

# How to Write Effective Proposals

## Writing Effective Grant Proposals for Individual Fellowships in the Humanities and Social Sciences

Susan Stanford Friedman  
University of Wisconsin-Madison

### The Big Picture

It's important to "think big," "paint the big picture," emphasize "the forest, not just the trees" for a grant proposal. To do so effectively requires stepping back from your project, seeing it as a whole in relation to a larger field, abstracting at a conceptual level what you are doing, how you are doing it, and why it is significant. Grant writing, like any other kind of writing, involves a set of conventions that vary considerably by discipline and by division of knowledge (humanities, qualitative or quantitative social sciences, natural sciences, and the arts). In the humanities and some of the social sciences (especially qualitative social sciences), grant proposals usually face strict page limitations-anywhere from about two to ten pages. This requirement means that effective grant proposals typically "stand back from" or "hover above" the project, abstract or distill its larger themes and methodologies, and avoid getting immersed in the details. At the same time, proposals need to demonstrate the specificity and richness of your material, your knowledge of relevant fields, and your capacity for conceptual and evidential precision. Usually, extensive literature reviews are not required or even effective. Your project needs to maintain a strong focus, although skillful proposals weave references to major publications throughout and brief bibliographies are sometimes required or allowed.

Granting agencies often want to see evidence that your research project is well established, that you already know the larger field to which your work contributes, and that you know quite specifically what you will be doing before, during, and after the grant period. Most individual fellowships--e.g., NEH, ACLS, Guggenheim, etc.--expect a publication to result from the grant, most likely a book, not an edited collection, and not an article unless your field typically publishes research in the form of refereed articles.

### The Big Three Questions

Your grant proposal should make crystal clear three main things: (1) **What you are doing**; (2) **How you are doing it**; (3) **Why it is significant**. It's even a good idea to open the proposal with a lively summary paragraph that answers all three of these questions directly. Projects that facilitate direct presentation of this vital information are often organized around a clear, overarching research question. Rather than explain your project in terms of a topic or even a thesis, you can focus your presentation around the major research questions you are asking, how you plan to answer them, and what contribution your project will make to fields of knowledge. You do not need to know what you will argue in the final product before you get the grant. Indeed, some committees will worry that research is too "thesis-driven" if the researcher knows what he or she wants to argue before the research is completed. Thus, avoid language such as "I will argue"; instead, write "I will explore," or "I will test the proposition that." (If your project is nearing completion, assertions of your thesis are more acceptable.) Your statements on the **significance** of your project are very important. Don't depend on your recommenders to do this for you. Explain what interventions your project makes in ongoing debates in your immediate field, and then what larger contributions it will make to scholarly and/or humanistic knowledge. Here is where it

helps to **think big**. Communicate in a lively and interesting way what's at stake in your research. Why should anyone care about your project? Can it pass the "so what?" test? What difference will it make? Don't assume the self-evident importance of your research. Even though we might all believe as scholars that knowledge as an end in itself should be justification enough, not all knowledge gets research funding. Therefore, you need to explain why your project deserves the grant.

### **Audience for the Proposal**

Who is the audience for your grant proposal? Will it be a panel of specialists in your field? Panelists in your discipline? An interdisciplinary or Multidisciplinary panel? Does the granting agency have a multi-tiered process for approval involving outside experts and in-house program officers? How controversial is your research--in its research questions, methodologies, findings, etc.? Will it tap into divisive debates in your field? Into the "culture wars" of postmodernity? The answers to these questions can have a huge impact on how your proposal will be read. The more specialized the panels, the more specialized your proposal can be. The wider the disciplinary reach of the panel, the more you have to make sure you provide sufficient context for your project and that you describe it in language that is clear to people outside your immediate field. Since program officers within a granting agency often weigh in on proposals in conjunction with outside faculty expertise your proposal may well need to be understandable and persuasive to a range of evaluators.

On the whole, avoid jargon. The issue of "jargon" is a tough one: what appears to be jargon to someone outside your field may well be ordinary or even expected discourse within your immediate field. But one thing is certain: if you cannot communicate what your research is about, your chances of getting funded plummet. Worry less about appearing too simple than being obscure. However, don't write a "thin" proposal. You need to communicate your conceptual framework and ideas with precision and specificity, and you need to communicate some of the particularities of the material you will draw upon or work with.

