A few hints for writing a successful grant application

Prepare
- Don't wait until the last minute. Register with grants.gov well ahead of time.
- Look at the guidelines for the program to which you're applying. They will tell you what is eligible and what's not, and what an application should contain.
- The web page for each program includes sample applications. Don't take those as models, but as examples of how someone else made the case for her/his project.
- Contact NEH staff with questions. They can help you figure out what program is right for your project. Contact information is on each program web page. For some programs staff will read and comment on draft applications.

Make your case
- The guidelines will tell you the criteria by which your application will be evaluated. Your application should make a case for how your application meets those criteria.
- For most NEH programs, the most important criterion is the project's significance. Tell your readers why this project is important. Who should read your work? How will it change the field?
- Locate your project in a larger scholarly context. Know the literature, issues, questions, and controversies on your topic. How are you building on or challenging the work of other scholars.in your area?
- Intrigue your readers. Make them want to know the answers to the questions you're asking.
- If you are revising a dissertation, explain how the planned book differs from the dissertation.
- Provide a realistic time line and work plan.

Think about your audience
- Your application will be read by both specialists and generalists. You will need to persuade them that your project is important and that you know what you're doing.
- Make it easy for your readers. Write clearly and concisely. Avoid language that is too abstract, unclear, or jargon laden. Define concepts and terminology.
- If possible, explicitly address the evaluation criteria.
- Balance the abstract and the particular. Tell readers why your project is important, but also provide examples.
- Show them you know what you're doing. Describe your planned methods and sources. Tell them why you are using those particular theories or case studies.
- Anticipate your readers' concerns and address them.

Attend to details
- Ask colleagues, preferably those who are not in your field, to read a draft application.
- Make sure your bibliography is up to date.
- Proofread your work.
- Make sure your references submit their letters.
- If you don't succeed, ask for feedback and try again.

Information on NEH grant opportunities is at neh.gov

Elizabeth's Proposal Preparation Strategies and Tips

- Start early—well in advance of application deadlines.
- In choosing a topic, think about the impact on the field and broader issues that your topic will address. Beware, however, of taking on a topic or project only because you think it fits program guidelines.
- Talk with colleagues, mentors, etc. about possible funding sources.
- Check funding sources, now usually on the internet, for possible grant support; create a grid of deadlines and materials needed.
- Read the guidelines. Follow them.
- Make sure to know and address the criteria for judging your application.
- For NEH individual grants (fellowships; awards for faculty at institutions with high Hispanic enrollment, HBCUs, and Tribal Colleges; summer stipends; etc.) you must register at grants.gov. Set a personal deadline at least two weeks before actual deadline). Submit at off-hours—before the deadline.
- Submit only what has been requested.
- Contact program staff with questions.
- Ask for sample proposals or check those provided with guidelines for some programs.
- Ask seasoned colleagues, preferably those who are not in your field, to read a draft application.
- Discuss ideas with others. Read outside your own discipline to help broaden your scope.
- Do preliminary work. Know the literature, issues, questions, and controversies in your area. Are scholars in other disciplines doing similar work?
- Demonstrate a topic's significance rather than making assertions about its significance.
- Discuss your project's strengths, but avoid hyperbole.
- Write clearly and concisely. *Avoid jargon*. Many proposals are not funded because the writing is abstract, unclear, or jargon laden. Define concepts and terminology.
- Discuss methods. If applicable, include selection criteria.
- Imagine your audience. Try to take yourself out of your mindset and think like an evaluator or a general reader.
- Avoid making unsubstantiated claims. Provide examples.
- Provide a realistic time line and detailed plan of work.
- Describe source materials. Where are they found? What can you expect from them?
- If you foresee potential problems, discuss how you will address them.
- If you are revising a dissertation, explain how the outcome proposed differs from the dissertation. Explain how the work plan relates to research accomplished for the dissertation.
- Proof read your work.
- For NEH fellowships and stipends, manage your referees.
- If you don't succeed, ask for feedback and try again.

