

The Critical Language Scholarship: Application Tips & Considerations

The [Critical Language Scholarship \(CLS\) Program](#) is an intensive overseas language and cultural immersion summer program for American students enrolled at U.S. colleges and universities. Students spend eight to ten weeks abroad studying one of 15 critical languages. The program includes intensive language instruction and structured cultural enrichment experiences designed to promote rapid language gains.

CLS Program institutes cover approximately one academic year of university-level language coursework during an eight to ten-week program and are designed to meet the needs of students from a variety of language levels and backgrounds. Some CLS institutes require one to two years of prior language study (or the equivalent), while others accept students with no prior background in the language.

Formal classroom language instruction is provided for a minimum of 20 hours per week. Extracurricular activities are designed to supplement the formal curriculum, including regular one-on-one meetings with native speaker language partners for conversational practice, as well as cultural activities and excursions designed to expand students' understanding of the history, politics, culture and daily life of their host country.

Term: Summer 8-10 weeks intensive language study abroad

Application Opens: Mid-September

Deadline: Late November

Eligibility: U.S. citizen or national at the time of application. Open to undergraduates, graduate students, and Ph.D. students enrolled in a program during the application cycle and who will have completed at least one full year of study (three quarters) by the beginning of the program. No minimum GPA requirement.

All other factors being equal, preference given to:

- Veterans of the United States Armed Forces.
- Applicants with the goal of representing geographic diversity and a diversity of institutions and fields of study.
- Candidates with limited or no previous study abroad experience.

The full set of [selection criteria may be reviewed here](#).

[FAQ's](#)

Program Benefits:

The CLS Program covers most of the costs of participating in its overseas institutes, including:

- International and domestic travel between the student's U.S. home city, Washington, D.C., and the program site
- Visa application fees
- Costs associated with the mandatory pre-departure orientation in Washington, D.C.
- Language instruction, room, board, program-sponsored travel within the host country
- All entrance fees for program activities
- Oral Proficiency Interview (OPI) language assessments
- Two units (six quarter credits) of U.S. academic credits issued through Bryn Mawr College
- While there is no requirement to seek government employment, alumni of the CLS Program are eligible for [non-competitive eligibility \(NCE\) hiring status](#) within the federal government for one year following the end of their programs, extendable for up to two additional years.

The following expenses are not covered by the CLS Program:

- U.S. passport fees
- The cost of medical exams and any follow-up visits necessary to pass the medical review process, as determined by the CLS Program.

Languages Offered:

The CLS Program is part of a U.S. government effort to expand dramatically the number of Americans studying and mastering critical foreign languages. **Participants are expected to continue their language study beyond the scholarship period and apply their critical language skills in their future professional careers.**

- Open to students at all language levels, Beginning through Advanced for [Azerbaijani](#), [Bangla](#), [Hindi](#), [Indonesian](#), [Persian](#), [Punjabi](#), [Swahili](#), [Turkish](#), and [Urdu](#).
- One year prior study required for Advanced Beginning, Intermediate, and Advanced levels of [Arabic](#), [Korean](#), [Portuguese](#), and [Russian](#).
- Two years prior study required for Intermediate and Advanced levels of [Chinese](#) and [Japanese](#).

CLS Language Levels and Terminology:

- **Beginning Level:** No previous study of the language, or less than one academic year of study or the equivalent.
- **Advanced Beginning Level:** At least one academic year of target language study or the equivalent.
- **Intermediate Level:** At least two academic years of target language study or the equivalent.
- **Advanced Level:** At least three academic years of target language study or the equivalent.

If you are currently taking college-level coursework, please apply for the next highest level. For instance, if you will have completed first year Arabic or the equivalent by the start of the CLS summer programs, you should select Advanced Beginning Arabic.

Student Experience:

- Intensive language study, no free time for travel outside the host country.
- Excursions are imbedded into the program.
- Study in cohorts with other recipients. No more than 30 students in one location.
- Class size is capped at seven students.

Application Notes:

- Students can be awarded the CLS up to two times, in addition to the Gilman Scholarship one time.
- For the past few cycles, CLS has offered around 550 scholarships each year.
- In many ways, applying for a language that you do not have a background in can be more challenging than applying with a documented history, because many universities do not offer these languages in a traditional classroom setting so making the connection between the language and your long term goals can take some planning.
- Students are encouraged to apply for CLS multiple times, just because they are not selected or make it to the final round does not mean they did not put a strong application together.
- One Letter of Recommendation required, ideally from target language professor.
- Non-traditional fields of study are encouraged to apply. The CLS Program actively seeks applicants in diverse fields of study, including STEM fields, law, medicine, and others. Applicants must clearly articulate how the target language relates to their academic field of interest and future career goals.

