

## **WRITING THE DISSERTATION FELLOWSHIP PROPOSAL** **Cynthia Verba, GSAS Director of Fellowships, 2017**

Learning to write an effective dissertation fellowship proposal has implications that go well beyond the process itself; it is a skill that is essential to a scholar throughout his or her career and also valued outside of academe. Ordinarily, students in the science fields are asked to submit an original research proposal for their qualifying exam, which then serves as the basis for the dissertation. Typically, the science dissertation is a series of papers or write-ups of lab result; it grows directly out of research done in the lab or on the research team. Most of the points below apply to the natural sciences as well as the humanities and social sciences, but with the important difference that in the natural sciences you must choose among the multiple papers that comprise your dissertation, and single out the one that will form the basis of your next research project. This format is used at times in the social sciences.

### **The Nature of a Proposal: How a Dissertation Fellowship Proposal Differs from a Dissertation Prospectus**

A fellowship proposal is essentially a persuasive argument for why your project deserves to be funded. Most dissertation fellowships — and fellowships in general — involve a highly competitive contest, judged by an anonymous fellowship committee. This is in contrast to a dissertation prospectus, where you are simply asking your own department to decide whether your project is *acceptable* or not; this is normally an easier task, more like “preaching to the converted.” Many departments have their own rules as to what a prospectus should be — how long, what to include, what format to use, and other requirements — but in general the prospectus is a fairly detailed explanation of your project.

In a fellowship competition you are asking an anonymous fellowship committee to decide that you deserve to *win* and — yes — that you are one of the more deserving applicants. In this situation, it will not do simply to describe a project that is acceptable; instead, you must develop a highly persuasive and polished argument that will convince the reader that your proposed project will make an important contribution to the field, that it will change the way people think about the topic, and thus deserves to be funded. The argument should be constructed so carefully that each sentence and each paragraph advances your contribution argument in the most tightly-knit and logically coherent fashion. If there are sentences that do not advance your contribution argument, then you should consider tightening your presentation even further.

### **Constructing a Polished Argument for How Your Project Will Contribute to the Field: Three Possible Paradigms**

Before you can construct a tightly-knit argument, you must first decide what your contribution argument will be. There are three possible paradigms — or three logical possibilities — for defining how a study will contribute to the field

**Paradigm One:** The project is a research topic that never has been done before. Almost by definition it will contribute to the field. The burden in this argument, however, is to show that the topic is indeed significant despite its neglect by scholars. Perhaps it has only recently acquired significance through scholarly developments, or perhaps there are other factors that you have discovered that explain its importance. The main point in this paradigm is to show that the topic no longer should be neglected.

#### **Sample Argument, Paradigm One:**

“While thirteenth-century Venetian art has been studied in depth, the story of the fourteenth century

remains to be written. Not only was this a period of extraordinary political and economic expansion and turning westward, but it was also a period matched by artistic transition, moving away from the prevalent use of Byzantine cultural models — once again in the direction of the West.”

**Paradigm Two:** (This argument is the opposite of Paradigm One.) The project will study well-known material that has been examined many times before, but you are making a reassessment of that material by looking at it in a new way, which will be your contribution. The challenge in this paradigm is to make a strong argument for the need for reassessment without denigrating all previous work. (The selection committee may well include an author of one of those previous works.) The wisest approach is to stress that you are adding a new dimension, thanks to the work that has already been done.

**Sample Argument, Paradigm Two:**

“The rapid turnover in population in nineteenth-century cities and the chaotic ordering of their neighborhoods has led many historians to focus almost exclusively on the social dislocation and uprootedness that they felt urban life brought. This dissertation seeks to re-examine these assumptions ...”

**Paradigm Three:** (This argument logically falls between Paradigms One and Two; it is where most research projects fall as well.) In this case, the project will contribute by exposing some new material, which in turn will call for some reassessment of what has already been done.

**Sample Argument, Paradigm Three:**

“While there have been some studies done on the Alliance’s activities in North Africa, there have been none on its work in the Ottoman Empire where most of its schools were located . . . By studying the activities of an organization which channeled Western values directly to a broad mass of young students, I hope to shed some new light on the process of Westernization at the local level.”

**Samples of Compelling Statements of the Larger Significance of Your Project, Building on the Contribution Argument:**

- “My work on the state of Veracruz, the first properly historical study of Mexican agriculture after 1940, will test the explanatory possibilities of this novel perspective, and will contribute new sources and fresh approaches to the fields of modern agrarian history and rural development.”
- “I could say, then, that my project is justified in that working out the intricacies of the Old Norse verbal system constitutes a formidable intellectual challenge. But I feel that much more is at stake than that. First, if the facts are as intractable as they seem . . . then they must provide a significant test case for the descriptive and explanatory power of current linguistic theory, and bring issues into clear view which have hitherto lurked in the background.”