Writing the application (Fellowships and Stipends): points to ponder

There is no perfect application. But some applications that are much better than others. This session is about writing a better application. Some applications are easier to write than others. I think that the hardest application to write is the Fellowships or Summer Stipends application because it is mostly conceptual and because the length limits are so stringent.

Who is your audience? It is NEH staff members, panelists chosen by the staff, members of the National Council on the Humanities, and NEH senior staff in the Chairman's office. All these are individuals who work in some capacity in the humanities, but in a variety of fields. Your application must inform them effectively about your project, no matter how far away it is from their own interests. You may be working in art history, but on the Council we have philosophers and political scientists as well as art historians. They need to be able to understand clearly what you want to do and why you want to do it.

The NEH staff can be helpful in a couple of ways. A program officer can tell you generally what kinds of people are likely to be on the peer review panel. And the staff can give you a sample of a successful application narrative. Use these samples not as models but as examples, because applications vary from year to year and there is no guarantee that what worked for someone else will work for you.

Be sure to address all of the evaluation criteria, which are posted with the application instructions on the website. These criteria are similar for Fellowships and SS.

1. The intellectual significance of the proposed project, including its value to scholars and general audiences in the humanities.

2. The quality or promise of quality of the applicant's work as an interpreter of the humanities.

3. The quality of the conception, definition, organization, and description of the project and the applicant's clarity of expression.

4. The feasibility of the proposed plan of work, including, when appropriate, the soundness of the dissemination and access plans.

5. The likelihood that the applicant will complete the project.

The most intriguing projects pose important questions, use important research materials, and have a fresh, interesting approach to their subjects. Make a case for significance to the field and for how the project might contribute to other humanities fields. Don't assume that evaluators will automatically understand this. Of course a well-known name—Washington, Churchill, Cervantes—will get instant recognition from panelists. On the other hand, it's hard to say anything new about any of these greats, so you will have to show that what you are doing is unique. Less well known individuals, movements, subjects, will need more effort on your part to explain their importance.

Also as you describe your project's significance, explain how your work fits in with other work in the field that has addressed the same subject. Are you taking research in a new direction? Are you using previously untapped primary sources? Are you proposing an entirely new interpretation of your subject? Are you adapting a methodology from another field? Are you working in a well-known area, such as history and memory, but proposing a completely new

approach to the subject? Emphasize what is unique about your project and how it will enhance scholarship in the field.

At the same time, however, be very wary of hyperbole. Avoid the temptation to make exaggerated claims for your research. Here are a couple of samples. #1: "my work will revolutionize existing conceptions of this author's work and will become the new standard interpretation." Unless you can back this up very convincingly in the application (and I've rarely if ever seen this happen), a more modest statement is in order. #2: "I intend to show that the cultivation of cash crops in the 16th century opened the way for the postcolonial hegemony of mass marketing." This one, especially to a historian like me, raises a lot of skepticism. It is too long a leap from the 16th century to the 20th.

Define your concepts and your terminology. If you reference theory, tell us whose theory and explain how it fits with your conceptual framework. It is not enough simply to say, I will use a certain theory.

Discuss your methodology and give reasons for such things as selection of a case study, or how and why you have selected your subjects for oral history interviews. If you are proposing a literature project, it is very important that you designate and justify the choice of texts you plan to examine in addition to specifying the line of argument or at least the themes that you want to pursue. If you are proposing a digital project, discuss the accepted standards that will apply and how you will provide access to the material. If your project is a translation, we will want a translation sample.

If you are revising a dissertation for publication, be sure to state how and why you are revising or adding to the dissertation. Also address how your planned revisions will enhance the significance of the study. You must show that what you are proposing will make your work into a better book. This is one of the most common mistakes that applicants make and it is one that is easily avoided.

Provide a plan of work that shows how you will carry on your research and writing. If you have a chapter outline, it can be helpful to include it. But the outline should not dominate your application narrative—evaluators don't necessarily want to read a book prospectus. Equally, if your outline consists of only chapter titles and if those titles are not indicative of chapter contents, the outline probably won't help the evaluators much.

