

How to Prepare for a Successful Interview

Interviewing for a job can be stressful. You want to make a good impression, but there is a lot at stake and you can't always anticipate what will happen. *Will you be asked a question you don't know how to answer? Will you appear nervous?* Remember that interviewing is a skill: you can improve your abilities with preparation and practice. Whether you're interviewing for a new job (or you are selected to interview for the Mandela Washington Fellowship), thorough preparation is the key to success:

1. Do Your Research.

- **Spend some time learning about the company** or organization you're applying to, including its history, mission, and leadership team. If the organization has a blog, news releases, and/or social media channels, be sure to explore them.
- **Investigate the organization from the outside in.** Who are their top competitors? What are the biggest challenges or issues facing the organization? A simple Google search should help you find the information you need.
- If you **know who your interviewer is**, learn about their background and current role ([LinkedIn](#) or other professional networking sites are a good resources for this).

2. Anticipate the Questions—and Plan Your Responses.

- Familiarize yourself with common interview questions in your industry and **think about the single-most important thing that you want to communicate.** Perhaps you want to showcase your creativity, leadership abilities, or versatile skills. Write your responses down so you can study and refine them; when possible, add anecdotes or “proof points” to strengthen your argument. For example, “I am a trusted and reliable manager. Over the past three years, I have gone from managing a team of two direct reports to a team of eight.”
- **Perfect your 30-second elevator speech.** Requests such as “Tell me about yourself” or “Walk me through your background” are common at the beginning of an interview; your answer is important because it sets the tone for the rest of the meeting. Your elevator speech should pertain to the job you are applying for only—don't give a detailed breakdown of your resume or share irrelevant details about your personal life. Instead, focus on your passions, skills, and what interests you about the organization to which you are applying. If you don't know where to start, fill out the “Accomplishments and Leadership” section of the [YALI Network Biography Questionnaire](#) [PDF 107 kb]. And remember, keep it short! Thirty seconds is plenty of time to get your key points across.
- Know your strengths and **know how to talk about your weaknesses.** Be prepared to share three or four strengths including examples of how you have demonstrated these skills. For example, “Creative writing is one of my greatest strengths. I studied poetry and six of my stories have been published in fiction magazines.” On the contrary, when you talk about your weaknesses, emphasize what you are doing to address and/or improve them. You might say “Public speaking is a challenge for me, but the more I can practice and prepare in advance of a speech, the better I perform.”

3. Prepare Questions of Your Own.

- While it may feel strange to “interview” your interviewer, you should always compile a list of

questions prior to the meeting. **Asking questions is another way to demonstrate that you have done your research** and are serious about the opportunity. Need some ideas? Check out our new resource, [Good Questions to Ask During an Interview](#) [PDF 80 kb].

4. Practice, Practice, Practice.

- *Thinking* about how you will answer a question is one thing; saying it aloud is another. **Consider asking a friend to conduct a mock interview**, where they ask questions and you give your best (practiced) responses. A mock interview is a great opportunity to identify your areas for improvement; perhaps you manage an important project at work, but have a hard time explaining your role and what you do. If you can't do a mock interview, try reciting your interview responses in the mirror, or use a recording device to review your speech.
- **Plan how you will approach a question you are unsure how to answer.** It's okay to take a deep breath, repeat a question back, and/or collect your thoughts for a few moments before you respond.

5. Don't Forget to Sleep

- Hours of interview prep can be wasted if you arrive to the meeting feeling tired and sluggish. Make sure you are well rested so you can **impress your interviewer(s) with your energy and clear thoughts.**
- Always dress professionally, bring extra copies of your resume, and leave plenty of time to travel. If you've done the necessary preparation, the interview is yours to ace. Good luck!

[YALI Voices Podcast: Education changed his life. Now he's giving back.](#)

Fombah Kanneh poses with some of the children he is helping with his startup Gift 2 Change. 
(Courtesy of Fombah Kanneh)

Fombah Kanneh grew up in a makeshift house in the slums of Monrovia, Liberia, during the country's civil war. As in many other cities, slum life in Monrovia is notoriously hard — plagued by drugs, poverty, hunger and peer pressure to engage in destructive behavior.

Speaking with the State Department's Macon Phillips in a YALI Voices podcast, Kanneh said that, due to his circumstances, he faced "one solid wall" barring a successful future. But thanks to his mother's sacrifices and determination, he also had "one narrow, slim opportunity" to improve his chances: education.

Kanneh, a 2015 Mandela Washington Fellow, founded the startup [Gift 2 Change](#) as a way to give back to his community by supporting single mothers and children who are facing the same

challenges he did.

“It’s my responsibility to get somebody from somewhere, especially in the rural areas, in a slum community, to this stage, that one day too, they can have the opportunity to explain their success story,” he said.

“They are not just kids today. But they are the future leaders of tomorrow,” he said.

