

Applying for Fellowships and Grants in the Humanities

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I. Why You Should Apply for Grants and Fellowships

Grant-writing has not always been an integral part of our culture in the humanities. Unlike our colleagues in the sciences, our jobs do not depend on our ability to get and keep external funding. Applying for the relatively few and highly competitive grants there are in the humanities may seem like a waste of time, given the long odds of winning one and the considerable effort required to put together a viable application. So, why should you bother?

A. For the money – to travel to do research in libraries or archives, to do fieldwork, or to buy necessary equipment. Grants need not be very big to be extremely helpful. Many major research libraries, for example, offer residential fellowships for scholars who wish to use specific archives for current research, and smaller grants such as these can be a good way to begin grant-writing and build a record of achievement.

B. For the time – the best thing a fellowship can make possible is time off from teaching to concentrate on research and writing, and the biggest grants—such as the National Endowment for the Humanities (NEH), the American Council of Learned Societies (ACLS), the Guggenheim, the various Humanities Centers and Societies of Fellows, the American Association of University Women (AAUW), etc.—replace all or part of your salary to free you from university duties for an entire academic year.

C. For the prestige – not only will you get the practical things you want (the time and/or the money), but winning a grant will itself be regarded as a solid accomplishment in professional development. Moreover, winning one grant will make you more likely to win another in the future. In fact, the more grants you win, the more you are likely to win over the course of your career, as long as you deliver on your promises and produce the work that the grants were awarded to underwrite.

D. To get your name known in your field and in the profession at large and to make contacts – this benefit can accrue even if you don't win the grant or fellowship you are applying for, because you never know who might be evaluating applications or where you might encounter them again. These may be people who can help you in concrete ways by making opportunities available to you. Plus, the people you ask to write letters of recommendation for you will get to know your work well.

II. How to Find Funding Opportunities

A. Begin with professional organizations in your discipline. Their websites include lists of fellowships relevant to particular areas of scholarship. Explore the offerings of the [NEH](#), [the Fulbright Program](#), and private foundations such as the [American Council of Learned Societies \(ACLS\)](#). The grants and fellowships these organizations offer vary to some extent year-to-year.

B. Investigate **internal funding opportunities**, starting with your department's research support. The university also has several internal grants, including Research Initiation and Scholarly Support grants (the former for starting big projects, the latter for finishing them) and the Provost's Faculty Research Fellowship (this last aimed specifically at faculty in the humanities). You can find detailed information about the university's Internal Grant Program on the [University Research Services and Administration website](#).

C. **Consider your own unique situation** in deciding what grants to apply for, and don't spend a lot of time worrying about grants that are obviously inappropriate for you at this juncture. Concentrate on those that, on the face of it at least, seem like a good fit for you and your project.

III. The Application Process

A. General advice

1. **Apply for several grants**, maybe 3 or 4 at one time. Understand that your chances of winning any specific grant are quite small, but that they improve if you are entered simultaneously in several competitions.
2. **Expect to invest significant time in the process**, at least when you first apply for grants and fellowships, but remember it gets easier each time you go through it. **Start early** so that you have an opportunity to **revise your application(s) several times**.
3. **If you are not immediately successful, don't give up**. Revise your proposal, if necessary, and keep on trying. Bear in mind that the committee evaluating fellowship applications probably changes from year to year, as (of course) does the pool of applicants.
4. **If the granting agency allows you to see the comments of the evaluators, be sure to obtain them** whether or not you win the grant (but especially if you don't). This can help you sharpen your proposal the next time you apply, addressing whatever concerns seem to crop up repeatedly.
5. **Seek the advice of program officers**, where appropriate. Many organizations include examples of successful grant applications on their websites. **Ask to see winning proposals** so that you will have something to use as a model, but don't be slavish in your imitation of them. Highlight your own strengths and those of your project.
6. Try to **look at the application process as an experience that can be rewarding whether you win or not**. You will be learning, for example, how to present yourself to best advantage and how to justify your research, skills that are useful in many other contexts (like trying to sell a book manuscript or proposal or applying for a job). Writing a proposal can also help you to clarify for yourself why you are committed to your project, how it relates to your career to date, what it might lead to next, etc.

7. **Don't get discouraged!** When it comes to winning grants and fellowships, persistence and a thick skin are key. Remember, everybody will know if you win, but very few will ever know about the grants and fellowships you applied for and did not get. **Keep trying, and don't take "no" for a final answer.**

B. Components of an application

1. cover sheet

a. Neatness counts. Also, be sure to leave a generous amount of white space on each page, so that the proposal isn't too daunting.

b. Carefully consider the title of your proposal and any brief synopsis of it that you are required to write, since these will be your reviewers' first impressions of the proposed work.

2. c. v. or narrative biography

a. Include anything you can relate to your proposed project, regardless of whether such experience is strictly academic.

b. Especially in the honors and awards section, be sure to explain any references that might be obscure. For example, if you've won a prize in your field or at an institution where you have studied or taught, don't assume that your reviewers have heard of it or know why they should be impressed.

d. Try to make every available field work to your advantage. For example, I have a section in my abbreviated c.v. that I call "Other Relevant Professional Activities and Accomplishments," where I list the numbers of invited lectures and conference papers I've given and mention media appearances, public humanities events I've organized and hosted, and a book club I run.