It's not a good idea to request support for research or writing that may not happen. Some examples: research and writing to address the comments of press readers on the applicant's manuscript—but the applicant does not yet have those comments. A request to do oral history interviews without having located the subjects and made sure they will consent. A request to work in a closed collection that requires permission, but the permission has not been obtained. And fourth: a request for funding to look for research material—what panelists may dismiss as a "fishing expedition."

In the evaluation criteria, let me specifically note, need for a grant is not part of our evaluation process. In fact we ask panelists specifically not to discuss need. So as you are writing the application, you probably don't want to bring up your personal circumstances. Sometimes referees will do that, and if they do, everyone understands that you don't have control over what they say. But need alone is not a consideration for an NEH grant.

If you are revising an application previously submitted and turned down, you should do two things. First, obtain the panelists' comments on your application and use them to improve your application if possible. Second, it is probably best to avoid referring to the fact that it is a resubmission. No one except the staff will know that because every application is treated as a new application and panelists change from year to year. Sometimes applicants make reference to earlier criticisms of their application and explain the reasons they've decided to change or not change their research plans. You may do that if you wish, of course, but it might be a stronger statement if you say something like "I've considered doing this and ultimately decided not to do it and for this reason."

Also, if you are revising an application, consider whether you want to change your referees. Go through the application carefully and make sure all the information is appropriate for the new submission—for example, make sure to change the dates of tenure in your request. If the application is one that you've submitted to another funding agency, do customize if for NEH rather than submitting it as is. Panelists often comment negatively on an application that is not customized for the NEH competition.

Specify what the final product will be—believe it or not, some applicants actually fail to tell us what the outcome will be. Also, be realistic about how much work you can get done during the grant period. Evaluators will look at your publication record and referee letters to decide whether they have confidence in your ability to produce.

Then: review, review, review that application and all its parts.

Have you followed all the instructions? Make sure you have done so and resist the urge to deviate. In other words, please save your creativity for your project—and give us an application that looks like the other applications.

Make sure that you have emphasized your strengths and if an institutional application, the strengths of the institution. Do you have exceptional language abilities that the project requires? Are you processing an archival collection that will add to the strong collections already available in a particular area?

Check to make sure your application is understandable for an educated nonspecialist. That means absolutely no jargon or insider language, and I advise against slang. Your application will be read by quite a few people, some of them, probably, far outside your field. You must explain your project in terms that any well educated person will understand. Think again about your audience. For a fellowship proposal, the same style you use for a scholarly journal may be acceptable, but if you anticipate a panel that has only a scholar or two plus others—a documentary filmmaker, a teacher, a librarian—you will want to "stand down" from the academic style. Certain words—agency, hegemony, exfoliation, ambiguation, valorized, narrativized, interpellation, and meta-this and meta-that—are code words in academe but not to the outside world in general. To some evaluators such words may sound very pretentious.

Take a look at the level of abstraction of your proposal. How hard is it to follow the argument you are making? Consider providing an example or two to show how the concepts shape your argument, perhaps drawing on the data that you have already gathered. This is a way to make your application not only much more understandable but also more credible and more interesting to your readers.

Think about what you might have left out. In considering your subject, perhaps you have decided not to include some incident, subtopic, or event in your research. Perhaps it is something that you have hesitated over. You may wish to mention that fact briefly, with a justification, if you think that evaluators might expect to see it mentioned.

Look at the proportions of your narrative. Have you spent too much of your space on purely descriptive material? Have you slighted explanation? Can the prose be tightened?

To help with these last few points that I've been making, I'd suggest that you show a draft of your application narrative to a colleague or someone who isn't acquainted with the project. Someone outside your field might also look at it to see if you've explained the project clearly.

Review your narrative to make sure you have made all connections clear. Your data and your research plan should relate closely to the overall conception of your project. If you are trying to trace a connection between an overarching theme such as citizenship or national identity, show us how your material will make that connection effectively. For a book proposal, look at how well all this relates to your chapter outline.

If you have a book contract or other production arrangements, you may include that information. It's not essential to have a contract, however.