Gift 2 Change combines environmental sustainability with community building and education projects. Kanneh mobilizes young people from the streets to help him collect scrap materials, compost, bottles and other waste to sell to a friend who runs a recycling center. He uses the money to provide clothing, books, educational materials and training to Liberia’s most marginalized children.

Listen to the full podcast to learn how Kanneh found the inspiration to dedicate himself to his community, and like former South African President Nelson Mandela, has come to believe that education “is the most powerful weapon we can use to transform the world.”

Don’t have access to [SoundCloud](#), [iTunes](#) or [Google Play](#)? Read a transcript of the podcast below:

UNITED STATES DEPARTMENT OF STATE
BUREAU OF INTERNATIONAL INFORMATION PROGRAMS (IIP)
“YALI Voices Podcast: Fombah Kanneh”

[MUSIC: GRACE JERRY, "E GO HAPPEN"]

MACON PHILLIPS: Welcome, young African leaders. This is the YALI Voices podcast, a place to share some of the best stories from the Young African Leaders Initiative Network. My name is Macon Phillips, and I’m so glad you’ve joined us today. Before we get started, don’t forget to subscribe to the podcast, and visit yali.state.gov to stay up-to-date on all things YALI.

When speaking about having achieved success, people often claim that they started from the bottom. My guest for the edition of YALI Voices, Fombah Kanneh, really did. He grew up in the slums of Monrovia, Liberia, during the civil war. Fombah and his mother were forced to live day to day, often not knowing where they’d sleep, or what they’d eat.

It would have been easy for Fombah to fall in with the wrong crowd. But early on his mother stressed the value of an education. Fombah embraced education as the narrow opportunity he had to escape poverty and violence. After graduating university, he decided he would dedicate his life to helping lift children and single mothers out of poverty.

Now let’s jump right into my interview with Fombah Kanneh.

[MUSIC: GRACE JERRY, "E GO HAPPEN"]

Fombah Kanneh, it’s great to have you here, and I hope you have had a nice trip from Liberia, and a productive time here. I’m looking forward to talking to you today.

MR. KANNEH: It’s an honor to be on YALI Network. Thank you.

MR. PHILLIPS: Absolutely. So we like to, in these conversations, just kind of get a sense of where

you're coming from, and what you're working on these days, and look ahead to some of the challenges that are facing us. So let's start by kind of asking the simple question. When you meet somebody for the first time, and they say, hey it's great to meet you, what do you do? How do you answer that question?

MR. KANNEH: I said, thank you, it's an honor to meet you. My name is Fombah Lasana Kanneh. I'm from Liberia. I basically aim to children-related issues, supporting kids in rural Liberia, and in urban slum communities as well, and kids that can't afford. Because once upon a time, I was just like those kids in rural Liberia, especially on the streets of Monrovia. So I have to give back to them. Just summarizing what I do.

MR. PHILLIPS: I think that's an experience that not a lot of people can understand, what it's like to be a kid on the streets in Liberia. So paint a picture of what life was like for you when you were really young.

MR. KANNEH: Well, terrible. Again, born in poverty as a child was not a decision I made, but to get out of poverty as an adult was a decision I consciously made. Because life, it's not about where you're coming from, it's about where you are going. Yes, I was born in poverty. Yes, my dad passed on. So I grew up with a single mother.

And in the slums of Monrovia, things are really hard, tough. So to some extent, my mom searched up coal or firewood to send me to school during the crisis, the Liberian civil crisis, at the time. So I have one solid wall, and one narrow, slim opportunity.

This solid wall — poverty, corruption, growing up in a violent community — indeed, was really painful. But the slimmest of opportunities I had, at the time, was to go to school. That was the narrow slims of opportunity. It was not deep, it was narrow.

Because you know the time, you want to go to school, your mom is sending you to school, when you're coming back to a community, you have peer pressure. Your friends you play with, today, they're not in school. They want you to just join them. So growing up in the slums of Monrovia was really painful, terrible.

Sometimes you don't even have a square meal. And if you have a square meal, you never know where next you will sleep. If you know where next you'll sleep, you don't know what next activities you guys will do. There was nothing planned. Because your shadow, your clothing, was just at a time where it could come off anytime, because of the crisis.

MR. PHILLIPS: So you're living day to day. You're living in poverty. There's a lot of children that grow up in that situation. I'm sure you have friends and people you know from when you were younger. What was different about you? Why do you think you made some of the right choices, and took advantage of that slim opportunity that education offered?

MR. KANNEH: Thanks to my mother, and thanks to all single mothers out there, you know. Mom encouraged me a lot to go to school. At the time, I told her that it was not really a good stuff to go to school. Like people would say, why do you want to force your son to learn Western education, for example. And unfortunately, my mom is not an educated lady. She doesn't know how to read and write.

But she had a sense that she must send us to school. So I was forced to go to school, to some extent. Until I realized the importance of education, when I graduated from high school, and I started to support myself in college.

