



International Division
UNIVERSITY OF WISCONSIN-MADISON

2025-2026 James C Gaither Junior Fellows Program topical essay writing prompts

Instructions: An essay of no more than three (3) typewritten, double-spaced pages on one of the following topics. These topics are intended to test skills in analysis, logic, and written expression. The essays should be analytical thought pieces, not research papers. Students should submit an essay related to their primary research program interests, although the James C. Gaither Junior Fellows Program may ultimately select an applicant for a program outside of his/her designated primary interest or make an assignment to more than one program.

- While candidates may indicate a second research program choice on the application, we strongly encourage candidates to tailor their application towards only their first choice.

Applicants must respond to the question pertaining to the program to which they are applying.

Complete information on the James C Gaither Junior Fellows Program and the application process is available at <https://iris.wisc.edu/funding/students/gaither/>

Prompts:

A. Democracy, Conflict, and Governance Program. Choose any two countries in the world, from two different regions, including at least one from the Global South. Explain how political developments in those countries in the past five to ten years embody what you believe are some of the most important elements of the global democratic recession. Be sure to give some indication why you have chosen the countries you focus on.

B. American Statecraft Program. America's role in the world is changing, whether it likes it or not. What are the 3-5 most important factors that will shape the context in which America conducts its foreign policy in the next two decades?

C. Nuclear Policy Program. Which state without nuclear weapons do you believe is most likely to acquire them?

D. Technology and International Affairs Program (Please respond to just ONE of the two following questions). When you read or hear discussions about 'risks of AI' what questions do you have that you do not think are being answered well? **OR** What technology issue will have the greatest impact on international stability in the coming decade, and why?

E. Middle East Program. The Middle East region is going through a huge, agonizing and protracted transformation characterized by dwindling oil revenues, rising populations, failing governance structures



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and government services, rising extremism and sectarianism, and high youth unemployment. The current situation has enabled regional powers to intervene in each other's affairs as well as non-state actors such as the self-proclaimed Islamic State to emerge and spread new toxic ideologies. What do you see as one of the most difficult threats facing the region today and the underlying drivers of turmoil? Discuss the impact this has had on two countries in the region and strategies that will help move these countries toward a better future.

F. International Security and Political Economy [to work with the International Security and South Asia Programs] (Please respond to just ONE of the two following questions). Many scholars argue that the world is experiencing a worrying period of democratic backsliding, while skeptical voices suggest that backsliding concerns are overblown. With reference to existing data sources and democracy ratings, which position do you find more compelling and why? **OR** Should the United States end its ambiguity over defending Taiwan?

G. Asia Program. To what extent are states in Asia "forced to choose" between the US and China? Consider political, economic, security, and other factors to substantiate your analysis.

H. Russia and Eurasia Program. The U.S.-Russia relationship has plummeted to unprecedented post-Cold War lows amid the war in Ukraine. Can this downward trajectory be arrested? What are the key dangers in the current situation and how might the White House seek to prevent things from getting out of hand?

I. Africa Program. The African continent is critical to the future of the global economy in this century. Africa has the world's youngest and fastest growing population. The African Continental Free Trade Agreement now encompasses the world's largest free trade area, by number of participating countries (54 signatories compared to the European Union's 27). With the world's largest number of mobile money accounts, digital innovations are providing new solutions to some legacy challenges on the continent, around financial inclusion for instance. And Africa's abundant natural resources endowments, including minerals and metals as well as forests in the Congo basin, will be crucial to the global clean energy transition to combat climate change. Yet, the continent is increasingly becoming the epicenter of global poverty - with 33 of the 45 countries designated by the United Nations as "least developed" situated in Africa. Nearly two dozen countries are at risk of debt distress and around 600 million people lack access to affordable and reliable electricity. What domestic/or global factors will shape the specific role that African countries play in the global economy? Illustrate your points with examples from two African countries.

J. Global Order and Institutions Program. The UN Secretary-General has depicted the world as "gridlocked in colossal global dysfunction." What accounts for the failures of many multilateral institutions, and what—if anything—can be done to improve international cooperation in addressing major global challenges?

K. Sustainability, Climate and Geopolitics Program. Imagine it is the year 2040 and you are working for a major international organization. Your teenaged niece, who is about to begin studying for a



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bachelor's degree in Climate & Geopolitics, asks you to summarize how the climate crisis and the responses to it have transformed international affairs since you were a student. In the interest of time, she asks you to focus on 2-3 of the most important developments. What do you tell her?

L. Europe Program (Please respond to just ONE of the two following questions). Should Europeans attempt to build a “European Pillar” in NATO? What could this look like? **OR** What challenges do Europeans face when considering their response to China’s support for Russia in Ukraine?