

HOW TO WRITE A FELLOWSHIP APPLICATION

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The single most important question you need to know to ask yourself when writing a fellowship application is **who is your audience?**

In most cases, your audience is **multi-disciplinary**.

Most fellowships go through two screenings: In **stage one**, they are read by one or two people in your discipline (but chances are, not in your field); in **stage two**, if they make it past the initial screening, they are read by a committee of people from multiple disciplines.

Writing a project statement for a fellowship is thus very different from writing a dissertation proposal or job letter. You need to make your project comprehensible and engaging to people in history, political science, sociology, anthropology, art history, and other national literatures. Yet you also need to write something that would satisfy a specialist in your field.

With this in mind, here are tips for writing effective fellowship applications:

1. **Have a hook and tell a story.** Reviewers are reading hundreds of applications in a very short period of time, often spending about ten minutes on each application. Their job is to eliminate applications, so grab them from the outset. Start with a vivid example, telling quotation, an account of something that surprised you in the course of your research, or an account of the epiphany that led you to formulate your argument. Posing a question that the rest of your project statement answers is a great way to start. By posing readers a challenge or puzzle that only you can solve, you hook them and impress them – especially the scientists and social scientists you'll encounter in stage two, who often value empirical knowledge. Make your opening sentences short, crisp, lucid – an intelligent 12-year old should be able to grasp your basic point.

Alternatively, start by articulating the central question of your project or by providing a devastatingly trenchant statement of your thesis. Then give some narrative structure to your argument: this can take the form of a chronological history, the story of how your central terms evolve from one chapter to the next, or an account of how the field looked before your intervention and a modest projection of how it will look different after it.

2. **Claims and stakes.** Make sure that within the first page you have clearly stated what your point is and why it matters to people in your field and to people outside it. Avoid jargon; it may be okay in stage one, but it will harm you in stage two. Make it easy for someone who likes your project to defend it at the final selection meeting by giving clear answers to the fatal questions: **so what? who cares?** Talk about your work in general terms before describing individual chapters; and make sure that you present the chapters in a fairly balanced way so that it is not glaringly obvious that you've thought about some much more than others. Avoid saying that

your chapters will do things; instead, focus either on what *you* will do or identify the agents of your project (a set of authors or readers, a group of social actors, an abstract force) and articulate what they do.

3. **Methods and evidence.** It may seem obvious to you and to anyone else in literary studies that a discussion of X is best conducted as a series of brilliant close readings, but this proceeding will arouse deep skepticism in stage two, when your readers are in other disciplines. Even those within your discipline will appreciate a lucid account of why you are doing things in the way you are doing them. Be very explicit about what kinds of evidence you are using and what methods you are using to interpret evidence, and why both choices are effective, given the kinds of claims you want to make.

4. **Engagement with extant scholarship.** It probably goes without saying that you would include this; the trick is to be generous toward previous scholarship while grabbing an opportunity to underscore the originality of your contribution. Show awareness of alternative viewpoints as a way of explaining why your argument is convincing. I have seen excellent applications that garnered much support at stage 1 founder at stage 2 because their defenders could not answer the charge, “But hasn’t this been said before?” Make your defender’s job easy by acknowledging that of course, the topic has received attention and you are building on the crucial findings of A, B, and C, but your original contribution is..... (in 20 words or less). Use the discussion of previous scholarship to *emphasize what is unexpected and surprising about your work*. Make sure to include a one-page **bibliography** of key sources you’re building on and overturning; it should include greatest hits, old and new, as well as the most recent relevant sources.

5. **Remember that fellowships fund people, not just projects.** Demonstrate that your research establishes a platform for your future work in this area. Give a sense of your intellectual trajectory, of how the work you have done to date has made you the perfect person to undertake your project and a perfect person to receive a fellowship. Mention other fellowships you have received (even if they were small) and explain how you used them; show that when you receive support, you produce results. Convey a sense that the research you are doing will generate new research questions in the years to come.

6. **Give a clear sense of what you’ve done and what you will do.** Even if the fellowship does not request a schedule or a timetable, awards go to people who are clear about how they will use their time. Make sure to state, for example, exactly what research you have completed, and how much time you will spend doing research and/or writing. (Always make sure to say you will do at least some writing.) If you are asking for money to consult an archive, give as many official-looking bureaucratic details about the archive as you can. If you are asking for money to write, state clearly how many chapters you plan to draft. Don’t exaggerate what you will get done, but gently overestimate and assume an ambitious schedule rather than a rigorously realistic one.

Finally, some other basic rules to keep in mind:

-- **Follow instructions.** Keep within page limits, and make sure to include all the materials each individual fellowship demands.

-- **Ask lots of questions.** If possible, find people who've received specific fellowships and ask to see their statements. Ask faculty members and your advisors if they know anything about any of these fellowships. The more information you have upfront, the stronger your application will be.

-- **Strive for information redundancy.** Yes, the prize you won appears on your CV, but that doesn't mean you don't mention it in your fellowship statement as well. People don't necessarily read all the materials, and they certainly don't read them all with equal care. If a point is important, make sure it appears in several places on your application.

-- **Contact your recommenders early; give them drafts of your materials; give them clear instructions about sending their letters.** In general, faculty members can write much more effective letters of recommendation when they've been given plenty of time to do so and when they can consult the latest version of your work. Make your recommender's life easy; she shouldn't have to ask you when the letter is due, where to send it, and she certainly shouldn't have to buy stamps or spend time printing out your attachments (unless she's said she prefers doing that). Also, if you get a draft of your statement to recommenders early, you can contact them and ask if they have any feedback about revisions.

How to find fellowships:

In addition to the list of relevant fellowship circulated previously, *PMLA* publishes an extensive list of fellowships each September. Cornell also has a wonderful website with live links to fellowships and a search engine that allows you to search by deadline and other rubrics.

<http://www.gradschool.cornell.edu/?p=132>