How can you determine who the audience is and what the decision-making process is your proposal? This can often be difficult, but not totally impossible. The NEH uses panelists of faculty specialists whose comments must be written (copies are available upon request), but the in-house program officers and staff make the final decisions, based on but not absolutely determined by faculty rankings. The ACLS uses a multidisciplinary panel. You can call the agency and speak directly with the program officer, who will often provide considerable information about the nature of the process and the constitution of panels. Some officers will also work with you on the development of the proposal (especially in the case of collaborative grants). You can also check out an agency's Web site for information. Different agencies are often interested in different kinds of projects; some even sponsor theme-oriented competitions that change annually. You certainly maximize your chances of getting funded by finding out whatever you can about the interests, needs, and processes of the agencies to which you apply.

Even when you can't get much information about your likely reviewers, **clarity** and **directness** go a long way, particularly since panelists often have huge numbers of files to evaluate and rank. It does not help your case to make the panelists dig for coherence through a mass of detail or a discourse that seems impenetrable. As to the minefields of debate and political alignments, you should assess these issues as they relate to your project and sub-field; you can try to avoid inflammatory discourse or trigger words. But in my view, it won't help your proposal if you "go bland," try to be "safe," to hide what it is you are doing. You want to communicate your excitement

about your project, your belief in its importance and significance. If you try too hard to please everybody and avoid all controversy, your project runs the risk of sounding just boring.

### **Parts of a Grant Proposal**

Different granting agencies often state explicitly what aspects of your project you should address in the proposal and/or what special emphases, topics, or themes they are looking for. Read and follow all specific instructions carefully. Avoid multiple submission of the same proposal to agencies that are looking for different kinds of things. Develop a basic proposal for your project and then adjust carefully as necessary. Address the specifics of the particular grant especially in introductory or concluding remarks. In addition, some agencies require supplementary statements, such as a narrative autobiography, an annotated bibliography, etc.

There is no standard format or organization for proposals. Different ways of presenting your project can be equally effective. Sub-headings (e.g., description; rationale or significance; methodology; chapter outline; schedule of research) can offer effective "signposts" and facilitate rapid comprehension. Clear, strong, direct topic sentences for all paragraphs can be equally effective. A summary introduction of the whole project--including such specifics as authors, texts, archives, and necessary contexts--makes an effective beginning. Quick and to the point is better, in most cases, than elaborately long introductions based on a narrative, details for a text, and so forth. After the introduction, the order of parts often varies, but proposals tend to include a description of the project, a statement about its necessity or contribution, a chapter outline; and a schedule of research. These sections need to be specific, indicating, for example, what primary and secondary materials you are working with, archives or special collections you need to consult, related scholarly literature (often cited in parenthetical style), and so forth.

If the project is a revision of a dissertation, explain what substantive new research and/or conceptual reorientation is planned. (Granting agencies are frequently reluctant to fund stylistic revisions of dissertations.) If the project is an outgrowth of earlier work or a stepping stone in a multi-stage research program, such connections should be outlined briefly. Your proposal should inform the panelists in some way why you are qualified to do this project and what function it is likely to play in your professional development.

### **Schedule of Research**

This section, which often serves as the proposal's conclusion, is a good place to communicate how you are particularly qualified to do this project, and that your "track record" on this and related projects offers good evidence that you will complete a final manuscript in a timely fashion. The section does not have to be long, but it should succinctly state the status of the project, your plans for use of the grant period, and your estimated completion date for the final manuscript. Include reference to material in draft form, related conference papers and articles, and so forth. Break up the period of the grant into stages and indicate what you hope to complete in each phase. (E.g., in the first two months, I will complete the archival research and draft chapter one- in the next two months, I will etc.). Avoid sounding preliminary or indecisive. A proposal that asks for money to read around on a variety of topics has very little chance of funding. Even though you may of course change a project as you do it, your proposal will be more effective if written in the declarative mode (e.g., "I will ....." "I plan... " rather than "Maybe I will..." or "Perhaps...") Panelists who suspect what is often called "a fishing expedition" are not likely

to support funding, however interesting the project. Instead, demonstrate that when the grant period begins, you will "hit the ground running" and use the time efficiently.