Take a look at the bibliography. Is it up to date? Does it include the works that are most relevant to your subject, your theory, and your conceptual framework? Remember that you don't have to list works in the bibliography if you've already mentioned them in your narrative.

Review your CV. Does it include everything you need to provide? Have you included all of your relevant publications? Is the bibliographical information complete? A failure to include page numbers or dates, for example, can draw adverse comments from evaluators.

Select your referees carefully, if you are applying to Fellowships or Summer Stipends. Supply each referee with a copy of your application so that they will direct their comments to that application rather than providing only a general statement about you and your work. Good choices for referees are colleagues from other institutions who know your work and whose work is in the same field as yours. If you are a historian of modern Germany, for example, your peers are other historians of modern Germany—and perhaps more specifically, historians of World War II or historians of German-Russian relations. If you are a historian of modern Germany who is working also in political theory, it may make sense to have a historian and a political theorist write for you. Junior scholars who have just completed their dissertations can use their mentors at first. It is often not useful to have department chairs write because they are not usually specialists in your particular field. We can talk more about this during the question period.

Be sure to nail the easy stuff: eliminate typos and make sure all parts of the narrative agree. Also make sure that your application is easy to read (no tiny type, please). Evaluators should not have to work hard to read your application, and they are very tough on a sloppy presentation.

Finally, if your application is not successful, request the evaluators' comments. We will send you the written comments made by the panelists and their summary ratings of your application. Evaluators write comments when they are reading applications at home. Then, during the panel meeting, they have a chance to discuss the applications and to exchange both opinions and information about the project. At the end of their discussion, they can add more comments. At this time they generally zero in on their chief reasons for supporting or not supporting an award.

Panelists' comments can be very helpful. Their criticisms are meant to be constructive and you as an applicant should take them that way. I have taken plenty of phone calls from disappointed applicants who are upset that anyone would criticize their work. And also from a few who can, perhaps at some remove, decide that perhaps some useful suggestions have been made.

For years we have noted that applications that are revised and resubmitted are much more likely to do well in the evaluation process because the applicants have paid attention to earlier criticisms. One evaluator once called the NEH the biggest humanities consulting firm on earth. We try hard to protect that reputation by working to make sure our evaluations are fair and constructive and we hope that you will accept them as such.

How to Get a Grant from NEH
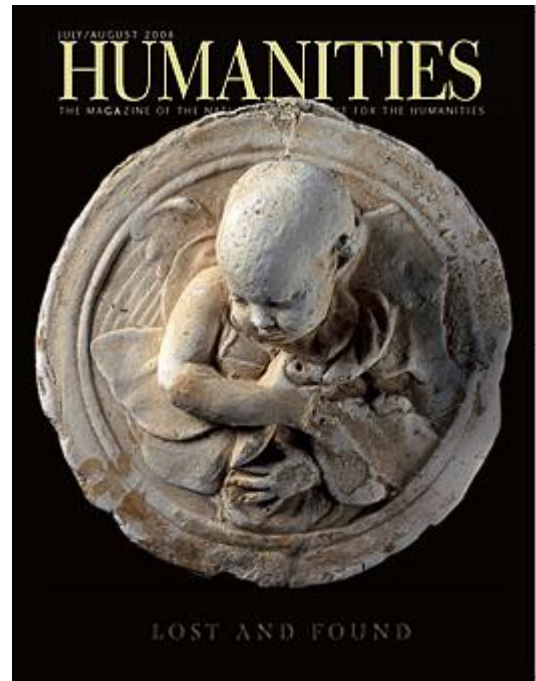
A public service message

BY MEREDITH HINDLEY

In 2007, NEH received 4,498 applications for projects ranging from documentary filmmaking to the preservation of artifacts to institutes for schoolteachers to scholarly research. Most of these applications were turned down. Is it so hard to get a grant from NEH? In a word, yes. We can fund only a small portion of the applications we receive, and the competition is stiff.

Given the odds, some applicants have wondered if there is a secret to getting a grant. A magic formula or maybe a special handshake? Well, actually, no. Successful applicants, however, do tend to hit certain marks. And a number of unsuccessful applicants, though not all, tend to miss those same marks.

