; the Elizabeth Ducey Scholarship; and the John Damis Middle East Studies Scholarship.

While these scholarships share a number of similarities, their criteria and parameters differ. For example, the Elizabeth Ducey Scholarship is the only award specifically designated to support study abroad, while the John Damis Middle East Studies Scholarship is open only to International Studies and Political Science majors with Middle East focus. Full text of the scholarships’ eligibility and selection criteria is available on the Middle East Studies Center’s website. Please note that only complete applications from students who meet the criteria will be accepted.

In order to streamline the application process, the Middle East Studies Center has accepts a single Scholarship Application Form for all three awards, however, students must submit separate forms for each scholarship to which they intend to apply. Applicants may use the same letters of recommendation and transcripts for all applications, but must indicate this clearly within the application and to their recommenders. Applicants are strongly encouraged to submit different Statements of Intent specifically tailored to each scholarship.

This document contains some tips for submitting a successful application. Occasional hypothetical examples are also offered in italics.

1. In the opening paragraph…

   • Make explicit which scholarship you are applying for and, if applicable, which language you are and/or will be studying and at what level. If you’re applying for funding to study abroad, make explicit where you will be studying or hope to study; ideally, you should be able to state that you’ve already applied to or have been accepted to the program you want to be pursue.

   • Be sure it is clear to the readers whether you’re an undergraduate or graduate student and what your major is (and what your minors are if relevant).

   a) As a junior political science major with an interest in the evolving role of Berber political parties in North African countries, I am seeking Elizabeth Ducey Scholarship funding for the study of intensive third-year Arabic this summer at Al-Akhawayn University in Ifrane, Morocco.

   b) I am a first-year MBA student seeking the Gary & Patricia Leiser Scholarship funding to continue studying Turkish at the second-year level.
2. Make clear what your intended future plans are with regard to school and/or career, relating these to the conditions of the award if relevant. What is important is *not* that you know exactly what you are going to do when you finish school, but that you demonstrate that you have a logical and plausible plan. (Notice that the student who wrote example (a) above has already begun to do this, so she has something to build on as she continues writing.)

3. Make clear why mastering the language you are studying is relevant and even necessary to your intended future/career path. Try to be explicit about what you will use the language for and whom you might be using the language with.

4. If you’ve been successful in attaining previous funding for Middle East language and/or area studies, be sure to mention what you achieved with the award.

5. Acknowledge your GPA. If it’s high, just state the fact. 

   *I’m a rising senior, majoring in electrical engineering with a GPA of 3.8.*

   If your GPA is not especially high, do the best you can to account for why it is what it is. *If your GPA is low, do not assume that readers won’t notice it; they will. Do the best you can to help them understand the situation.*

   Here are some possibilities:

   a) Looking at your transcript, can you say that your GPA continues to rise?

      *With regard to my GPA, I must admit that I got off to a difficult start when I first came to PSU, but my GPA has risen steadily and consistently during my sophomore and junior years and is now a 3.1.*

   b) Can you offer a truthful account for why your GPA was especially bad during a particular period of time?

      *As is evident, my GPA suffered during my sophomore year. My father was stationed abroad in Afghanistan, where he was seriously wounded. I live with my parents, and the stress of the situation took a toll on my entire family. During this period, I was not able to do my best academic work. However, the following year, I had a GPA of 3.6.*

   c) If you GPA in your major and/or in the language you’re studying is higher than your GPA overall, then focus on those.

      *While my overall GPA is 3.1, my GPA in my major is 3.7, and I have received an A in all the Persian courses I have taken.*

   **Note that both the Gary & Patricia Leiser and John Damis Middle East Studies Scholarships have minimum GPA requirements.**

6. Be sure to mention any connections you have to the region, whether here or there. Examples could include involvement in community organizations that include or serve the diaspora community, a language group that meets to practice the language, academic papers about the region you’ve presented at a student or academic conference, or travel to the region. If your family or ancestors or from the region, you’ll likely want to mention that fact though remember that the ability to speak a particular language isn’t inherited. Just because your
grandfather spoke Hebrew, that doesn’t mean it will be easier for you to learn it than it will be for someone whose grandfather didn’t speak it unless there are other factors involved — you grew up in a house where Hebrew was spoken, you’ve spent time in Israel or some other place where Hebrew is the primary language of communication, etc. Finally, if you’re applying to study in the region, explain how that experience will add value to your language learning and to your education.

7. Rather than just enumerating your activities, your skills, or your strengths, show them as part of helping readers to know who you are. My volunteer work with the local chapter of Americans United for Palestinian Human Rights has helped me appreciate…. (Notice how the sentence’s subject states – or reminds the reader – what you did, but the main part of the sentence explains what you took away from the experience.)

8. Make clear how you’ll maintain and build on the your studies undertaken during the scholarship. In other words, how will you keep from losing the skills you develop? Options could include additional coursework, travel to/living in the region, involvement in the local diaspora community (provided you can explain how this will help you maintain or increase your language skills), etc.

9. It’s often useful to explain briefly how you became interested in the region and study of the language you’re studying. It is often useful to mention briefly your history/successes as a language learner.

   I was lucky enough to spend a year in Buenos Aires in high school. While there, I was able to develop my language skills and become comfortable using Spanish all the time. When I returned to the US, I later received a score of 5 on the College Board’s AP Spanish Language Test. In Argentina, I also had the opportunity to meet a number of Jewish Argentines and became interested in the diversity of the Jewish community there; in fact, this experience is what encouraged me to begin studying Hebrew, which is a heritage language for my family.

10. Don’t inflate your achievements or overestimate what you can achieve. Avoid making statements like this one: After a summer in the Istanbul program, I will be fluent in Turkish. It takes years of studying a language (and often years living in a culture where it is spoken) to become fluent in a language; most highly skilled nonnative speakers, especially if they are language teachers or work in language-related areas, are very aware of the limits of their abilities.

11. If you’re having trouble figuring out how to conclude your essay or statement, mention whom you’ve asked to write on your behalf.

   a) I have asked Dr. Birol Yesilada to write a letter of recommendation focusing on my achievements in my major. It is included with my application.
   b) Dr. Pelin Basci has agreed to write about my progress learning Turkish. Her letter will arrive under separate cover.

12. Your statement is not a place for lengthy or therapeutic narratives. (In other words, don’t spend the first half of the page telling readers in detail about where you grew up, etc.) Keep things focused on demonstrating why you should be considered a strong candidate for the award.
13. Plan on submitting different (but likely overlapping) statements if you are applying for more than one scholarship. The awards are different, and you need to address those differences explicitly.

14. **Avoid coming across as entitled.** You simply can’t write things like *Therefore, I deserve this award* or *In light of these facts, I am certainly a strong candidate for this award* or *Given my many achievements, I am a strong candidate for this award* if you expect to be taken seriously. Those who write letters of recommendation on your behalf can make such statements about you, but you can’t make them about yourself.

15. Proofread, proofread, proofread. Get three friends to read the statement; better yet, try to get two professors to read the statement. Ask them for feedback—and be ready to hear it. And proofread again!

16. Be sure those writing letters for you have a copy of your application, including your statement and transcripts. The strongest letters will speak to your suitability for this award rather than being general letters of support.

17. Follow the instructions. A one-page essay is one single-spaced page long. Generally, it will have 1-inch margins on all four sides, and it will be printed in 12-point font.