### **Letters of Recommendation**

Your choice of referees is a major factor in putting together a successful application. Most letters tend to be inflated; consequently, committees often view them with a grain of salt, becoming adept at reading between the lines and assessing the weight to be given to the letters' praise. Graduate students and people whose degrees are recent frequently get letters from their dissertation director and committee members. Although letter writers often have a stake in seeing students and former students succeed, their letters can contain valuable assessments of an applicant's achievement and future promise. For people out of graduate school for longer periods of time, particularly if they have established some sort of research record, letters from former teachers and colleagues frequently carry less weight. A useful rule of thumb is that the more advanced an applicant, the more letters should come from people with recognized standing in one or more of the fields related to the proposed research.

In selecting a group of people to write letters, think in terms of the whole package. Not every letter has to accomplish the same thing; different letters make distinct contributions to your case. Thus, you might pick one person not so well known who will write a highly detailed letter based on thorough knowledge of your project and another person with national visibility who does not know your work as well or who tends to write very short letters. Or, one letter might attest to your knowledge of a particular field necessary for your project, while another letter might discuss in details the significance of your prior research. Particularly in the United States, lukewarm letters often hurt a proposal; a negative sentence or two in a letter often kills a proposal on the spot. Thus, it really pays to be as certain as you can be that your recommenders will be enthusiastic. Be aware that the conventions of letter writing (and letter reading) can vary significantly from country to country (in Britain, for example, letters tend to understate praise and to include some criticism or qualification, as a way of building credibility, whereas letters in the U.S. with qualifications tend to signal significant concerns). Do what you can reasonably do to acquaint your referees with the conventions most likely at work where the grant is awarded. For U.S. agencies, ask your referees to write their letters in English or arrange for translations.

To develop a list of possible letter writers, think about who knows your past work and has indicated in some fashion admiration for it. Such people might include journal editors or referees of your work, editors of collections, convenors of conference panels, and so forth. Use your full professional network. You should ask people if they would be willing to write a supportive letter well in advance of the deadline. Provide them with an up-to-date vita and the proposal (a draft version if necessary). Many granting agencies ask letter writers to comment specifically on the cogency of the proposal itself and the feasibility of your schedule. Consequently, send your referees your most recent information and plans. Letters that are out of sync with the proposal and vita seen by the committee often lose influence.

### **The Russian Roulette Factor**

Getting a grant sometimes feels like a crapshoot, the luck of the draw. Not getting a grant can feel like a terrible judgment on your worth as a scholar, so discouraging that you might well be reluctant to try again. Many people (if not all) who get a grant deserve it, but many who do not succeed deserve it just as much. You can never know what actually happened in

the discussion of and voting on your proposal, let alone the institutional constraints that can come into play. In the end, the decision on your proposal may have had little to do with the merits of your case. While the system may well aim toward being a genuine merit system the realities are seldom so rosy. Consequently, it's important (but very difficult) to avoid internalizing a negative decision. It's important to try to learn from the experience and try again-on the same proposal or a new one. It's important as well if you succeed in getting a grant to celebrate your good fortune, get your work done, avoid getting a swelled head, and help others in the future succeed as you have in the roulette of grantsmanship.

Note: These guidelines were initially prepared for a panel on grant proposals at the Modern Language Association Convention, Chicago IL, December, 1999 I am grateful for the remarks of my co-panelists--Sander Gilman, Elizabeth McKinsey and Mark Rose- their collective wisdom and advice on proposal writing as well as the audience discussion, helped me revise my preliminary formulation.

**Feel free to distribute a copy of these guidelines.**

Susan Stanford Friedman  
English Department  
600 N. Park Street  
University of Wisconsin-Madison  
Madison, WI 53706  
[Ssfriedm@facstaff.wisc.edu](mailto:Ssfriedm@facstaff.wisc.edu)