So, for the sake of new and returning applicants, we've been talking to program officers and division heads, collecting positive and negative lessons, along with a few of the more telling details about how NEH's review process works. This article, of course, is not intended to supplant any instructions found in NEH's application guidelines, but rather to supplement them. We have tried here to give prospective applicants the kind of information they might learn from a short but informative conversation with an NEH officer.

Got humanities?

Does my project have a strong humanities component? That's the first question you should ask yourself if you're thinking about applying for an NEH grant. We hate to belabor the obvious, but if a major portion of your project is not devoted to some area or topic in the humanities, it won't be funded.

So what are the humanities? NEH's founding legislation offers an expansive definition: "The term 'humanities' includes, but is not limited to, the study of the following: language, both modern and classical; linguistics; literature; history; jurisprudence; philosophy; archaeology;

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comparative religion; ethics; the history, criticism and theory of the arts; those aspects of social sciences which have humanistic content and employ humanistic methods; and the study and application of the humanities to the human environment with particular attention to reflecting our diverse heritage, traditions, and history and to the relevance of the humanities to the current conditions of national life."

We sometimes get applications seeking support for projects that aspire to "benefit humanity," such as yoga studios, community centers, and UFO investigations (yes, really). That's not us. NEH is interested in helping people study, tell, interpret, analyze, and document the course of human history and culture—ancient, modern, and in-between.

Read the guidelines!

Application guidelines for all NEH grant programs are available on the agency's website (www.neh.gov). They contain everything you need to know about applying for a grant. Each set of guidelines begins with a program description that explains the purpose and goals of the grant program and lists what types of activities it supports. This section lets you know if your project is a good fit for a particular program. If you're uncertain whether your project fits, please contact an NEH program officer.

You should also carefully read the eligibility section, making sure that you or your organization are eligible to receive that particular grant. The last thing you want to do is spend time and energy preparing an application only to be declared ineligible. (For what it's worth, NEH staffers hate declaring applications ineligible.)

The meat of your application is the narrative and supporting documents. In writing your narrative, you need to clearly outline your project. (Psst . . ., if there's a secret to getting a grant, this is it.) What do you want funding to do? Don't make the reviewers guess.

You should make the project's contribution to the humanities explicit. The importance of your subject is not self-evident. There may be ten projects about your topic during a particular grant cycle. Why is yours better than the others? Are you making new documents accessible? Blazing new historiographical trails? Introducing the public to a little-known but important historical moment or figure? Helping teachers incorporate new scholarship into their teaching?

Give a lot of thought to how you present your project. And never underestimate the power of a good example. The reviewers who evaluate your application are experts, but they aren't likely to be versed in the minutia of your project. A good example helps your reviewers contextualize your topic and gives them something to chew on intellectually.

A strong narrative should also give readers a sense of where your project has been, where it is now, and where it is going. If you received other grants to help you develop your project, mention those. The fact that another reputable organization has considered you a good investment is likely to be counted in your favor.

Make sure the narrative brings out your strong points. If your institution is known for its community outreach programs, highlight that fact. If your team possesses unique language skills essential to conducting your project, showcase your expertise. If you have a strong publication record, let the reviewers know. The reviewers should be left with no doubt that you or your institution are particularly well-qualified to carry out the proposed project. This is no time to be bashful.

Although we just suggested you tout your strengths, we would be remiss if we didn't remind you that denigrating your colleagues or fellow institutions is generally considered bad form.

Challenging an interpretation or approach is one thing, and perhaps all to the good, but denigrating others for disagreeing with you is apt to hurt your chances more than help them.

For many grant programs, you can submit preliminary drafts of your narrative for review by NEH program officers. In most cases, the drafts should be submitted six weeks before the deadline so that NEH staff will have time to respond. Many applicants find the draft review to be a useful exercise, particularly those submitting applications for the first time. By reviewing a proposal, NEH staff can alert you if any of your proposed activities are ineligible for funding.

