

Tips for writing a successful grant application

Prepare

- Don't wait until the last minute. Register with grants.gov well ahead of time.
- Read 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. 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 your 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 and/or challenging the work of other scholars in your area?
- Especially for early-stage projects, discuss the questions at the heart of your project.
- For dissertation revision projects, explain how the planned book moves beyond the dissertation.
- Provide a realistic time line and work plan. What chapters will be written? What archives will you visit and for what kinds of materials?
- If you're proposing a book, describe its parts/chapters. Make sure the individual parts/chapters hold together.
- Remember, panelists won't read your application as a bunch of parts, they will read it as a whole. Find ways to strengthen the ties between parts. Understand how your parts work together.

Think about your audience

- Your application will be read by both specialists and generalists. You will need to persuade both groups that your project is important and that you know what you're doing.
- Make it easy for your readers #1. Write clearly and concisely. Avoid language that is too abstract, unclear, or jargon laden. Define concepts and terminology.

- Make it easy for your readers #2. If you know from the criteria that panelists will be interested in “significance,” make it easy for them to find “significance” in your narrative.
- Make it easy for your readers #3. Don’t leave it to panelists to “figure it out.” Do the interpretive work for them.
- Balance the abstract and the particular. Tell readers why your project is important, but also provide examples. This goes double for projects that are predominantly theoretical.
- Show panelists that 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.
- After your application is drafted, ask yourself what kind of narrative the panelist will put together about YOU and YOUR PROJECT. Reading your cv and narrative, will panelists understand how you’ve arrived at your project? Do they know where you will be in your proposed project when the grant starts? Have you explained what you will do during the grant period? And is it clear when you anticipate completing your project? This narrative is important to panelists when they meet to discuss your application.

Details, details, details

- What separates the Excellent applications from the Very Good applications is often the attention to details.
- Ask colleagues (not friends), both inside and outside your field, to read a draft application.
- Make sure your bibliography is up to date, and it gives a good “snapshot” of your project.
- Proofread your work. Panelists do not expect adherence to a particular style (i.e. MLA, Chicago) but they do expect a well-executed narrative.
- Make sure your references know what you expect them to do; make sure they have the evaluation criteria and a copy of your application; check to make sure they submit their letters.
- If you don’t succeed, ask for feedback and try again.
- If you have already applied and been turned down, remember that panels are constructed anew each year.

Information on NEH grant opportunities, subscribing to our Twitter feed, etc. can be found at www.neh.gov

If you get stumped along the way, contact someone at NEH for help.