But what I do, with the question of what I do, especially giving back to kids in slum communities in rural Liberia. Because a few years ago, I was in that same situation. So I deem it necessary now to give back. I'm talking to you, Macon and the rest, because somebody somewhere, along with my mom, gave me the light, which is education.

So that's why I'm here. So indeed now, it's my responsibility to get somebody from somewhere, especially in the rural areas, in a slum community, to this stage, that one day too, they can have the opportunity to explain their success story.

MR. PHILLIPS: And that's one of the reasons, I'm sure, why you put together Gift 2 Change.

MR. KANNEH: Yeah.

MR. PHILLIPS: Why don't you tell us a little about that? That's the project you're working on right now. And I know that was heavily influenced by your respect for your mother, and sort of came from that. So tell us a little about what that project's all about.

MR. KANNEH: What Gift 2 Change is social entrepreneur startup for sustainability [INAUDIBLE]. Now, thanks to the YALI Network, online, I met this guy. He was a 2014 Fellow, and he also encouraged me a lot to participate in the Mandela Washington Fellowship, through his mentorship, through the YALI online network, I got close to him.

Coming to my project Gift 2 Change — so say he ran a big company, a recycling company. Not really a huge one. So I help collect bags with the young people, from the streets of Monrovia, to give to his company, called Green Cities Incorporated, where he manufactures these into large production. For me, I'm just mobilizing young people, getting my team on the streets, and sent it to him.

So what I would get from this selling of those scrap materials — blocks today, bottles, compost materials — it was to sustain my vision of giving back to impoverished kids, with that campaign called Leave No Child Behind. And I learned that campaign, in many ways, through my fellowship. There's a campaign called Leave No Child Behind. So I said, OK, at least we can take this back home. Especially to my village, my country, then we can run it through Africa.

So that to sustain our vision of giving by whatever I sell to him, sustain myself, and give back.

MR. PHILLIPS: Now in addition to that, you're also teaching classes some. I know that you have used the YALILearns platform, and the classes from that. Can you talk a little about your experience using the resources on that, and from the standpoint of other people who might be listening right now, who might be considering that, how did you find it useful?

MR. KANNEH: Well, it is a library. It is a huge resource center. It's not just the video that you watch for entertainment. It's a video that you watch to inspire you. What are you into? Civil society, for example. What if you're into business and entrepreneurship, or civil leadership? It helps to generate the kind of person you want to see.

So yes, I've benefited from it. So others want to be like me, a role model, right? Or have opportunity at the same time. So what I do with the materials I got through YALI online, through the internet, or through flat disks — so I share it through to PowerPoint presentations.

Soon, for example, we have free and popular speaking. And the lady will come on display, the YALILearns materials from the video presentation, they all watch it, university students. And people from local communities who watch those videos. If they can't understand the American way of speaking, maybe they see it as serious or standard English, they find it difficult.

We have to come — as someone who has participated in a YALI program — and break it down to their level, to the simplest form, so at least communication can flow. So that it can get a message, and be the leader that we all can be, in Africa, in the world at large.

MR. PHILLIPS: So now you're in Liberia, you've got these initiatives, you're teaching these classes. Tell me what the future looks like for you. What are some of the big projects that you're planning to take on?

MR. KANNEH: The future looks bright. But it's only for prepared people. Getting a lot of their materials from YALI online, been a Mandela Washington Fellow, going to the U.S., coming back. It's easy. You can set up bridges virtually. But it's not a point to celebrate here, until you can liberate somebody through education. Like Mandela said, education is the most powerful weapon we can use to transform the world. And as someone that benefited from education, and is still benefiting, I think it is a responsibility, and a driven passion to help kids in rural and slum communities.

In terms of how the future looks bright, we can do it together, by sharing and helping others. It's easier for us to sit in this room and criticize. It's easier for us to lament the years I was born in poverty. So what? Yes, I don't have resources. And so what? Who cares?

I'm thinking right, I've been taking one step. If you can't say, 'I am,' no one will say you are. So you have to, especially young people across the world, in Africa, if you can't be the change that you want to see, and rise up to the occasion, then no one will be. But if you just sit there and don't do nothing to build your future, you become an instrument of violence.

Especially as to what is going on in West Africa. Extremism is all over.

MR. PHILLIPS: Well, let me ask you a question on that. Because I couldn't agree with you more. But I think you would agree that breaking through, sometimes, to people, particularly kids, can be really difficult. In particular, when they're in poverty, or they're not in a good education system. And they kind of turn it off. And you have to break through to them.

For all the people listening today that are focused on similar issues, that are focused on children, that are trying to break through, what have you learned, both from your own experience growing up in poverty, and now doing work focused on children? What are some pieces of advice you could give to those who are trying to pierce through that, and help people understand that they need to stop making excuses and take that initiative?

MR. KANNEH: Well, growing up as a kid in a slum community, and those experiences that I had, personally, I think if we all can just take one single action, it starts in your home. It starts with your

own family. Then you can take it out. You have to sacrifice, yes. The challenges ahead of sharing those training materials with kids are very sharp and difficult. I can tell you that it is bread-and-butter stuff.

