

# Using the 4 Pillars of Initiative, Leadership, Impact, and Scholarship as a Writing Framework

Embarking on the adventure of high-stakes writing is a daunting task, whether you are applying for a research fellowship, graduate schools, a million dollar grant, or your dream job. There's a lot on the line... which is why it's called high-stakes! The 4 Pillars provide the stanchions and writing framework to address your high-stakes endeavor at a benchmark level and build a narrative that leaves your reviewers emotionally invested and rooting for you!

## What are the 4 pillars?

Think of the 4 Pillars as a continuum of Initiative, Leadership, Impact, and Scholarship with each phase building on one another:

**Initiative** is the *Explorer Phase*. It's about developing a vision, taking that first step, thinking outside of the box, being resourceful, creative, innovative, original, risk-taking, etc.

**Leadership** is the *Action Phase*. It's about translating that vision into reality, inspiring action, influencing the practice of others in achieving a goal, and shaping a culture that helps everyone grow! Keep in mind that leadership doesn't necessarily require a title like "President of \_\_\_\_." Rather, it's a quality that is exhibited by transforming a vision into reality. It's about jumping in! It's about action and getting others to act!!

**Impact** is the *Influence Phase*. It's about taking that leadership to the next level by adding significance, scope, and magnitude. It's creating something that's far-reaching and lasting. By building impact you're leaving behind something that lives beyond you, that's transformative, that produces more leaders, etc.

**Scholarship** is the *Benchmark Phase*. It's where the significance of what you've accomplished is assessed and communicated. While this phase may seem more intuitive for your research - through publications or presentations - it is equally important to your other endeavors. Scholarship can also be demonstrated through putting together or engaging in workshops or panels, creating an exhibit, or engaging in local community events.

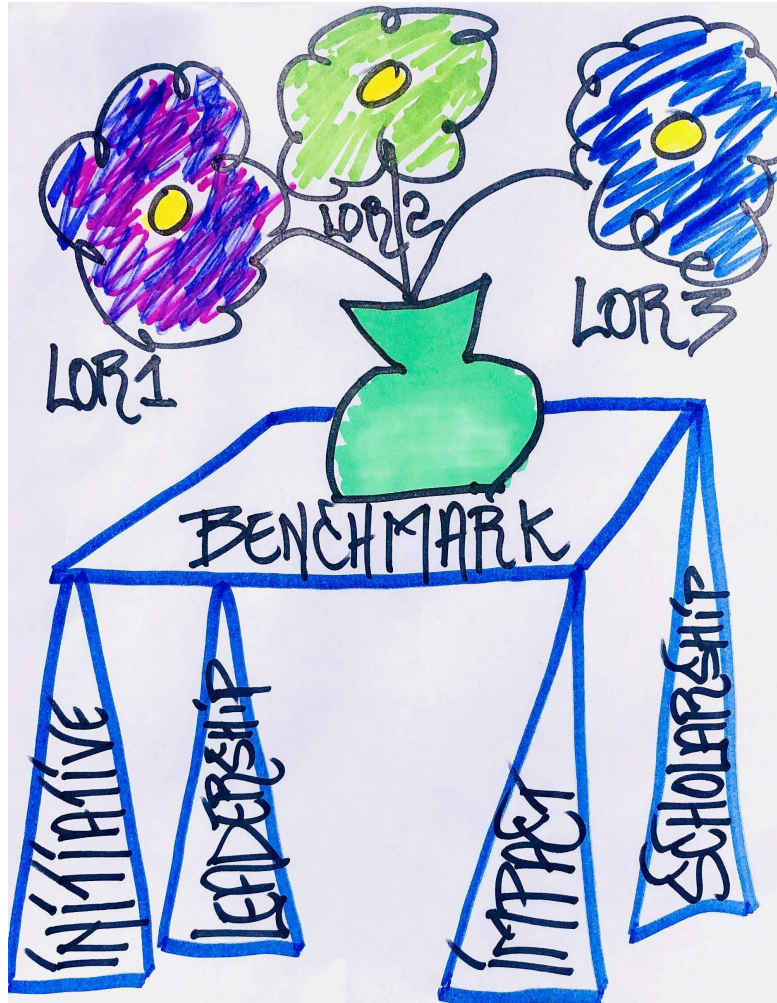


Figure 1: View the 4 Pillars framework of Initiative, Leadership, Impact, and Scholarship as stanchions that support a benchmark application. Letters of Reference (LOR) add a bouquet of spectacular color!

### Why use the 4 Pillars?

Both the National Science Foundation Graduate Research Fellowship Program and the Ford Foundation Fellowship Programs are investing in **a memorable vision of your future** – a vision that demonstrates *initiative, leadership, impact, and scholarship*. To be compelling, this requires **evidence of these qualities in your background and in what you propose to do during your fellowship**.

