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Writing Proposals for ACLS Fellowship Competitions

Proposal writing is a genre of its own. If rhetoric is the craft of persuasion, proposal writing is especially so. The goal is to persuade reviewers that the proposed project has the special merit to deserve funding—that the project will stand out as novel and significant, and that the methodology will be recognized as careful and thorough.¹ Whatever the project may mean to the author of the proposal, it is for the reviewers inseparable from the language in which it is presented. In the economy of proposal writing, every element must contribute to the argument and to the idiom of persuasion.

Like essays or articles written for publication, a proposal is an integral part of the scholar's professional life. Unlike essays or articles, though, the proposal is addressed to readers who focus their attention on whether the described project is the one to support. While the professional article constitutes the dissemination stage in the process of scholarly communication, the proposal belongs at the production end. The author asks the reviewers to select the project under review for funding that will help bring the project to fruition.

There is no one-size-fits-all formula for success in this genre. At the same time, however, certain fundamental rhetorical points should inform one's choice of the most effective language and organizational structure to argue for your pro-

posed work. The following remarks speak to those points.

AUDIENCES

When a scholar submits an application to ACLS, it is not filed away in a giant database, never to be seen again. Rather, submission of an application is the start of a substantial peer reviewed selection process in which diligent readers give the application their fairest consideration and judgment.

These reviewers are the proposal writer's *audience*. It is important for the applicant to try to enter into the thinking of those reviewing one's application, and to understand how it may be read. The structure of ACLS competitions is suggestive in this regard: The first-round reviewers are in the discipline of the applicants—or represent the range of disciplines that are the ingredients of an interdisciplinary project—though in any case may represent specific areas or subfields quite different from those of the applicant. The second-round reviewers, who meet as a selection committee, represent a number of disciplines across the humanities and social sciences. In sum, each of the reviewers judging any given application will have differing levels of familiarity with the particulars of the research represented by that application. The tricky task for the applicant is to find the

right tone and deploy a strategy that will persuade them all.

It is easy to imagine the audiences one is addressing because they are already familiar: The reviewers are colleagues, in a broad sense, sharing with the writer general academic experience and professional awareness. Reviewers from within one's discipline could be thought of as colleagues from down the hall; those from outside one's discipline would more closely resemble colleagues from across campus. With a clear sense of who these audiences are, the proposal writer can speak confidently and persuasively about the nature and value of the proposed project, avoiding narrow, issue-specific language. This does not require "dumbing down" one's work but it does require pitching the issues at a level of generality sufficient to making them clear to the general scholarly reader.

Projects in some disciplines of the humanities, such as philosophy of physics or formal semantics in linguistics, may seem further afield from the rest of the humanities than do other projects. How might such projects appeal to reviewers in other, less technically-oriented areas in the humanities? Applicants in these and similar disciplines must aim to introduce their projects at a level conducive to understanding by the intelligent layperson—and to speak to the relevance of their main claims and arguments for other, more familiar concerns (whether historical or contemporary) of scholars in the rest of the humanities. This is something of an exercise in translation and, as such, a classic element of proposal writing that transcends the technical nature characteristic of such proposed projects.

Just as important, if not more so, is the need to avoid jargon. The reviewers, whether they represent particular fields or the humanities and social sciences in general, are assumed to share something of a common language. Nothing turns

off a reviewer like language that seems purposefully to obfuscate or exclude.

STRATEGIES AND STRUCTURES

There is no one strategy for writing proposals, no prescription, no single all-purpose format or outline. Each applicant must develop her or his own rhetorical and argumentative strategy. Audience awareness, sureness of voice, and clarity and cogency in stating the question at hand are essential. Yet a proposal can be carried through in any number of ways. At all events, the applicant should use the beginning paragraphs to announce his or her voice, clearly establish the main question to be pursued, and set up the reader's expectations regarding the principal research statement of the proposal—the central claim—and how it will be explained. It is here that the proposal writer must grab audience attention and enunciate the main question and central claim quickly and effectively.

Some prominent proposal writing strategies—which may be used in combination—are described in the appendix.

The applicant should argue for the project and organize the proposal in a way that best matches the kind of project, the proposed approach, and his or her scholarly background. A project whose aim is to develop a conceptual framework for analyzing a particular historical or social phenomenon, or a literary, cultural, or artistic genre, or a philosophical, economic, or legal claim, might devote a significant proportion of the proposal to explaining, contextualizing, and assessing prior approaches. What is useful, flawed, or missing?

Are the main stakes of the discipline—and, thereby, the significance of the questions asked in the proposed project—likely to be unfamiliar to scholars in other disciplines in the humanities and social scientists? A proposal for a study of a poorly

understood language group might well inform non-specialists of the importance of the relevant terms of analysis and suggest how the languages in question reflect a particular history.