3. project narrative

This is the most important part of your application. In it you must convince reviewers of two things: that your project is important, and that you are qualified to do the work you propose.

a. The narrative proposal must be an example of your very best writing, since this is the main tool that reviewers will have to gauge your competence as a scholar and writer. It should give reviewers a taste of what they could expect in the finished book.

b. Follow to the letter any instructions from the specific granting agency regarding presentation (margins, format, length, etc.).

- c. Be sure to tailor this portion of the application to the specific requirements of each granting agency. All criteria listed on the application must be addressed (remember that reviewers are reading many more applications than they can possibly fund, and an easy way to eliminate an application is to note that it has not answered all the required questions). For example, the NEH provides applicants with the criteria that reviewers use to rate the applications. Read those carefully and be sure to satisfy them.
- d. Remember that the people reviewing your application are probably not specialists in your precise area of research. Aim for a general audience and be sure to explain why the question or subject you wish to examine is significant within your own field of study.
- e. Situate your proposed research in the context of other scholars' work and explain how it will make an original contribution to your field.
- f. Provide a detailed plan for how you would spend the time and/or money that you will receive if your application is successful. Be as specific as possible and be realistic.
- g. Timing is key when applying for fellowships. You need to be immersed in your project to the extent that you can explain clearly your rationale for doing it, the methods you are using to do it, and the precise form that you expect the final product of your research and writing to take. Therefore, you may not have great luck if you apply at the outset of a new project, when you're still engaged in answering such questions for yourself. On the other hand, you don't want to give the impression that you are practically done with the project, since every granting agency wants to believe that its award has been a decisive factor in the completion of a research project of distinction.
- h. It is vital to instill reviewers with confidence that your project will, in fact, be completed, ideally in a timely fashion. Over time, it is important that your research be disseminated regularly in books and articles, or you will find it more difficult to attract funding.
- i. Clarity is essential. Signpost your narrative clearly, explain any references that might be unfamiliar, and concentrate more on getting your point across than on impressing.
- j. When discussing your approach to your subject, try to develop at least one extended specific example of it in your chapter outline. This will help reviewers to grasp your methodology and what you are trying to accomplish in your work.
- k. Show your project description to as many people as are willing to read it. All input is potentially useful to you. Make a point of soliciting reactions from people in your discipline but not in your specific field.
- l. Make sure that the proposal is free of mechanical and typographical errors.

4. letters of recommendation

Your references must do a few things for you that it is hard for you to do for yourself: they must convince the members of the evaluating committee that you are a person of consequence in your field, they must explain why the research you are doing is of compelling interest to people in that field, and they must demonstrate how your current research fits into your career to date and grows out of the work you have done previously (which they can elaborate on in much more detail than you will have space to do, since you will have to focus on your current project in your proposal).

- a. It is more impressive to have letters from senior scholars in your field than from your dissertation director or your colleagues. Make a point of getting to know established scholars in your area of expertise who can serve as references for you. Good prospects for references: people who have heard you speak at conferences and complimented you after your presentation, people who have positively reviewed your published work, people who have served as external reviewers for your tenure case or external examiners on your dissertation, people who have asked you to submit an article for publication, people who have invited you to a seminar or conference, people you have invited to speak or to visit with your students, people you have met at conferences who do work similar to yours and can appreciate its significance – above all, people whose own work you admire.
- b. Don't hesitate to ask the same people to write several letters for you or to submit letters in several successive competitions. Once a letter is written, it's easy enough to change the addressee or update it to use again.
- c. Make the process as painless as possible for your letter writers. Be sure to give them plenty of time (a month's notice is optimal), give them a list of all the fellowships you've applied for and clear descriptions of the relevant criteria, make sure they know when the deadlines are how they will be submitting their letters, and give them copies of your proposal and c.v. and maybe a sample of what you consider your best work.
- d. Check back with your letter writers a week or so before the application deadline to make sure they have everything they need from you (i.e. to make sure they haven't forgotten about your request).
- e. Whether you win or not, be sure to let each of your letter writers know the result of every competition that he or she supported you in. People like to be kept in the loop.
- f. It's usually more important that your letter writers know you and your work well than that they be big names in the field, although it's great if all those things are true. Choose references who can write well and comment knowledgeably on your plans, and don't pressure any potential reference to write a letter for you if he or she seems hesitant.
- g. Don't forget to thank your letter writers because they are doing you a big favor.

IV. The Review Process

A. **Review criteria are crucially important** – panelists are asked to read applications with these constantly in mind and to write a brief assessment of each application that touches on each criterion.

B. **Competition is stiff**, particularly for the larger, national grants, but less so for some of the smaller grants, such as those offered by libraries and archives to work with particular collections.

C. **Many applications are eliminated from serious consideration on technicalities** – that is, they might not have convincingly addressed *all* the questions posed in the prompt, or perhaps they did not provide a specific plan of work or were not clear on how much of the project had been completed to date.

D. **The evaluating panels are made up of professors** – usually previous recipients of the grant or fellowship in question. They typically read and rate the applications on their own and submit their ratings, and then a smaller committee of professors and administrators might meet as a group to tabulate the ratings and make final decisions.

H. **Detailed and well-written applications fare best** – it is important for reviewers to feel that an applicant has a realistic plan for finishing the project in question.

J. **In most cases, the review process at the major grants-awarding institutions and organizations is democratic and does not favor scholars based at big-name institutions** – any bias, in fact, seems to go the other way. Granting institutions seek to support diverse groups of scholars from a range of institutions. Many offer grants specifically for early-career scholars or scholars at minority-serving institutions.