Award recipients are selected on the basis of merit, with consideration for (see further details below):

- Academic record and potential to succeed in a rigorous academic setting;
- Commitment to language learning;
- Connection between the target language and career/academic goals;
- Ability to adapt to an intensive program and a challenging environment; and
- Contributions to the CLS Program and Program goals.

Academic Record and Potential to Succeed in a Rigorous Academic Setting:

Successful applicants:

- Show that they understand the challenges of the CLS Program as a group-based, intensive academic study abroad program, and that they are prepared to meet these challenges.
- Articulate how their academic, professional and personal experiences have prepared them to succeed on the CLS Program.

Applications score higher if they demonstrate strong academic history, activities, and relatable experiences.

For the letter of recommendation, ask a recent professor who knows you well. It is ideal to ask a language professor since they can speak to your advancement in the language.

If you are in a multidisciplinary field or major, this can be a challenge for the CLS evaluators, since they are reviewing academic history and academic trends to determine students that have a clear commitment to their goals and studies. If

students have difficulty connecting various interests under one umbrella, it can be hard to show a commitment to one particular language or field of study.

It is good to utilize your resources (mentors, advisors, [Hacherl Research & Writing Studio](#), [Scholarship Center](#), [Fellowships Office](#)) and have many people review your essay drafts. That being said it should be clear that you wrote your essays. If it looks too altered or edited, the reviewers may question the authenticity of your application. Make sure your words are your own.

Commitment to Language Learning:

Successful applicants:

- Articulate a motivation for learning the language for which they are applying.
- Show that they have leveraged available resources to develop appropriate foreign language skills and cultural knowledge for the CLS Program.
- Show commitment to further developing their language skills and cultural knowledge after participating in the CLS Program.

Remember you are applying to study a language, not applying to a region. Focus on how the language skills will impact you rather than why studying in a particular region will assist you.

If you have a heritage component with the language this can be helpful. However, reviewers may wonder why your skillset is not more advanced and question your commitment to the language if you have had several trips abroad and opportunities for independent language learning, yet you are applying for a beginning level.

If you are studying or have studied other languages, the evaluators will want to know why you are not applying for your historically studied language, or why this new language is an asset in addition to your other skillsets. Same for other travel or study abroad experiences, if you have multiple unrelated experiences, they will question how it relates to your long-term goals.

Connection between the Target Language and Career/Academic Goals:

Successful applicants:

- Show that the specific language and cultural knowledge they gain on the CLS Program will have an impact on their academic, personal and professional development.
- Show that the language and cultural knowledge they gain is integral to their future plans.

Make sure to read and answer the prompts with intention. The most successful applicants had very refined long and short-term goals and their academic history and activities aligned with these goals.

Flow of logic is important, academic history, commitment to language study, and initiative in language immersion all must support your goals and connect with the language. It must be very clear why you have chosen to study the language, how it is imperative to your future professional and/or personal goals, and how you intend to continue with language learning after the program.

Go beyond stating “additional language skills and cultural experiences are valuable.” Draw a specific connection between linguistic competence and your future academic and/or professional goals.

Spend time researching your language of choice, region(s) where it is utilized both internationally and domestically, and how learning the language can impact your career and future goals. Research and statistics can be included in your essays and statement of purpose. Especially when addressing how the language is imperative to your goals, this connection must be clear and strong.

Ability to Adapt to an Intensive Program and a Challenging Environment:

Successful applicants:

- Exhibit maturity and self-awareness when considering potential challenges they may face abroad.
- Show the ability to interact with people and situations that require adaptation.

Maturity, flexibility, and resilience are important on such a short and intensive immersive experience. It is ideal to have documented examples that show you have appreciation for challenging situations, even when difficult, and readiness for this experience. Express self-reflection on how you handled these situations.

Have you had experiences of intensive learning or immersion experiences in the past that required adaptability? Explain beyond the experience and highlight how you adapted. What strategies did you employ and how did they work for you?

It is important to demonstrate tolerance and an openness to alternative perspectives. Identify your process for navigating cultural differences and adapting in challenging situations.

Contributions to the CLS Program and Program Goals:

Successful applicants:

- Have considered what their unique experiences, perspectives and/or background might contribute to the program.
- Make a good case for how they will contribute to the mission of building mutual understanding between the people of the United States and the people of their host communities.

Highlight what makes you diverse and unique. What can you learn from the program, and how can others learn from you? This is about collaboration, knowledge sharing, and having an open mind. What perspectives and experiences can you bring to the cohort and host community? What experiences in your past provide a foundation for your readiness for such an experience?

Why should the program invest in you? How will your improved language skills transition to further learning in the future, and how does this relate to your goals?