

# Preparing a Successful Fellowship or Grant Application

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Navigating academia successfully requires a network of reliable mentors, colleagues, and friends who can provide sound advice and support. Nowhere is mentorship more valuable than in the process of applying for grants and fellowships. We know the process is challenging and competitive, yet it serves as a tremendous learning experience in shaping one's research trajectory. Equally important, applying opens the possibility of landing a coveted prize and promises to provide valuable resources for one's career. Knowing how to identify appropriate grants and fellowships, address all components of the application effectively, and maximize your chances for success can help ensure a generative experience, even if you do not ultimately obtain a grant or fellowship. A recent stint evaluating applications for a national fellowship program taught us that a significant number of applicants, especially those early in their careers, receive little, if any, advice about how to do this. The dearth of such mentorship motivated us to compile a few words of advice aimed at improving and, hopefully, making for winning proposals.

## Why Apply

Fellowships and grants form an invaluable component of our dossiers and are critical to providing the resources to flesh out ideas, complete research, and, most importantly, write essays and books that will produce knowledge and bring further opportunities down the road. Equally important, receiving an award signals to others—particularly fellowship and hiring committees—that your peers value your work and that you have something important to contribute. Although the odds may be against you, if you do not apply, you will never give yourself the opportunity to test the competition and potentially obtain the prize. This is, after all, part of our business and we must engage in it if we wish to be full-fledged members of the profession. Even in those instances when you are not awarded a grant or fellowship, the process of thinking through the arguments, writing, and submitting your application inevitably strengthens the project. Thus, grant and fellowship applications are an opportunity to assess, grow, and further develop your work.

## Where to Apply

Grant and fellowship opportunities, though diminishing in troubled economic times, are available and not difficult to find, especially if you continuously keep on top of your search. Begin by asking mentors, advisors, and peers and by checking online sources periodically, like the *Chronicle of Higher Education* <<http://www.chronicle.com>> and HNET <<http://www.h-net.org>>. Next, contact the research and grants office at your home campus and inquire about resources. Finally, pay attention to newsletters and newsmagazines generated in the profession. When searching, pay close attention to the different kinds of grants and fellowships. Some are for research or travel only, while others are for extended periods of writing. Note deadlines and requirements as well.

## Before You Begin

Before starting the application process, give yourself at least a week, ideally two or more, to pull together a strong file. The main component of your application—the project proposal—needs to stew for a longer period of time and should develop over the course of a few weeks, even months, and should be updated throughout the life of the study. As the work matures and you have a better idea of what it is you want to do, make the appropriate changes to the language of the proposal, refining your main arguments, research findings, theoretical frameworks, interventions in existing literature, methodological approaches, and timeline for completion. The more precise you are about your project, the stronger the proposal.

## Getting Started

Soon after embarking on the fellowship application process you will learn that most are composed of multiple sections, underscoring the need to start early. Most fellowship applications are online. Before you begin, look over the entire application and its requirements so that you can complete them before the deadline. This will also ensure that those writing letters of recommendation on your behalf have enough time to submit their letters. Rest assured that each component of the application serves a purpose—the applications were not designed to annoy. Rather, each component has been thought out and likely is meant for you to link your project with the interests of the organization sponsoring the fellowship and to facilitate the review and evaluation of your project. Your job is not to challenge or refute the requirements of the application—doing so will likely lead to a rejected proposal. We suggest that you take advantage of every component to demonstrate the strengths of your project, experience, and approach in answering a set of questions furthering our knowledge on a particular subject. It is therefore important that you spend time addressing each part separately and to treat it independently. In other words, avoid repetition and/or recycling your main points. Think of the application as a puzzle with each piece offering an opportunity to convey the innovative and significant aspects of your work. The sum of the parts should come together to form a bigger picture of who you are, what your project is, and why it is significant.

## The Personal Statement and/or Perspective

Grant and fellowship organizations often ask you to discuss how your personal experiences, professional history, and accomplishments in and outside academia intersect with the interests and goals of their organization or program. In such a case, if you are able to demonstrate a commitment to diversifying the academy and that your efforts have dramatically shaped your research trajectory, your application will be well served. The personal statement is your opportunity to show how your lived experience—upbringing, early educational background, and current work—intersects with the interests of the organi-

zation. While being confident in your ability and project is a good thing, you should refrain from outright boasting about your accomplishments and ability to pull yourself out of difficult circumstances. Likewise, avoid portraying yourself as a victim and the “only” one studying a given subject. Beginning your essay with “I was born poor . . .” will guarantee a low ranking. Most reviewers will be able to see through the ink or pixels. Instead, take the time to discuss who or what organizations, programs, philosophies, and/or individuals supported you along your academic trajectory. In addition, discuss how it is you plan to continue to do the same or to work in other ways to promote the kinds of programs or circumstances that enabled you to arrive at your current situation. Be mindful and respectful of those who supported you and be a responsible citizen who is cognizant of and grateful for what you have and what you plan to give back.