Well, again, if you don't do it, who will do it? If you can't rise up to change that mention, no one will do it. We all seem to be busy because we want to make profit. Yes, it's good. But the initiative of giving back to kids, you learn to be more tolerant, you learn to be more patient-mannered. You try to understand that you're not doing it because this is the kids of Liberia, but you're doing it for kids. They are the future.

Not just Liberia, but Africa. Not just Africa, but the world. So in order to fill the gap, especially in Africa, we have to educate the kids. You run a program on YALI online called Africa for All. That's a great initiative. And where people are signing, or encouraging people to stand up for women's rights, no violence against women, now having a large campaign around electorate issues. Those are great initiatives.

But if I can recommend an appeal, which of course you already started. We can say Africa for Kids. Stand up for kids. Those campaigns, you know — you may just sit in D.C. and just send messages, you're all OK. But you don't know the impact that you made, except you meet the Fellows interacting with them.

YALI Go Green. We all want to go green, now. We all want to wear green shirts, and sensitize others. Well, if we can all just rise up, Africa stand up for kids. Stand up for kids against violence. Stand up for kids with education. Social injustices, kids suffer from social injustices.

We have a lot of juveniles in prison across Africa. Maybe they can't afford, besides education, dozens of children I earn go to school every day, but go to school hungry. So if we can just start running those campaigns, and we don't have to sit for mark on the rest of the stuff for YALI online to do it — but if you're listening to me, wherever you find yourself, we can create those online platforms, especially through social media, and sell the idea that we need to stand up for kids.

They are not just kids today. But they are the future leaders of tomorrow.

MR. PHILLIPS: Totally agree with you, and I know we've done some work already on climate change, done some work already on women's empowerment. I really appreciate your point that people shouldn't wait around for people in D.C. to come up with this stuff. You're already working on this. So tell me a little bit, something, about you that might surprise most people.

MR. KANNEH: Well, like African youths, we love soccer. And if I'm really down, well, I gain inspiration from soccer. If I can gain inspiration from soccer, and I just look and sit, and see people that don't have anything I have, and they still appreciate themselves. So what does that mean? I have something. So those are the two areas I really get inspiration from.

If you want to give up, and you say, OK, I'm this, I'm that, just look at someone around. They don't have eyes to see. They don't even have feet to walk. What's about you? You have five senses. Beautiful ideas. But just wake up and take something positive.

Like many youths, what stops us from achieving our full potential is the fear factor. When I started, especially when I came out of university with this campaign, Leave No Child Behind, people would

say, you're not going to make it. You'll fail. Come on, we'll have a job here for you. You can do this one five hours a day, earn this.

I said no, this is my dream. You don't believe in my dream, then compared to you, I believe in my dream. If my dream of helping one kid to be successful, I can do it.

And lastly, through the YALI online, I'm sharing this vision to a Fellow from Tanzania. So Leave No Child Behind, now, is not just in Liberia, now, but it's crossing borders. From Tanzania, now Fellows from Sierra Leone want to repeat the ideas, because they've been inspired.

Even Alieu Jallow, from The Gambia, have all been inspired. If Fombah can do it, we all can do it.

MR. PHILLIPS: That sounds like the kind of thing you want spreading. You know, sounds like a great thing to grow.

MR. KANNEH: If it can grow, then we all would make an impact.

MR. PHILLIPS: So my next question, this is just a little bit more specific, maybe a personal question. Which is would you consider yourself a morning person or someone who does better late at night?

MR. KANNEH: I think in the morning.

MR. PHILLIPS: You wake up early and get started.

MR. KANNEH: Yes.

MR. PHILLIPS: Do you have any routines or anything that you feel like you do every day or every week that helps you be more organized, and focused?

MR. KANNEH: I'm more focused on building my mind, then focus on taking exercise and building my own body. We need to balance work, with fun, with exercises. But if we balance our mental capacity, which of course is the mindset. The mind, for me, I believe, is the most powerful weapon.

So when I wake up in the morning, for me, before going to bed, the first thing I do is to have an agenda for the next day. If I wake up, where do I start my day from the start? My agenda is already set. When I wake up, I'm strictly into it. Start work at like 5 o'clock in the morning, check a few emails, and follow my daily activities.

From 5 in the morning till 12 are my productive hours, because anything after 12 it would just be a bonus. That's exactly what I focus on.

MR. PHILLIPS: Yeah, I'm hearing that from a lot of people I talk to. It's just get it done in the morning, that's when you're most productive.

OK a final thing is you've been answering a lot of questions. I appreciate it, but if you could ask a question of President Obama, what would your question be?

MR. KANNEH: See if I had the opportunity, I'd say, Mr. President, thousands of kids in Africa don't have the opportunity to go to school. What you can do, in your own weak way, as president of the free world, as a fighter, to help kids in Africa? Kids in the world? Not just limited to Africa. Giving an

education.

