Research Proposal Writing in the Humanities and Social Sciences

Justin Pearlman, Ph.D.
Assistant Vice Provost for Research Advancement
In-class assignment

Prepare a project summary:

- What is the motivating question/hypothesis/subject?
- How will you answer or shed light on that question?
- What is the significance or impact of this project?

No more than one sentence for each question
Workshop agenda

- Approaching the proposal: Finding a voice
- Proposal components: Key elements
- Getting feedback, revising proposal
- Review Panels: How they work
- Finding funding sources
Proposal writing: key takeaway

- Proposal writing is a skill; practice leads to gains in proficiency

- A proposal is related to, but is **not** the same, as the project or the ideas that motivate it

- Award/Rejection: Based on an evaluation of the proposal, not the idea or the applicant
Funder response: Always an opportunity

- Therefore, rejection is an opportunity to:
  - improve proposal text,
  - revise research design or project design,
  - incorporate feedback, and:

Re-Apply.
Approaching the proposal: Finding a voice

Who are you writing for?

- Reader is colleague from different (but related) field who is very interested in learning more about your work, and is curious about your project

- Wants you to succeed

- But, is busy and has a heavy review burden
Finding a voice

- Keep them engaged, don’t let them tune out

- Make their job easy
  - clear writing
  - logical organization and narrative flow
  - key points up front, not buried
  - big picture, not small or inessential detail
  - general significance, not narrow debates
  - tone: positive, collegial, confident but not immodest
Proposal mission

- Proposals must persuade reviewers on three points:
  - Significance
  - Approach/Research design
  - Feasibility
Significance

- Why does this matter to others?
- What will we know from this project that we don’t know already?
- How will the results of your project shape scholarly debates?
- What new lens/light will it shine on subject?
- What is the value-added of your project?
What is the research design for this project?

Is that approach likely to provide valid, useful, insightful answers to the project’s key questions?

Why is this approach chosen and not others?
Feasibility

- Is this project likely to be completed in a timely and successful fashion?
- Is there a well-defined, concrete plan of activities?
- Are the plan’s components doable within the grant time frame?
- Is there access to necessary resources?
- Does the applicant have necessary skills and experience?
Putting this all together in a proposal narrative . . .
Narrative: Intro/Context

- Illustrate project’s significance
  - State motivating question and its relevance,
  - Give data to highlight scope of topic, and/or
  - Offer story/vignette/headline to engage reader

Define relationship of project to current/previous approaches to topic; to scholarly conversation or public concerns

- Not lit review, but big picture
- Highlight what is novel and innovative in the project
Narrative: Research design

- How will questions be examined, or hypotheses tested?
- What are the cases, texts, data, subjects?
- How are alternate explanations addressed?
- What is plan B?
- Results should not be preordained.
Narrative: Plan of activities

Timeline and activity plan
- Be **concrete** and **specific**
- Going to archives? Say when, and for how long.
- Acquiring and analyzing data? Explain how.
- Interviewing subjects? ID protocol and recruitment.
- Working with collaborators? Explain how.
- When are you going to write/create?
Narrative: Plan of activities

Outcomes

- Describe scholarly products that will result.

- Other impacts (service, education, community, shared tools/resources, etc.)
In-class exercise

Sample abstract for NEH proposal:

Discuss structure and prose

(courtesy of UC-Santa Barbara)
Highlight previous work

*What have you already done to prepare for this project?*

- Pilot studies, preliminary research
- Previous experience with archives, data, subjects
- Previous experience with tools/resources
- Previous studies or published work on topic
Applicant’s credibility

- Why should you be funded for this project?
- Expertise, skills, experience
- Access to unique materials/data/subjects
- Scholarly networks/communities
- Access to institutional resources
- Relevant awards, grants, honors
- Impact of grant on professional development
- Overall productivity of applicant
Project and career progression

*Explain how project relates not only to previous work, but to future research program as well*

- How does project fit into long-term career development?
- What subsequent projects are likely to grow out of grant? What questions will researcher be in a position to study?
- Have a book contract or an exhibition lined up?
- Overall, what is payoff of project after grant ends?
Now that you’ve prepared a draft of the proposal . . .
Getting feedback

- Mentors, at USC and elsewhere
- Peers within department/center
- Colleagues from different departments
- Colleagues who have experience with funder
- School and USC research offices
- Grantmaker program officers
Revise and Submit

- Use limited space (page limit) wisely
- Revise: Highlight key components
- Revise: Eliminate peripheral details
- Revise: Streamline for clarity
- Handle bureaucratic requirements early
- Submit proposal in advance of deadline
Finding funding sources

- Databases: Community of Science (cos.com)
- Colleagues: Mentors, peers
- Current and recent publications/projects
- Research offices:
  - School: research dean; advancement office
  - USC: Office of Research; DC Research Advancement; USC Advancement

www.usc.edu/research/
Justin Pearlman

pearlman@usc.edu

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