## Research Statement

Use your research statement to discuss some of the most significant projects you have accomplished. Avoid generating a list of archives you have visited and the length of time you spent there. What is most important is your research and findings. For each project, discuss the nature of the project (whether an unpublished essay, conference paper, or journal article), the main findings, methodology, and theoretical approach or framework. Equally important, present your research projects or experiences as parts of a larger sum, either working toward a larger project or as part of your learning experience in the research process. Undoubtedly many of us carry out research projects that do not always feed into a larger project (like a dissertation or book) but try to find ways to make those links, however small. It is important to demonstrate how your previous research has enabled you to complete effectively the project you are currently proposing. Ultimately, your statement is designed to show the reviewers that you have research experience and the skills to finish the proposed project.

If relevant, include significant archival recovery work you have conducted, such as identifying, accessing, and/or cataloging important documents or materials. This demonstrates your maturity and investment in the field and, more importantly, that you are on your way to becoming a productive scholar.

## Bibliographies

Some grant and fellowship committees ask you to compile concise bibliographies of the most relevant sources for your project. Choose the most important works in your study. And, if you have been asked to complete an annotated bibliography, be sure not only to summarize the individual entries but also explain how each moves, chal-



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lenges, or reaffirms key debates in its field. Also, do not just include secondary works, but also primary sources. This shows the reviewers that you are aware of and familiar with these materials.

### Proposed Project

The Social Science Research Council ("The Art of Writing Proposals"\*) reminds us that the first paragraph is the most important component of the application for its ability to capture or lose the reader's interest. We can attest that after many hours of reading proposals, many of which are unclear and uninspiring, we are left bleary-eyed, bored, and starved for some excitement. Your goal is to develop a first sentence or paragraph that captures the reader in a compelling way. In that same paragraph, you should also present the major contours of your study, your main argument or findings, and, perhaps, suggest your methodological approach and/or other innovations in your work. Many times we came away from reading an application not knowing what the project was about. Letters of recommendation often do a better job of explaining the project. Leaving it up to your letter writers to do your job, however, sends a message to the reviewers that you do not know exactly what you want to do. More important, it says that you are not equipped (at the present moment) to carry out the study and the proposal does not merit funding.

Beyond the first paragraph, the project proposal should provide a significant discussion of the main argument and contribution of your study to the field(s). You should also point out the main themes and questions being asked, theoretical framework methodology and sources, scholarly contribution, and, if required, a timeline to completion. If you do not think you will finish in the time required, do not say you will because the reader will know—

based on the quality of the proposal—whether the project is feasible in the time projected. Address questions such as: What is the significance of the project? What is your contribution to the field and general knowledge? What will we learn that we do not already know? In other words, why is the work important? Do not assume that the reviewers—or anyone else for that matter—already thinks that your project is important. You need to convince them of that fact.

One of the more difficult aspects of grant and fellowship applications is that they essentially ask you to convey clearly arguments and descriptions about work that you have yet to complete. This is a challenging task, but one that is made immensely easier if you are aware of the constitutive elements that need to be addressed in your proposal. Moreover, it forces you to take a stand on your work.

### Before Pressing "Submit"

Before you submit the application, budget the time to send out for feedback the completed application to mentors, peers, and other colleagues. If you are unclear about something or feel the need to double-check on a matter, call the fellowship or grant office and speak to relevant staff. Ask colleagues to share winning proposals or to read your proposal. Successful files are most often read by several people ahead of time in order to provide comments, suggestions, and clarity in overall presentation. Lastly, proofread. Read it aloud, looking for inconsistencies in sentences and meaning. Typos and contradictions turn off the reviewers instantly.

### Final Bit of Advice

The most important thing to remember is that, although time-consuming, applications for funding are part of the academic experience and more than pay for

themselves if and when you should get a grant or fellowship. Remember, it only takes one grant or fellowship for you to have the opportunity to continue your research and writing without having to hustle multiple jobs or responsibilities to make ends meet. Start early and apply often. Good luck! □

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\*For invaluable advice on writing proposals, we recommend the Social Science Research Council's "The Art of Writing Proposals," found at <[http://fellowships.ssrc.org/art\\_of\\_writing\\_proposals/](http://fellowships.ssrc.org/art_of_writing_proposals/)>.