**DO’S AND DON’TS IN WRITING THE DISSERTATION PROPOSAL**

The dissertation proposal for a fellowship application, which is often an initial version of a dissertation prospectus, is a very special form of writing, a genre in its own right, with its own special context. Typically the committee reader of proposals is faced with the task of reading between 50 to 100 proposals, a strict deadline for selecting potential winners, and the reader is probably not a specialist on the proposal topic but qualified mainly as a skilled scholar. In this context it is imperative to make a clear and compelling argument for why the project should be funded, and it must be “reader friendly,” which

means sparing the reader the hard work of figuring out the major points of the topic and why it is important.

In choosing what to say and when and how to say it, try to imagine that in all likelihood the committee reader will only absorb or retain approximately five major points from each proposal that she reads. The tips below indicate how to choose and treat approximately five major points about the dissertation; the tips also indicate some common tendencies that weaken a proposal and how they may be avoided. Also see below for **writing a fellowship abstract**.

#### **\*The Importance of Structure**

The structure of the proposal plays an important role in the strength of the proposal. The order in which you present your points should be a hierarchic order, with the most important items placed first, as early as the opening introduction. The reader is likely to be grateful to learn sooner rather than later what the project is all about, and is likely to attach greater weight to what comes first. This means having a strong but succinct opening paragraph(s), in which all the major points of the proposal are presented in a concise nut-shell fashion, with further elaboration postponed for subsequent paragraphs. The major points include: a statement of the topic; the methodology, stating how and also where you will conduct the research if away from Harvard; how it contributes to the field(s) and why it is important;

#### **\*Identifying the Main Topic**

In terms of effective hierarchic order, it is important to pin down the topic as early as possible, at the very opening of the proposal. This should include a central argument or question which is an essential aspect of defining a topic. There is common tendency to postpone stating the topic and engaging instead in preliminaries, often providing extensive background material, and saving the actual topic for last. This deprives the background of its meaning or relevance, which only becomes clear when the topic is reached (sometimes as late as the second page of the proposal). The comedian may well postpone the punchline until last, this is not a good idea in a fellowship proposal.

#### **\*Communicate Your Intention Up Front**

When stating the topic, recognize that the reader's main interest in the proposal is to find out what you intend to do with the topic, what central question you intend to explore. There is a common tendency for the writer to hold back, avoiding a direct statement of intent, avoiding the use of the active voice. It is far better to state what you will do rather than to state what needs doing. For example, you might say, "I will address the question of . . ." rather than just throwing out the question, without ownership.

#### **\*Distinguish Between the Main Central Question(s) and Subsidiary Ones**

There is another common tendency for the writer to present a multitude of specific questions in neutral fashion, scattered throughout the proposal, without distinguishing between the main central question and those that are subsidiary. Bringing these dispersed questions together under an umbrella central question benefits not only the reader, but also the writer. It can often lead to a clearer formulation of the topic and help to assure that it is a workable topic, with central and subsidiary questions that can be documented. In any case, it is not a good idea to leave it for the reader to do the hard work of figuring out what is central and what is subsidiary. Similarly, if the topic deals with a specific time and place, it's not a good idea to postpone giving these crucial features which help to orient the reader.

**\*Be Concise:** It is also important to make all statements concise and compelling. The use of fewer words is the best path to clarity. There is a common tendency of adding clause after clause, burying the main point of a statement and making it unmanageable for both reader and writer.

**\*Present One Version of the Topic**

Another common tendency is to present the main topic in multiple versions that are just different enough from one another to leave the reader confused (all too frequently, there are even versions that contradict one another); once a topic is clearly and concisely presented at the opening, there is no need to repeatedly tell what the topic is. When further elaboration is presented subsequently, stay as close as possible to your opening formulation and then elaborate. There is a tendency to turn to synonyms or pronouns to avoid too much repetition of the same words when referring back to the topic. Since clarity must be the highest priority, it is far better to avoid synonyms or pronouns; they seldom are a perfect or clear match for the original noun.