MR. PHILLIPS: OK, great. Well, I really appreciate it. We've had a great conversation with Fombah, and wish you the best of luck back in Liberia.

What a great conversation that was with Fombah. It's hard not to be inspired by his story and his commitment to help others facing similar situations. He figured out, early on, that education unlocks the key to a better life. Thank you, Fombah, for taking the time to chat with us.

If you'd like to get in contact with Fombah, you can find him and his organization on Facebook under Gift 2 Change. That's gift, the number two, and change. Be sure to come back for more inspiring stories from young African leaders on the YALI Voices podcast.

Join the YALI Network at yali.state.gov and be part of something bigger. Our theme music is "E Go Happen," by Grace Jerry, produced by the presidential precinct. The YALI Voices podcast is brought to you by the U.S. Department of State, and is part of the Young African Leaders Initiative, which is funded by the U.S. Government. Thanks for listening, everyone.

[Mandela Washington Fellowship Tips: How do I answer the essay questions?](#)

Adepeju Jaiyeoba, a 2014 Mandela Washington Fellow from Nigeria,  has offered helpful insights into what reviewers are looking for in the 2017 MWF essay questions. (Courtesy of Adepeju Jaiyeoba)

When you get to the essay questions in your application, don't see them as a barrier to be overcome. Instead, consider them as an opportunity to tell reviewers about the great things you have been doing and how being a 2017 Mandela Washington Fellow would benefit your community as well as yourself. The essays offer a chance to explain in your own words, and with your own energy and positivity, your track record of making change in the community and how you plan to do even more as a Fellow. (Here is a [great article](#) if you need general writing tips.)

Adepeju Jaiyeoba, a 2014 Mandela Washington Fellow from Nigeria, offered some helpful advice to applicants in a [previous blog](#) for the YALI Network. This year she teamed up with several other Fellows on the YALI Network's [Face2Face page](#) to discuss this year's essay questions, with specific ideas on how to approach each one. Click on the link after each question to read the tips and the discussion.

1) Please give a brief description of your professional background and current work. Why have you chosen this work? ([read more](#))

2) Nelson Mandela said, "It is in your hands, to make a better world for all who live in it." What are you doing to improve your community? ([read more](#))

3) What role do you want to play in your community/country in 10 years? What are you currently doing to achieve this? ([read more](#))

4) Describe how your participation in the Mandela Washington Fellowship will influence your activities when you return home. ([read more](#))

5) What do you consider to be your most significant professional accomplishment or most innovative idea? Explain the accomplishment or innovation, why it was important, and what obstacles you overcame to achieve it. ([read more](#))

6) Nelson Mandela was awarded the Nobel Peace prize for working with leaders of the South African government to agree on a peaceful transition to multiparty rule and end to Apartheid. He was able to forgive those who enforced his imprisonment to achieve a greater goal. Leaders are able to achieve progress despite differing views or identities. Please explain a situation where you have used your leadership skills to resolve a conflict or disagreement with others. What actions did you take and how did you encourage respectful discussion? ([read more](#))

Albert Muragijimana, a 2016 Fellow from Rwanda, said that when he first applied he made the mistake of telling stories about himself and his hard work in the essays without demonstrating the impact he was having on his community.

"If possible show the numbers," he advised. "How many people are going to be reached? How many lives are you going to change? If you are running a school for example, how many kids are you going to take at school? If you are looking to improve access to education or access to health, how many people are going to have access to those services? So always make sure that you have demonstrated both the action and the impact," Muragijimana said.

If you are having trouble, don't be afraid to contact MWF alumni and those who are familiar with your work for advice. As Agang Dithogo, a 2016 Fellow from Botswana, said, the encouragement she received from previous Fellows "kept me going."

"All through the application I would ask for advice, like 'This essay is only 200 words but I want to go on for 700 words. Where do you think I should cut it? Where do you think I should modify it?' So they offered that platform for us," she said.

In addition to reading Jaiyeoba's posts on the [YALI Network Face2Face group](#), be sure to visit the [YALI Network Facebook page](#) and the [MWF Application Information page](#) to get more tips and information on preparing a great application. Good luck!

2017 Mandela Washington Fellowship Application Tip: What is a 'proven record of leadership'?

One insight into Nelson Mandela's leadership skills comes from his famous saying, "It's  always impossible until it's done." (© AP Images)

A 2016 Mandela Washington Fellow from Botswana described being a recipient of the fellowship named after the former South African president and initiated by the first African-American president as "mind-blowing."

No doubt many 2017 MWF hopefuls share this sentiment as they finalize their applications (due by October 26!). They may also notice that the very first item on the list of [selection criteria](#) is "A proven record of leadership and accomplishment in public service, business and entrepreneurship, or civic engagement."

In other words, the fellowship named for Nelson Mandela is not meant for people who are aspiring leaders, but who are already leaders in practice.

Balarabe Ismail, a 2016 Fellow from Nigeria, said, "Not many people can apply because some of the questions cannot be answered by somebody on the street. It has to be somebody doing something for society."

