Proposal Writing in the Humanities: Theoretical Orientation and Significance

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At the very heart of any humanities or humanities-related social science proposal is a series of statements in which authors declare their relationship to one or more theoretical positions and explain the significance of their findings. Without a clear statement clarifying both of these items, a proposal has little chance of success, and yet many proposals founder by poorly explaining or ignoring these narrative requirements.

As we all recognize, every work of scholarship is inhabited by theoretical assumptions, whether or not those are uppermost in the proposer's mind as she writes her request for funding. In the cooperative enterprise of research, writers build upon one another's discoveries through an additive process (extending the implications of a theory by applying it to new examples), a corrective process (offering revisions to the implications of a theory by applying them to new data), or a subtractive process (demonstrating the falseness or inadequacy of a theory to explain a set of significant data). In each case, the researcher, whether explicitly or implicitly, demonstrates his relation to one or more theoretical ideas.

This intellectual core of a proposal must be written clearly for the non-specialist and it must show an awareness of the major current theoretical innovations in the author's field. In his groundbreaking book, *Orientalism,* Edward Said explains his departure from the "humanism" of Eric Auerbach's 1946 *Mimesis*: "(T)he great book he wrote was an elegy for a period when people could interpret texts philologically, concretely, . . . and intuitively, using erudition and an excellent command of several languages to support the kind of understanding that Goethe advocated."

Instead of reading texts under the banner of the older humanism, destroyed by World War II and fragmented by the internet, new humanists must read texts as works "**that were produced and live on in the historical realm in all sorts of . . . ways" including "power, since . . . what I have tried to show in my book have been the insinuations, the imbrications of power into even the most recondite of studies.**" Said here echoes Foucault's concept of power as dispersed and implicated in knowledge, a theoretical idea underlying his book's argument.

A second, more implicit, example is drawn from an NEH proposal to study the Creole Circus in Uruguay and Argentina, c. 1860-1910: "**My book project expands on previous scholarship by: (1) tracing the routes of circus troupes and their dramas as they traveled from the countryside to the city; (2) highlighting the reception of Creole dramas . . . to understand the social composition of audiences; and (3) providing an overarching framework for understanding how the Creole circus bridged popular and elite classes, practices, and literary traditions."**

By implication, this study will draw upon theories related to performance and audience reception. A third example from an NEH proposal also implicitly stakes out two or three theories related to diaspora, imperialism, and colonialism: "**By centering my analysis on one regional cohort, as opposed to focusing on the state, and by using a river system rather than**

provincial boundaries as my geographical scope, I bring a new perspective to the recent historical scholarship on the frontier in Ming and especially Qing times. My work also adds to recent scholarship on translocal linkages in late imperial China. Rather than exploring how the local was incorporated with the center, I show how one diasporic elite in pursuing its own socioeconomic interests, though often in the name of the state, linked local places horizontally. I also show the extent to which such institutions as the 'localized' lineage were dependent upon migrant strategies. In addition, my analysis of Cantonese translocal practice along the West River basin both has been inspired by recent scholarship on overseas Chinese in the modern era and seeks to contribute to that scholarship."

Each of these examples states or implies what is currently known about a subject, then promises to revise that knowledge by adding to it, correcting it, or discounting it in some way. In cases where a proposal guideline is not provided by a potential funder, the applicant is advised to include a clear statement describing the proposal's relationship to the current field of knowledge on that topic. The author should signal to the proposal reviewers which part, if any, of the current state of knowledge in the field is being revised through expansion or subtraction.

Typical ways to send this signal include phrases such as, "While recent scholarship has focused on (fill in the blank) , this study will change that focus by (fill in the blank.) It's best to be explicit and clear about the theories being used in the proposal. Short proposals (+/- 5 pages) may imply such theories but longer proposals should identify them explicitly, including how each will be used to advance the proposer's argument. In sum, the theoretical orientation and significance sections of a proposal should receive the proposer's close attention. They carry the major intellectual weight of the proposal.