

## Writing a Fellowship Proposal in the Humanities

A fellowship proposal is a tricky document to get right. Its goal is to convince readers—some from within your field, others from very different fields—that a project you have not yet written, based on research you have not yet done, is innovative and exciting and important in myriad ways. That’s tough! If you are new to grant writing, or if you have had trouble winning grants, this tutorial aims to offer a bit of guidance.

**There are two things you need to keep in mind while writing a fellowship proposal. First, you need to determine your audience.** Are the members of this fellowship’s selection committee within your field? Outside of it? In either case, you’ll want your project’s driving question, key hypothesis, scholarly interventions, and broader implications to be crystal clear. But if the members of the selection committee are, say, anonymous archivists rather than historians you’ve already met at a specialized conference, then your fellowship proposal will be more effective if it emphasizes the broader significance and implications of your work more than the specifics. Pretend you’re visiting your favorite high school teacher, and are trying to convince her or him that you made the right choice in going to grad school, because your dissertation is changing what we thought we knew about X—and that *X matters* to your high school teacher in her or his daily intellectual life because it also shapes the way we think about Y and Z broader things.

**The second thing to keep in mind is that the funding you are applying for exists for a reason.** Find out what that reason is, and devote serious thought to how your project advances the goals of the funding institution. Also, articulate the specific reasons why you *need* this money. What will it allow you to do that you couldn’t do otherwise? And why are *you* the best person to do this project? *Do not* trust the fellowship committee to make these connections on their own. **Several additional pointers:**

- Introduce people to your general topic before you introduce them to your own argument about that topic. This allows readers to gradually enter your intellectual world.
- It’s better to frame your research as a project that answers a question, rather than one that fills a “gap” or a “lacuna” in the literature, because it’s easier to demonstrate the urgency and relevance of a question than it is to prove the need to fill a “gap.” Identify the question your research answers, and state it explicitly—and early—in your fellowship proposals.
- Beware of empty container verbs—things like “shaped,” “influenced,” “sheds light,” “nuances,” and “complicates.” These vague words and phrases suggest that an argument exists but do not actually show what that argument is.
- In situating your project within the existing literature, don’t get hung up on individual scholars or studies. Rather, frame your research vis-à-vis *schools* of thought. It makes your research seem more impactful.
- Finally, give the fellowship committee some sense of your research process. Allow them to imagine you doing the work you will use their money to do, and to see *how* you will know the things you wish to know. In other words, the discussion of your methodology needn’t seem inert; think of it as a chance to paint a picture of yourself as a scholar at work.

In sum, effective fellowship applications pose two arguments. The first is the hypothesis of your research, in its broadest strokes. The second is the argument that your goals and the goals of the funding institution are symbiotic, that you need their money to make your research the best it can be, and that their goals will be worse off without your research.

The following list of questions is designed to get you thinking about how to frame your research. By answering them, you should be able to develop a rough outline for your fellowship proposal. First, **describe in two sentences the thing you study—the event, phenomenon, group, place, etc.—without making *any* reference to your own ideas and arguments about that thing.**

**Identify the specific question your research attempts to answer.** (This can be harder than it seems; write your question in such a way that it does not implicitly contain your argument.)

The fact that nobody has studied a thing is not enough to convince many people that that thing needs to be studied. You need to show your project's urgency. **Write a sentence that convinces people that your specific research will unlock new insights for a broader, enduring, and hopefully "hot" question in your field.** Try framing it this way: If we wish to understand [*broad, field-shaping question here*], we need to know [*your specific research question here*].

**Find the mission statement for the institution that offers the fellowship you want to hold. How will your research advance the institution's goals?**

**In three sentences, describe your perfect, productive research day, in a way that vividly depicts your method:** how you learn the things you need to learn in order to build an answer to your research question. What evidence do you seek, and where/how do you find it? Then add this phrase to the beginning of the first sentence: "This fellowship will allow me to . . ."

**Think back to the last two books you read and enjoyed by people *not in your field*. Why should those authors be glad to learn that somebody is doing the research you are doing?**

**For further pointers, see:**

- Karen Kelsky, *The Professor Is In: The Essential Guide to Turning Your Ph.D. into a Job* (New York: Three Rivers Press, 2015), 597-617.
- Rachel Herrmann, "Grand Applications," *The Chronicle of Higher Education* (February 5, 2012), <http://chronicle.com/article/Grand-Applications/130648>.