How to Get a Grant from NEH
A public service message

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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;
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. (Pst . . ., 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 minutiae 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.

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