Bowling For Dollars:

The Art of Writing the Grant-Proposal

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Every PhD student in History, even those rare students fully funded through all years of study, should apply for research grants during the course of their graduate careers. Applying for funding constitutes an essential part of what faculty must do in order to support their research. Learning the art of grant-writing in graduate school not only increases the chances that a student will complete the dissertation in a timely manner but provides training for a life-long professional activity as almost no form of support for research, including sabbatical support, comes without a writing a proposal for the work to be conducted. In addition, the more external recognition of the value of your dissertation as you go on the job-market, the better. Even the unsuccessful proposal advances the student's career because there is no better way to think about the significance of a proposed dissertation than by being forced to convince intelligent strangers about its importance in four to ten pages. Finally, even if you do not succeed in obtaining a grant, your project is now known to senior faculty outside of your own institution. Some of them may now even be quite enamored of your project, are themselves disappointed when they rate you highly and you do not get the grant and they may well remember you in the future when jobs are available or publication opportunities arise. Thus, successful or not, every proposal matters and is a key way of joining the broader community of scholars and "going public" with your project. This is why grant-writing is not to be taken lightly.

There are scholars who seem to have a way of thinking, as well as the sort of project that lends itself to condensed explanation. If you are among the majority of scholars for whom that is not the case, you still have a chance of winning a grant. Before you begin, it is essential to understand, that given the large numbers of applicants and the small numbers of funded proposals, no one has "a good chance" of winning. In addition, prize-winning first books did not always begin as winners of SSRCs and Fulbrights. Many brilliant historians were not successful in getting outside funding for their dissertation research. Sometimes that can be due to the tastes of the selection committee, the fashion of the times, to the fact that some projects are more interesting as finished products than as proposals. Sometimes it is because a student had a great project but wrote a weak proposal. This essay is meant to help eliminate the weak proposals the cause of the failure to win funding.

Before the Proposal-Writing Begins

A) You need a compelling project

Behind every successful proposal is an excellent research question and problem. This means that before you write a proposal, you must identify a problem that goes beyond gap-filling and the logic of "no one has ever studied this here and in this time." all proposals should try to answer the following questions: What will we learn that we do not already know? Why should we care? How will we know that the research results are valid? Otherwise put, a successful proposal must begin with a dissertation topic/problem that answers the most basic question: so what?

In order to answer that question, you need to have

1) mastered the secondary literature narrowly attached to your field of specialization as well as the "big books" that will enable you to frame your questions beyond your time/place designations.
2) selected a research method to answer the questions you pose. This will address what you might think of as the "how" question. In order to select your method(s) you need to have engaged questions of theory and method. Sometimes the research itself will demand a shift in methods and assumptions, which is why knowing theory and methodology will be helpful in the short term and the long-run.
3) if you are claiming to be "interdisciplinary" be clear in your mind about what this literally means so you can describe it in the proposal. Do not "assert" interdiciplinarity. Think about why it is a value added to historical research.
4) identified a corpus of research materials related to the problem at hand.

B) Identify possible funding sources

1) Funding sources are ever-evolving. On the one hand, there are the "big grants" in the field that your advisor and their previous students know about and/or have received. These should not take much time to identify. There are, however, grants associated with library collections and archives that are also excellent sources of smaller funds.

2) Identify deadlines and give yourself and those on whom you are relying for letters of support plenty of time. The first time you write a series of grant proposals for a project, expect that it will go through several rounds of revisions. You should work on this with your letter-writers (who anyway need to read the proposal in advance) and possibly with other students and faculty at your university. Seek out grant-writing workshops or ask for them to be held. It will help to have the proposal vetted by intelligent strangers since that is who your screeners and selection committee will be.

C) Writing the proposal itself

General guidelines:

- **Establish the Context for Your Work**: not everyone is an expert on what you are studying or understands why they should care. Think about how you

can get your reader "up to speed" with a body of knowledge in only two or three paragraphs at most.

- **Consider the "context" as a series of nesting dolls**: move from the specificity of the problem you are addressing to the largest questions and issues we can now better understand by virtue of the work you are undertaking.
- **Aim for absolute clarity of language**: proposals are read not only by historians outside your area of specialization but also by humanists and social scientists from other disciplines. Avoid pretentious jargon, neologisms of any kind. Instead, be a tour-guide through the field's research frontiers. Convey your unabashed enthusiasm for your problem and materials and remember the proposal is a "pitch" of sorts.
- **Carefully follow whatever protocols for the proposal the funding agency outlines**: this can lead to writing different ten proposals for ten agencies. The key is to be aware of the call for proposals and follow it. Understand that there are ways to frame your project that might be more compatible with an agency's goals or requirements. Be careful to communicate any special aspects to your letter-writers who can also tailor their letters to the requirements of the granting agency.
- **Feasibility: Method, Materials and Time**: you need to make a case that you know how to answer your research questions, that there are sufficient research materials available and accessible to you as a researcher and that you are proposing a reasonable work plan for the duration of the grant and for the scope of a dissertation.

Specific writing suggestions:

- **Title:** choose wisely and with two things in mind: they signal the subject and parameters of the project and they suggest a perspective or point of view.
- **Powerful Opening sentences:** much is gained or lost in the first few sentences of a proposal. Screeners are reading many proposals and they are tired and agitated by how much material they have to get through. Your first sentence should be about YOUR SUBJECT or have a great anecdote about the past. It should not be about the scholarship. Historians are over-represented in humanities fellowship competitions because they tell good stories. Be as fresh, original and interesting as your material no doubt is.
- **You should have a strong working hypothesis and/or research question that is one sentence long**: this should come not long after the attention-grabbing opening. People often think of this as the essential phrase of the "elevator" version of your dissertation (that is, a description that lasts as long as an elevator ride).
- **Avoid use of the first person:** While you will certainly need to do this when you describe the research plan, otherwise speak of the project rather than yourself.
- **Justify the reasons for your research positively:** if you say you are filling a gap, you are advancing through negation. What is "missing" may well be

missing for good reason and what has been considered endlessly may well deserve further inquiry and explanation.

- **Make good use of the telling detail and illustration**: your reader needs examples and details from the "stuff" of your research (even if you haven't conducted months of research, you will have by grant-proposal writing time gathered some interesting details that animate your thought). Engage your reader with great "stuff."
- **As you conclude your proposal return to what is at stake in the project**: remember, these are the big questions about class-formation or political change or distinctions between high and low culture that transcend time, place and sometimes disciplinary specificity.

Whether you are successful or not in any given request for funding, you should see each proposal as a "version" of a project that is constantly in development. Each time you submit a new proposal, you need to plan for it and re-write the old proposal. If you have been unsuccessful in a fellowship competition, ask the granting agency for feedback as some even provide screener comments and evaluation. You will never really know why you did not get a grant. It is however, in your best interest and within your power to constantly work to make the proposal the strongest it can be. The rest is bowling for dollars.

The author wishes to thank Nancy Troy and Karen Haltunnen for their participation in graduate grant-writing workshops at USC and Anne Higonnet, her SSRC DPDF research director. The perspective offered here is indebted to advice the author heard them give them.