How do you become a leader? It's true that many became Fellows after having already founded and led a business, a nonprofit organization or another formal group. But that's not a requirement. Neither is having a formal diploma or degree.

Here are two questions to consider:

- What impact are you having in your community?
- How are you changing the space you live or work in?

It could be that what you are doing in your neighborhood or religious or civic organization is providing an important community service, even if you hadn't previously thought of it as "leadership."

If you see there is a challenge in your community and you are actively doing something about it, you are a leader.

As 2016 Fellow Mwanga Simwanda from Zambia said: "Yes, we have a lot of problems, but what are you doing about it as a leader? They want somebody who has resolutions and not just a list of challenges. So that's the key. What are you doing to solve the problems?"

How can you demonstrate that you are a leader in your application? Don't be afraid to contact MWF

alumni and those who are familiar with your work for advice. You can connect with them and find more helpful tips by becoming a YALI Network member and by following the [YALI Network Facebook page](#) or the [YALI Network Face2Face group](#).

[Writing an exciting personal biography](#)

YALI Network member types at a computer. (State Department)



An attention-grabbing biography is an important resource for any professional. This biography can be used as part of your resume/CV, school or Fellowship applications, on your social media pages, in cover letters, and much more. It can be a key factor in decisions as to whether or not you are accepted for a new position or opportunity. It needs to be polished, thorough, and capture who you are in just a few sentences. Below are our top tips for creating an exciting personal biography.

Top Biography Tips

1. **Develop an outline** or fill out the [YALI Network Biography Questionnaire](#) [PDF 107 kb] to get started. Then, remember you don't have to use every idea—pare down your content to the best of the best. Use the Biography Questionnaire as a resource to build your own personal narrative - it is not a requirement for any applications or the YALI Network.
2. Keep it short—aim for one paragraph. Readers will spend a minute at most on your biography so make sure you only include the **most important and relevant information**.
3. Use the third person, which is **more professional than first person**. Third person would be "John moved to Nigeria when he was 12" Instead of "I moved to Nigeria when I was 12."
4. When describing your accomplishments, don't write a long list. **Select one or two** that you are most proud of and provide specifics.
 - a. **Can be improved:** Sam volunteers at his local school, has two advanced degrees, speaks three languages, and is passionate about music education.
 - b. **Good:** Sam created a choir program for underprivileged girls. He asked the telecom company where he worked in advertising if they would be interested in mentoring the girls. By the end of the first year, more than 20 girls had received not only a music education, but also gained new computer and other professional skills.
5. Avoid careless mistakes—**take your time** and don't wait until the last minute to write your bio. If you get stuck, step away to clear your mind. Make sure you edit the bio multiple times and ask someone you trust to edit it as well.
6. Talk about your **specific, achievable goals**. Stating that you plan to become a tech entrepreneur

is vague; instead, discuss a specific goal, like starting a company that develops digital learning tools and programs for schools.

7. **Don't forget the basics.** Even though your bio should be short, make sure to include your name, profession, education, years of experience, etc.

[If you are afraid of public speaking, read this](#)

Allison Shapira talks to Mandela Washington Fellows during her workshop on public speaking. (State Dept./Tim Brown) 

Need a guide to get you started on your next public speaking engagement? Check out this [public speaking guide](#) [PDF 300kb] and [interactive worksheet](#).

Have you ever had to give a speech on behalf of something bigger than yourself? It sounds terrifying. But it doesn't have to be, said [Allison Shapira](#), who teaches public speaking and presentation skills in Washington.

"It doesn't matter where you're from. It doesn't matter how old you are. And it doesn't matter what stage you're at in your career. Every single one of us needs public speaking," she said.

What exactly is public speaking? Shapira defined it as anytime you speak in front of an audience of one or more with some kind of goal. That covers everything from a formal address at a podium or on a stage to a small meeting with co-workers.

If you are responsible for giving a speech, Shapira said, there are three questions to ask yourself that will help get you started:

- Who is your audience?
- What is your goal?
- Why you?

Explaining further, she said your goal will drive your message, and knowing your audience helps you understand what will make sense to them and how they will most effectively receive information. Understanding your own passion for the subject gives you permission to bring in your enthusiasm and experience, including a story or anecdote that will make the speech more authentic.

To organize the speech, first define its one main message. "The more focused you are in your message, the more powerful you are going to be," Shapira said. After you write down the main points, rearrange them into a logical structure. Then write out the opening and closing sentences.

“The first sentence and the last sentence are the two most important parts of a speech,” Shapira said. The first captures attention and creates the first impression, while the last drives home the message.

Given audience attention spans, “a short, concise speech is more powerful,” she said. You can actually make a strong point in less than two minutes.

Shapira advises that you practice the speech out loud, at least a week before if possible, and record it. “The more you practice, then the more it becomes natural to you,” she said.