Many programs also provide sample narratives, either as part of the guidelines or by request. These are a great way to see how successful applicants constructed their narratives, but you should resist the temptation to mimic the sample.

Another key indicator of your project's seaworthiness is its work plan. Think carefully about what you can accomplish in the grant period. It is fine for your project to be ambitious; it is not fine for it to seem unrealistic. Promise too much and your reviewers will question whether you're a wise investment. Also, failing to meet the benchmarks you established will not help you the next time you apply for an NEH grant.

Institutions applying for a grant have to submit a budget. Before you start filling out the budget form, please take a moment to read the instructions, which explain things like cost-sharing and allowable costs. You'll be happy you did. Sample budgets are also available for many NEH programs.

The Office of Grant Management, which administers NEH grants and reviews budgets, has noted on more than one occasion that "math is not the strong suit of the humanities." You'd be surprised how many budgets don't add up. Double-check your figures. And remember to keep an electronic copy of your budget, as you may be asked to provide a revised version.

As you work on your application, you should also keep the evaluation criteria in mind. Each set of guidelines spells out how your application will be assessed. Make sure that reviewers have all of the information they need to rate your application. You never want a reviewer to say, "It's not clear from the application how they intend to accomplish this task."

A couple of cautionary notes: If you're tempted to "spin" your application to what you think NEH is looking for, do yourself a favor and don't. There is no such thing as an ideal project or application. And overselling certain aspects of a project can lead to trouble. Your application may end up not ringing true to the reviewers examining it. When the application specifies a page limit, don't exceed it. More is not better. Along the same line, don't play with the font and reduce the type to a size so small that your reviewers will need a magnifying glass. That's something a college freshman would do. Save space instead by trimming your prose. Your application will be the better for it.

Submitting your application

Long gone are the days of standing over the copy machine and making a mad dash to the post office before it closes.

Now applications are submitted via Grants.gov, the federal government's grant website. Grants.gov came about because universities, state governments, and other research institutions asked the federal government to systematize the online application process. As the technology became available, grant-making agencies developed their own online application systems, but each was different. That meant applicants had to learn a new system for each agency they dealt with. To consolidate and economize, the federal government created Grants.gov.

We know that Grants.gov can be a bit daunting to use the first time, which is why we provide step-by-step instructions in the guidelines. Have no fear: If you can buy a sweater or a plane ticket online, you can master Grants.gov. The most important thing to do is start early, particularly if your institution hasn't registered. If your institution has already used Grants.gov, you'll want to check that your registration is current.

You will need to download an application package, for the program that you want to apply to, from Grants.gov. The package contains the required forms. You will need to complete these, as well as provide the materials specified in the application guidelines. To view the necessary forms, you need to have Adobe Reader installed on your computer. You can download the current version of Reader for free at Adobe.com.

When you submit your materials, everything will need to be in PDF format, including your narrative and supporting materials. There are a number of ways to make PDFs, ranging from Adobe Acrobat software to websites that will make PDFs on the fly. Please don't scan your documents as images. This results in awkwardly large files, which can cause delays in uploading your application. It is also not uncommon for type to go wacky when scanned, making the text hard to read.

The review process

Once your application arrives at NEH, the review process begins. NEH prides itself on its peer review system. NEH staffers recruit subject, institutional, and programmatic experts to review applications. If yours is a scholarly project in American history, it will be reviewed by scholars of American history. Film projects are vetted by filmmakers, preservation projects assessed by preservation professionals, and so on.

The top-ranked applications are then forwarded to the National Council on the Humanities for review. The council is a twenty-six member body nominated by the president and confirmed by the Senate. After reviewing the applications, the council makes recommendations to the Chairman of the Endowment. The Chairman takes into account the advice provided by the review process and, by law, makes all funding decisions.

Unfortunately, NEH always receives more applications than it can fund. If you are unlucky, you can ask to receive copies of the reviewers' comments about your application. Most applicants find them to be helpful and use them to strengthen their application for the next deadline.

Last but not least

NEH staff is always available to answer questions. If you're uncertain about any phase of the application process, contact us.