Does the proposed project reflect a novel or special technical approach or unusual, hard-won data? A scholar who has done extensive field or archival research, or has refined a set of tools, or has trained in a special research skill might allocate some portion of the proposal to explaining how the nature of those experiences, tools, or skills shape a new approach of the proposed book or article.

One kind of proposal might take the form of a single prose statement, without sections delineated according to the application guidelines. Another kind might briefly introduce the major question and then move to a list of aims that provide an explanatory structure. A third kind might offer a more expanded introductory section, followed by a chapter by chapter summary demonstrating how each contributes to the major thesis. Still another kind might cast the entire proposal into sub-sections: an introduction or overview, methodology, plan of work, and so on. How the structure is fashioned is a matter of personal preference and one's judgment as to how to best to put forth the argument.

The applicant should keep in mind that the reviewer is likely to be reading a tall stack of proposals. This heightens the importance of being clear, persuasive, and economical whatever strategy is followed—and answering all the questions regarding how the work will be done. The reviewers want to know why a particular methodology is appropriate for the questions being asked, how the research will be carried out, what has already been accomplished what time frame is envisioned for completion.

SIGNIFICANCE: THE BIG PICTURE

Proposal writing entails advocacy on various levels. The author of the proposal advocates not only for the proposed work in the context of his/her discipline, but also for the value of that work in the larger context of the humanities as a whole. Thus, applicants to ACLS Fellowship competitions are asked to explain, in a separate paragraph, the project's significance to scholars across the humanities and related disciplines—that is, to scholars in humanities disciplines aside from one's own. Even if this paragraph is written after the proposal is drafted, consideration of the broad significance of the work for other fields should help guide the planning of the proposal and how one's work speaks to various levels of interest.

One of the proposal writer's tasks is to explain the ways in which the project speaks to questions specific to the various formations of the humanities—disciplines, sub-fields, interdisciplinary emphases. Another task is to demonstrate to the reviewers a capacity to consider the big picture. What does this big picture look like—and how do specialized or formal or technical modes of humanities or social science research fit into that big picture? While there are no formulaic answers, the proposal writer will do well to start with the basic question: how would I explain my topic and why is it significant to another scholar with humanities training who is well versed in his or her domain and the general course of human heritage and civilization but knows nothing of my own discipline? The answers to such a question might touch on specific points of dialogue or dynamics among particular disciplines. It is important, at all events, to outline how one's topic, as a significant scholarly pursuit within the given discipline (or interdisciplinary framework) relates to others—for example, to say how a specific moment in French art history, the syntax of Maori, a grasp of poetic form, philosophical understanding of natural kinds, or the history of the Seleucids, relate to their

broader disciplinary landscape and, as a result, to the humanities disciplines taken as a whole. It can be a challenge to articulate the substantive connection between the refined level of discussion and analysis of a project cast in disciplinary terms and the broader topography of the humanities. Here is another place to discuss one's project with scholars in other disciplines.

THE SCHOLAR AND THE PROJECT: DANCER AND DANCE

Like the dancer and the dance, the scholar and the project are always to some degree inseparable. One of the reviewer's main tasks is to gauge, not only the scholar and the proposed project individually but also how well they fit each other.

Many elements in the entire application packet identify the applicant to the reviewer: the scholar's home department(s), Ph.D. discipline, references, and so on. But identities are not enclosed disciplinary boxes. The ACLS application form asks applicants to define themselves by field, and a number of spaces are provided for answering the question. With the advantage of multiple boxes, one scholar may define herself as first a political theorist, second a historian of ideas, third a historian of the United States, and so on; another scholar may identify himself with art history, classics, archaeology, architectural studies, and history. Such complex definitions are helpful in the process of sorting proposals for review—but just as important, they help guide the applicant in answering the fundamental question: "Why am I the best person to do this project?"

Of all the elements in the application, the proposal affords the applicant the most straightforward opportunity to describe the connections between the dancer and the dance: How does the project relate to who the applicant is, professionally? Where does the applicant place the work on the

scholarly map? How does the applicant describe the intellectual territory in which s/he proposes to work? In response, a film researcher might write that his work grows out of earlier concerns with cinema and modernity; a literature scholar might state that she found in an earlier project on book design and the novel the intersections of high and low culture that she now wishes to pursue more directly; a historian of mercantilism in China might suggest how a trajectory of research in two earlier books has brought him to his current project; and so on. Such statements add context, identify relevant expertise and skills, and help establish conceptual relationships and pathways that may suggest why that scholar is best suited to take on that project.

Addressing these questions need not wed the applicant to a particular intellectual framework or disciplinary outlook. Rather, the goals of any such compelling account relating the project to the scholar are to demonstrate the scholar's grasp of the field; to suggest a coherent, knowledgeable, and confident sense of self; and to indicate that the applicant is the right person to do the job and the right person to tell the reviewers what needs to be done.