When delivering the speech, she said, there are three effective nonverbal techniques to keep in mind:

- Eye contact with the audience.
- Good body language, such as posture, facial expression and hand movements that match your words.
- Vocal tone. Be expressive!

But above all, relax. “Public speaking is more about authenticity than it is about perfection. Nobody wants you to give a perfect, flawless speech,” Shapira said. “It’s more about connecting with people on an authentic personal level.”

[#YALICHAT Wrap-up: 2017 Mandela Washington Fellowship Application](#)

Experts from the U.S. Department of State answered your questions about the [2017 Mandela Washington Fellowship](#) with a three-day Facebook [#YALICHAT](#). We’ve compiled the most frequently asked questions, with answers from those who know best!

APPLICATION REQUIREMENTS

Many of the #YALICHAT participants wanted to know if they qualified for the Fellowship based on their age. Applicants age 21 to 35 will be considered, but those between the ages of 25 and 35 are preferred. Those under the age of 21 must provide an exceptional application for consideration.



#YALI2017 applicants do not need to possess a valid passport at the time of their application. Having a passport will not assist or hinder applicants.



One potential applicant asked how his residency will affect his application eligibility.



Fellowship applicants must speak proficient English to participate in the program.



YALI Network membership is not required to become a Mandela Washington Fellow, but taking the YALI Network Online Courses will assist applicants with their public speaking skills and further prepare them for the second step of the application process, the interview.



APPLICATION CONTENT

Many applicants apply multiple times before being selected as a Mandela Washington Fellow. Their applications improve greatly every year. If you're resubmitting your application, include your latest accomplishments and strengthen your essays. Be careful if you choose to copy and paste your answers from a previous year's application because it changes each year.



Include all relevant leadership activities in your application, past and present. This will greatly strengthen your chances of being selected. When you choose your track, ensure your choice represents your leadership experience and goals. You cannot edit or add to your application once you've already submitted it. Multiple submissions in the same year will lead to disqualification.



Potential applicants also inquired what kinds of documents they should attach to their Fellowship application. Often, applicants attach letters of recommendation from people who can speak to their leadership skills, but it is not required for applicants to include documents in their application.

POST APPLICATION SUBMISSION

If you've you are selected for an interview, your U.S. Embassy or Consulate will reach out to you in January or February of 2017.



If you still have questions about the Fellowship application, refer to the [Frequently Asked Questions](#) page and [subscribe](#) to the YALI Network email list to receive tips on how to submit your best application today!

2017 Mandela Washington Fellowship Application Tip: How's Your English?

(State Dept.) - <https://americanenglish.state.gov/four-skills-resources>



Mandela Washington Fellowship (MWF) applicants who come from countries where English is the main language or one of the main languages have a built-in advantage when it comes to meeting the requirement to be proficient in [reading, writing and speaking](#) the language.

Diane Edea, a 2016 Fellow from Benin, pointed this out directly to President Obama during the [town hall meeting](#) at the August 1-3 MWF Presidential Summit.

In her French-speaking country, Edea studied applied linguistics and communications before creating an English-language learning center that trains students and professionals for interviews as well as for English language tests such as the TOEFL (Test of English as a Foreign Language) and IELTS (International English Language Testing System). She said she is also hoping to use it to train MWF hopefuls.

In her remarks to Obama, Edea asked, "Mr. President ... help us build English club[s], English language centers for young people to be able to be more efficient and seize this opportunity."

Fanta Coumba Karembé, a 2016 Fellow from Mali, said English was indeed a barrier for her and others who live in French- and Portuguese-speaking countries. "You need help if it's not your language," she said. "You have to go to someone who has mastered the language and get them to look at your application and make corrections."

If you are not a native English speaker, where do you feel you need the most improvement? For some, like 2016 Fellow Wilfrid Marx Abidji from Benin, reading and writing the language was not a problem.

"I have a B.A. in English, but since I am in a French-speaking environment, my speaking was not as fluent as I needed," he said.

He looked for ways to practice and improve his conversational skills, which he knew would be critical if he was called in for an interview.

His advice? Try to find ways to immerse yourself in the language.

"Switch your TV to an English station like CNN, or your radio to BBC, and try to create an English-speaking environment," Abidji said.

Do you have tips on how you have improved your English? Or are you a native speaker and willing to practice with others who want to sharpen their skills? Become a YALI Network member and make those connections by following the [YALI Network Facebook page](#) or the [YALI Network Face2Face group](#).

Good luck with your application!

[2017 Mandela Washington Fellow Application Tip: Use the YALI Network!](#)

YALI Network members in Nigeria show their stuff. (State Dept.)



If you are reading this blog, following the [YALI Network Facebook page](#) or the [YALI Network Face2Face group](#), and otherwise taking advantage of YALI's ability to connect people online and through local events, you have a great advantage as you pursue your quest to be a 2017 [Mandela Washington Fellow](#).

But don't just take our word for it. Several 2016 Fellows whose previous applications had not been successful found different ways to use the YALI Network to get advice, feedback or other help with their next attempts.