**\*State the HOW, Make it Match the What When Discussing Methodology**

Your concise opening statements will also need a concise description of methodology, how you will document your arguments, what types of principal sources you will use to support your arguments (but without giving a long list of every item you will use), where they are located, and what theoretical framework, if any, that you will use for analytic purposes. Some proposals create a disconnect between the WHAT and the HOW in the proposal: a topic is presented, but the method for implementation is poorly matched with the stated topic. Often the HOW is in fact the truer version of the writer's intent and the topic needs a more accurate formulation. You may need to elaborate further on the methodology after the opening, so continue to make sure it matches the stated topic; keep looking back at the opening. When elaborating, you can specify some of the principal sources, but avoid long lists (which the reader will surely skim).

**\*Contribution to the Field** (see the paradigm arguments above)

Once you have accomplished the difficult task of making a concise and compelling statement about your topic and your methodology, your opening should present a concise statement of how the project will contribute to the field, emphasizing how the project will make a difference in how we think about the subject. This is the single most important aspect of the proposal, and needs to be stated early. In most cases, you will need a subsequent paragraph that deals at greater length with the existing literature. This subsequent elaboration needs to present a well-organized and coherent picture of the relevant literature, making sure that you cover all the scholarly areas to which your project will contribute, since projects often contribute to more than one field. Here too there is a common tendency to scatter references to the literature throughout the proposal, which makes it harder for the reader to get a complete grasp of your contributions. A unified treatment of the literature is the most effective. (State major works; avoid long monotonous lists within the proposal, especially if a bibliography is required.) Another common tendency when describing the existing scholarship is to point out how each work fails to do what you propose to do. Keep in mind that the reader will already know from your introduction what your topic is and what is new about your topic. In this section all you need to do is discuss the literature in the field(s) that is pertinent for your topic; no need to repeat what these works have not done, which is your project. Best to note that you will add a new dimension to the rich existing literature in the field, unless little or nothing exists. (You want to be on good terms with authors in your field.)

**\*Contribution to the Field Must Follow Rather than Precede Topic Statement**

Another tendency is to present the gaps in the scholarly literature before telling what the topic is. In many cases, the best presentation of the topic is found in a statement of what is missing in the literature. It is far better logic to state what you are doing and then to note it is missing in the literature, rather than have the reader surmise that what is noted as missing is what you will be doing.

### **\*Providing Background, If Needed, For Clarifying the Main Topic**

There are times, especially with an obscure topic, when some lead-in is needed before stating the topic. Make the background lead-in as brief as possible, avoiding a prolonged delay before getting to the topic. If a longer background passage is needed, then do so after giving all the opening main points cited above. Present the background material in a separate paragraph and identify it as background: “By way of further background . . . .” There is a common tendency to present a long introductory background passage before stating the topic. The reader will be far more interested in the background facts after knowing the topic; this allows the reader to know why the background matters.

### **\*Further Elaboration of the Opening Points, How To Structure the Rest**

Once you have written a strong concise opening paragraph (in some cases, two opening paragraphs, including background if needed), you can elaborate in subsequent passages of the proposal. In fact, once the opening paragraph(s) is structured in hierarchic fashion, as suggested above, the opening can then serve as an outline for the rest of the proposal; just follow the same hierarchic order.

### **\*Don’t Have A Project That Tries To Do Too Much**

There is a tendency to present a project that has too many goals to be feasible, often too many countries to visit, too many repeat visits required, or too many years needed to complete the proposed research. Working closely with the dissertation adviser can help to avert that problem. The dissertation need not be the definitive work on the subject; it is possible to do a significant piece even while limiting the scope of the topic.

## **WRITING THE FELLOWSHIP ABSTRACT**

Many fellowship applications also require an abstract. The stipulations of length requirement vary — ranging between 150 and 500 words. All the principles described above should be followed in writing the abstract. There might be a close resemblance between the introduction paragraph and the abstract, but repetition is perhaps inevitable when presenting the same project in two different formats. The abstract is likely to be more complete than the opening paragraph since it stands apart from the proposal, while the opening leads into the rest of the proposal.

The following items should be included in the abstract, and can also serve as a checklist, to see that the essentials have been covered in the proposal:

- A concise statement of the purpose of the project and its methodology and how it will contribute to the field (much can be drawn from your introduction)
- Significance of the project in broader terms (this too from the introduction)
- Personal background of relevance

It is important to prepare the abstract carefully, since members of the selection committee typically use the abstract as a reminder of the project after reading a huge pile of proposals. In addition, the abstract, along with the title, may be used in the various national computerized information systems, so major reference terms should appear in the abstract.