BEFORE AND AFTER

Some additional, cautionary remarks are in order: It is very difficult, if not impossible, to write a successful proposal when the deadline is only days away. It is best to start early. It may take longer than expected, even with a core proposal in hand that was written for an earlier competition and suitable for adapting for the ACLS competition. One needs time to edit, think, and re-edit; to ask colleagues for their frank judgment of the draft proposal; and then to edit once again. All these steps may take substantial time.

Now fast forward to another spring. The proposal has been out of the scholar's hands for five or more months, but the project itself has not. It is still there, and so it will remain. Whatever news the letter brings regarding the fate of the proposal, the scholar should still look to his or her research as worthy of further development. Next year will bring another competition with another group of readers and another applicant pool. The applicant who does not succeed in one competition year should plan to enter the competition in subsequent years.

APPENDIX: POSSIBLE PROPOSAL STRATEGIES

QUESTIONS IN THE FIELD

All proposals should in some way address questions raised in the field of study, whether defined as the discipline, some particular territory within the discipline, or an area that moves across disciplinary boundaries. Perhaps the most common strategy is the effective reference to focused, easily recognizable, and previously unaddressed or inadequately addressed questions in the field: State the question and explain how the project will answer that question. It is not sufficient to identify an important question that has not been asked before or that has been inadequately answered, or to propose a new perspective on an old problem: one must note *why* the question has been inadequately answered to date, or why a new perspective is needed.

A proposal for a project on Bambara art might explain that the spiritually-imbued artifacts of that tradition have not been adequately examined in terms of their social value; a second line of explanation might focus more broadly on the connections between visual culture, spiritual traditions, and social currency—and lay out the specific goals of the proposed book. A proposal on

class in modern French literature might first state that while class is a dominant theme in the period, no one has explored its appearance in the particular genre the applicant will explore. The applicant might go on to suggest that the proposed work will explain how these accounts of class reveal regional differences in French literature of the day, political concerns regarding social stability, and the dynamics of literary schools in the period.

SNAPSHOTS AND STORIES

Snapshots and short stories can be very effective in attracting a reviewer's attention to a proposal. In a proposal on hidden dimensions of a ritual, a religious studies scholar might offer a vignette of Central American women praying to a surrogate deity; a geographer might offer a snapshot of a leisure fishing community in urban New Jersey to show how members of a working class immigrant group retain connections with their natural environment. Similarly, an economic historian proposing to interpret the development of water rights management in Southeast Asia might offer a thumbnail account of monsoon damage to agriculture in the Mekong Delta. A literature scholar might offer a series of Latin epigraphs prefacing modern works to illustrate a point about the links authors attempt to establish between their own writings and those of classical figures. A music theorist might recount the recent history of interpretations of musical expression in order to set the context for an account of a proposed new mode of analysis. In these examples, the snapshot or story is short (rarely longer than one paragraph) but *dramatic*—setting the stage for the investigation to come by giving the reviewer a concrete reference point.

INTELLECTUAL AND SCHOLARLY TRAJECTORY

As establishing a connection between scholar and project is essential to a successful proposal, an

emphasis on the intellectual and scholarly terrain previously covered by the writer may serve as an effective framework for presenting the proposed research and writing project. This strategy may suit the scholar who already has significant publications in a particular area and whose new project, while at a less advanced stage, is demonstrably related to the earlier work. The anthropologist who has written a well-received book on the commodification of “folk” objects in Asia now turns to the effects of the global marketplace on similar tendencies in another region where s/he has the appropriate language and cultural expertise. Similarly, the dance historian who has published an important book on mid-twentieth-century choreography now examines innovations of the explosive subsequent decades in dance.

Although the applicant must demonstrate that the new work take the earlier projects as a starting point, and will cultivate new ground, reviewers expect that most scholars’ careers reveal patterns of interest and expertise. Thus, even an early career applicant seeking support for the first book or a set of journal articles might well refer back to the dissertation—the single largest project that s/he has accomplished—and explain how the book or articles will take further, and possibly in new directions, the earlier body of research. In this vein, an applicant might draw the reviewer’s attention to new layers of detail, expanded discussion, newly-drawn relationships, or freshly emerging questions arising out of the earlier work.

ENDNOTES

1. In their valuable guide to the art of proposal writing, Adam Przeworski and Frank Salomon highlight the importance of “conceptual innovation, methodological rigor, and rich, substantive content;” see Przeworski and Salomon, “The Art of Writing Proposals: Some Candid Suggestions for Applicants to Social Science Research Council Competitions,” New York: Social Science Research Council, 1988/1995; http://fellowships.ssrc.org/art_of_writing_proposals/.

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This essay derives from her personal experience in advising humanities scholars and should not be taken as reflective of the views or policies of ACLS.