

### The Dos and Don'ts of Writing the Statement of Purpose for a Humanities/Social Sciences Funding Application

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by Katherine E. Kelly, PhD

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*Katherine E. Kelly is a retired English professor from Texas A&M University. She is the author of several books and numerous articles supported by research grants and served as a contributing editor for an academic journal for five years. She provides editorial services to ARFS clients on proposals, journal articles, and manuscripts and presents seminars on grant writing and funding in the humanities and humanistic social sciences.*

Perhaps the most critical section in a proposal—the statement of purpose—tells reviewers what the applicant wants to do with the funds being requested. It's essential to a proposal's success that this statement be compelling, expressed in clear language without jargon, and that ***it should encourage the reviewer to read the rest of the proposal***. The precise statement may occupy one or maybe two sentences, but it will be preceded and followed by important contextualizing information. Described in a slightly different way, the statement of purpose conveys the most pointed description of the applicant's idea. No amount of eloquence, fashionable references, or relevant evidence can make up for a weak idea—i.e., an idea already investigated, a poorly conceived and described idea, or an impossibly ambitious idea that would require years to realize. The effective statement of purpose must, therefore, strike the reviewers as a realistic idea worthy of an agency's investment. And agencies have their own sets of interest that the savvy applicant will learn by studying the titles and abstracts of recently funded proposals along with statements of strategic plans and other documents conveniently posted online. In addition, applicants can increase the likelihood of formulating a worthwhile idea by studying the criteria reviewers use to judge a research proposal's merits, and by recognizing that a proposal is an attempt to persuade peer reviewers that an idea of interest to the applicant should ***also be of interest to other humanities scholars and perhaps even to the general public***. It therefore makes sense to review those criteria, especially how to interpret them, to prepare for writing a proposal with a fighting chance of success.

The NEH's five criteria closely resemble those of many funders. NEH first asks the applicant to explain the intellectual significance of the project, including its value to humanities scholars, general audiences, or—even better—to both. Reviewers will be looking for a clear, jargon-free description of what will be done with the funds requested and why it should be done. ***Be sure to write this statement for a humanities generalist rather than for a specialist in your field or subfield, and situate your idea in the larger context of humanities or social science research.*** As you think about how to answer this, consider the question: how will my project change the scholarship in my field by creating a new way to think about the topic? And what differences might this make to a wider area of study? Here, it's essential to broaden out the implications of the project, linking it to trends in recent, allied fields, so that its significance is seen to ripple out from the smaller core of the research. Review the funded examples on the NEH website to see how others have attempted this difficult but essential move. Answering these questions calls for a brief review of the relevant scholarly literature on the same or related topics. Stress how your own idea adds to, contradicts, or revises current studies.

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The second criterion is the quality of the concept, definition, organization, and description of the project, along with its clarity of expression. This criterion judges how coherently the idea has been conceived and links conceptual clarity to clarity of written expression. Use of technical terms or disciplinary jargon will count against the applicant under this criterion, ***as will failing to lay out a step-by-step description of how the project will be organized and completed.*** Again, a quick review of samples on the NEH website can offer some ideas for avoiding jargon and presenting a clear description of how the project will be organized and completed. By the time a reviewer has judged the merits of these first two criteria, ***s/he may have made a global judgment about the project's merits.*** But three more criteria will be applied before the review is complete.

The third criterion describes the work plan. Here, the reviewers want to know how the applicant will organize her time and undertake a series of tasks in a specific order to complete the project. Reviewers will want to know the physical location of the applicant at various times during the project's duration. Will the project be completed during the grant period (not necessary for receiving an award)? Or will some percent of it get accomplished with the remainder to be completed in the future. Here, providing organizational detail will benefit the applicant by ensuring the reviewers that the entire project has been forecast and carefully planned over time.

The fourth criterion considers the quality of the applicant's work as an interpreter of the humanities. ***In other words, does the applicant's resume predict that he will complete this project?*** What has he done before that suggests he will or will not? Here, ancillary skills such as language proficiency or technical know-how needed to complete the research can be described.

Finally, NEH asks the reviewers to assess whether the applicant will complete the project—again, not necessarily during the period of performance. Reviewers will also want to be told here about plans for disseminating the project's results, such as publication and/or other forms for circulating the final results. Applicants should therefore mention the expected outcomes of the project, if they exist, to ensure the reviewers that the project will be both completed and shared widely.

Succeeding as an applicant to a national grant competition calls for ***strategic planning and careful preparation of a research project.*** As in any other kind of contest, the more thorough the preparation for entering a research competition, the better the applicant can expect to perform.