Tips on Writing an Application for Fellowships and Stipends

There is no perfect application, but some applications are more successful than others. Let's consider how to write a strong application for the NEH Fellowships or Summer Stipends application—a difficult task because it is mostly conceptual and 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 what you want to do and why you want to do it, regardless of their own fields or interests.

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. We have posted samples of successful applications on the NEH website and can provide others, if you like. Use these samples not as models but as examples, because every year brings a new competition, 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. They are:

1. The intellectual significance of the proposed project, including its value to humanities scholars, general audiences, or both;
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; and
5. The likelihood that the applicant will complete the project.

The most intriguing projects pose important questions, use well-selected 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 may be challenging to say anything new about any of these greats, so you will have to show that what you are doing will add something new to our understanding. 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
over what they say. Although NEH responds to a wide range of needs in the humanities across the nation, it doesn’t make grants on the basis of need only.

If you are revising an application previously submitted and turned down, you should obtain the panelists’ comments on your application and use them to improve it to the extent possible. By the same token, it is probably best to avoid referring to the fact that your revised application is a resubmission. No one except the staff will know; besides, 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 it for NEH. One size does NOT fit all.

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? Resist the urge to deviate. 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 (this is true for an institutional application as well).

Is your application intelligible to an educated nonspecialist -- did you refrain from using jargon or insider language? (Remember, your application will be read by quite a few people, some of them may be outside your field). Certain words—agency, hegemony, exfoliation, ambiguization, valorized, narrativized, interpellation, and meta-this and meta-that—are code words in academe but not to the outside world in general. Some evaluators might even think such words sound 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
Evaluators should not have to work hard to read your application, and they are very tough on a sloppy presentation.

Once again, 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.

Panelists' criticisms are meant to be constructive and you as an applicant should take them that way. All of us at NEH have taken phone calls from disappointed applicants who are upset that anyone would criticize their work. In the end, most applicants respond constructively to the process, and conclude that perhaps some useful suggestions have been made.

Over the years, we have observed that applications revised and resubmitted are much more likely to do well in the evaluation process because 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.

[Jane Aiken, my colleague in the Division of Research Programs, developed the lion's share of information contained in this document distributed at the NEH grants information workshop I conducted on November 26th, 2012, at Florida Atlantic University----Barbara Ashbrook]