Rita Zaumu from Cameroon said, "The Network helped me a lot because the past Fellows ... gave a lot of heads-up about how to go about applying for the fellowship. I spent something like five hours a week on the YALI Network and Face2Face pages to see what people are doing in their communities."

Zambian Fellow Mwanga Simwanda said the YALI Network "really made it possible for me because they got in touch with me after my first application, and through the Zambian Embassy I received a lot of emails allowing me to network with other people and the Zambian YALI alumni."

Through her participation, Simwanda discovered local events with Fellows where she learned tips on how to improve her application and understand what the recruiters were looking for.

The Zambian YALI Network coordinator "would contact us and host seminars for us on how to apply and link us with the alumni that came and their experience and how they applied. She really was just encouraging us to apply and apply and apply. ... I got to network with other people and through the network I met a lot of different people," she said.

Simwanda, overcoming her disappointment from earlier unsuccessful attempts, learned what they had done differently on their applications. "So I tried the third time, and here I am. I made it!"

Wilfrid Marx Abidji from Benin turned to the YALI Network for advice when he found out he had been selected for an interview and he was working to improve his English-language skills.

"I was really impressed with the speed and the proactive way people reacted on the Network," he said.

Abidji advises, "Don't close your door and be alone. Open yourself, go to the YALI Network and ask questions."

Agang Dithlogo from Botswana said the encouragement she received from successful applicants “kept me going” and motivated her to try again.

“All through the application I would ask for advice, like ‘This essay is only 200 words but I want to go on for 700 words. Where do you think I should cut it? Where do you think I should modify it? So they offered that platform for us,” she said.

She said Fellows are especially important in countries like hers where not everyone has access to the internet. “They are a precious resource,” she said. “They went back to their communities [and explained] this is how they started, and that is very inspirational.”

Perhaps, like Fanta Coumba Karembé from Mali, you knew someone before they became a Fellow, and were amazed by the transformation.

“When my friend came back from this program he was completely changed. I could see stars in his eyes, lots of confidence in himself and all the things he wanted to achieve. It was like he was on a different level,” she said.

The YALI Network can help by offering a platform to learn about Fellows’ experiences. “When you read about young leaders and their stories, what they want to do in their countries and share information, it’s exciting. You realize you are not the only one thinking in these ways and you feel that change is possible. They give you motivation,” Karembé said.

Good luck with your application!

[2017 Mandela Washington Fellow Application Tip: Which track should I choose?](#)

You have three tracks to choose from to be a Fellow studying at a U.S. college. Choose  carefully! (© AP Images)

As a Mandela Washington Fellow, you would learn a lot and meet many useful contacts over the course of six weeks on a U.S. college campus. Looking over [the application](#), you will notice there are three separate tracks or themes of study, and you are asked to “rank the sector/track in order from the track that most closely aligns with your daily work, education, or community involvement.”

These are your choices:

- Business and entrepreneurship.
- Civic leadership.
- Public management (including a specialized program focused on energy policy).

You may be especially interested in one, or even all three, but some former Fellows would advise that you pay close attention to the wording in the application. It's not so much about what interests you. It's more about what you are doing now.

Juby Peacock, a 2016 Fellow from Botswana, learned this lesson the hard way. She wanted to study business and entrepreneurship, but because she didn't currently have a business of her own, her first application was unsuccessful. The next year she tried for the civic leadership track. Again, she did not qualify.

"I thought I'm such a loser. I'll never try again," she said. Bear in mind that this remarkable person had 12 years of experience in social work and volunteerism in addition to being an accomplished artist. Oh, and she was also once Miss Botswana.

Peacock realized she hadn't made a critical point clear to those reviewing her application. Her involvement with an arts-based nongovernmental organization actually made her a civic leader in practice. "I was doing it all along, but I just didn't know how to say it," she said. She tried again for the civic leadership track and met with success.

"What I realized is that I did not actually understand the tracks at first," said 2016 Nigerian Fellow Balarabe Ismail. "I learned I have to know the track I am applying for, and will I have the skills or the experience in those areas."

Rita Zaumu, a 2016 Fellow from Cameroon, said she has "a passion" for community service and was strongly considering applying for the civic leadership track. But with several years of business experience and as founder of a communications company, she realized this might not be the best choice. "After a lot of reflection, I decided it was better to apply from what I have been doing for the past seven years," she said.

On the [YALI Network Facebook page](#), Adepeju Jaiyeoba, a 2014 Fellow from Nigeria, advised hopefuls that "you don't want to confuse the application reviewer such that they won't even know the track to place you."

"Here's my advice: Of the three areas, which one provides you with the most evidence of effectiveness? Which one do you desire to grow most in? Which one do you think the Fellowship is best positioned to help you advance? When I was applying, I had an NGO and a business. I applied for business because I wanted advancement in that area and I got it," she said.

So think about your choice. It matters.

Good luck with your application!