Incorporating the 4 Pillars framework throughout your application statements naturally supports the design of a future vision that is achievable given previous accomplishments.

### The 4 Pillars in Action

The 4 Pillars Framework is designed to be used throughout your writing process, and the more you engage with the 4 Pillars the more you'll see them highlighted in your final statements. To get an idea of how the 4 Pillars might emerge in your final statements, take a look at these two color coded examples of paragraphs from successful applications (also shown on pages 10-11 of the Primer). Here's an example of an **Intellectual Merit Relevant Background** paragraph that incorporates **Initiative** (in green), **Leadership** (in blue), **Impact** (in purple), and **Scholarship** (in red):

*The grant period came to a close, but I recognized that ethnography and conceptual design added a critical perspective to my engineering education and helped me to master the psychosocial aspects of design. I also felt extremely rewarded by working to extend the abilities of people with visual impairments. The Principal Investigator, Professor John Carroll, invited me to remain in the lab as a Research Assistant, and I have continued contributing to Third Eye and joined a second project with similar aims, Conversations for Vision [Initiative]. Over the last three years, I have assisted in conducting three ethnographic end-user studies; analyzed qualitative data; helped to design and prototype two assistive technologies, including co-designing with people with visual impairments; worked with an industry partner to augment their assistive services; and mentored new undergraduates joining the lab [Leadership]. Our findings reveal the latent needs and unseen strengths of people with visual impairments as well as how those factors can be translated into valuable new assistive tools [Impact]. I had the opportunity to share those findings by co-authoring two peer-reviewed publications (with two more currently under review) and presenting at the 2018 NASA Space Grant Research Symposium and the 2019 Penn State College of Engineering Research Symposium. Disseminating our work and insights to inspire further research and improve assistive technology design practice has demonstrated to me the power of research and motivated me to pursue other research opportunities [Scholarship].*

Here's an example of a **Broader Impact Relevant Background** paragraph that incorporates **Initiative** (in green), **Leadership** (in blue), **Impact** (in purple), and **Scholarship** (in red):

*At UW-Madison, I sought to share my passion for maps and science through story maps. Working with the Wisconsin Sea Grant, I developed a story map that informs coastal decision makers about the deleterious effects of coastal structures [Initiative]. I spearheaded the map design by translating a team of coastal engineers' and planners' expertise into a coherent narrative centered around a set of dynamic maps that visualize how coastal structures have incited shoreline erosion [Leadership]. Throughout the design process, I established and*

*documented design conventions for future Wisconsin Sea Grant story maps [Impact]. The story map is now a staple of the Wisconsin Sea Grant's outreach, and it received honorable mention for the 2020 Cartography and Geographic Information Society David Woodward Digital Map Award [Scholarship].*

For more examples, see pages 9-18 in the [Primer](#).

## Try it yourself!

Try recognizing the 4 Pillars yourself! Click onto [this Jamboard](#) and make a copy to start the activity. Read over the orange student activities and identify which of the 4 Pillars you recognize in each of the activities. Remember that the 4 Pillars are a continuum so a particular activity may have some overlap and fit multiple pillars.

Do any of the orange student activities reflect endeavors you've engaged in? If not, consider endeavors you've engaged in and where you would place them in the 4 Pillars framework.

Next, identify the 4 Pillars in your own activities! Building on your jamboard exercise, start to further expand your own experiences using the 4 pillars. Download the [Strategic Self-Inventory Worksheet](#) and write out any and all activities you've engaged in that would fall under one or more of the 4 Pillars.

After working through these two exercises, you should be familiar with how different activities fit within the 4 pillars framework. This is just the first step. As the examples above show, activities can be elevated to a benchmark level when they are connected to multiple pillars. Doing so turns a single activity into an impressive endeavor that adds to your memorable narrative.

## Next steps

The Strategic Self-Inventory is an important worksheet to bring to an initial session with your Fellowship Mentor! They're happy to help get you unstuck, to refine, and to take you through the next steps.

However, as we mentioned, the Strategic Self-Inventory is just a necessary first step. You'll continue to use the 4 pillars throughout your writing process to transform activities into well-rounded endeavors. Try highlighting your CV with four colors, each referring to a different pillar. Do you see a lot more of one color than another? Try this same exercise with a draft paragraph from one of your statements (as shown in the examples above).

As you continue your writing process, keep coming back to the 4 pillars and be creative in the way that you highlight the pillars each step of the way.

Feeling comfortable with the 4 Pillars? Move on to the next module.