## **FURTHER DETAILS ON ORGANIZING THE PARTS OF THE PROPOSAL**

As noted above, once the introduction presents a concise and carefully structured articulation of the major points of your project, then the introduction can serve as an outline for the rest of the proposal, which elaborates on the major points, as needed: further elaboration on the central argument, on the

methodology, on the contribution to the scholarly literature, on the project's significance in larger terms. Following the outline of the introduction helps to assure a highly polished and structured presentation throughout the proposal. As each new paragraph picks up a major point of the introduction for elaboration, be sure to have an opening sentence for the paragraph that identifies which point is being elaborated, and then be disciplined and make sure the paragraph indeed sticks to that point. With this approach each paragraph makes a clear point that is identified at the outset; it helps to strengthen the whole.

### **Elaborating on the Scholarly Literature: Should You Include Footnotes and a Bibliography?**

You will note that all three contribution paradigms have the advantage of allowing you to discuss the scholarly literature in the field, which is an essential part of a winning fellowship proposal. However, they avoid the potential monotony of simply describing a long list of works; instead they make the discussion of literature an integral part of your contribution argument. When you get to the paragraph that provides a more thorough discussion of the literature, it is important to organize this discussion tightly, grouping the relevant works by field, if more than one field comes into play, and concentrating the discussion within a paragraph or two. All too often, as noted, the applicant tends to scatter citations throughout the essay, which only makes it harder for the reader to locate the exact nature of the contribution and how your original ideas fit within the field or fields. In this more detailed paragraph where you cite specific works or authors, the general and recommended practice is to present them in abbreviated form — author's last name and date of publication — and placed within the text in parentheses, rather than in footnotes. This is especially recommended when only a brief fellowship statement is required (of no more than six double-spaced pages).

In some competitions, usually when a longer and more elaborate proposal is required (around ten double-spaced pages), you will be expected to have references and a bibliography. Cited works can still be presented in abbreviated form within the text, or you may use footnotes. In either case, this type of proposal should be accompanied by a bibliography, even if not specifically required. Even here, the bibliography should be limited to selected works that are central to the proposal.

### **Elaborating on Methodology, Developing Specific Objectives**

In the many cases where methodology needs further elaboration, an essential step is to translate your central argument or hypothesis into a series of well-defined objectives that will support your central argument, making sure that the steps are a logical outgrowth of the major argument or hypothesis. There is a tendency at times for the methodology discussion to veer off course, so that it does not closely match the stated objectives. (In extreme cases, the methodology discussion is so disconnected from stated goals that it sounds like it is describing a completely different project.) Again, it is important to keep checking back to your stated goals, making adjustments as necessary, so that the WHAT you are doing and HOW you are doing it are perfectly matched. If you find you are making an important new point in your methodology, then you need to insert it into your introduction. Similarly, it is important to state all of your specific steps or objectives in a single place in an orderly fashion. If they are scattered, then it is impossible for the reader to know exactly what is being proposed, and how or why it fits with the major goals or contribution paradigm.

### **Candidate's Relevant Background or Qualifications**

Often the application includes instructions for discussing the applicant's qualifications as part of the proposal, or there is a separate essay question asking for relevant personal background, or a curriculum

vitae is required. If there are no specific questions or requirements, it is nevertheless important to include some of your strongest qualifications or preparation for the project in the proposal itself, once you have described the project. This discussion also gives you the opportunity to convey a sense of your commitment and enthusiasm for the project. (Conveying your own enthusiasm may well generate a corresponding enthusiasm from the reader.) If there are no instructions, the following items should be addressed:

- Special background or skills or preparatory work for the project (languages or other skills mastered, prior fieldwork or research related to topic, etc.)
- How the project fits in with your long-term career goals
- Any other evidence of your promise to carry out the project successfully.

Some applications ask for a c.v. or seek a more extended biographical essay — for example, the Fulbright Institute of International Education application includes a c.v. in essay form that asks for such personal history as family background, intellectual influences, enriching experiences and how they have affected you. Whether it is a standard c.v. or a biographical essay, it is important to be selective and to present those aspects of your background that emphasize how well qualified and well suited you are for the particular project and fellowship. The essay is not the occasion to “tell the story of your life.” A good idea in preparing to write the essay or c.v. is to make a list in hierarchic order of what you think are your most outstanding qualifications and then work them into a personal essay or a c.v. In organizing a c.v. it is common to list things in reverse chronological order, since your most impressive qualifications or experiences are probably your most recent ones. For the same reasons you might even want to organize your biographical essay in that fashion: you need not start from the beginning—it is possible to work backwards. (Samples of fellowship c.v.s, as well as biographical essays for fellowship purposes are included at the end of the present chapter; job application c.v.s will be discussed in chapter six.)

### **Paying Attention to Fellowship Descriptions; Adapting the Proposal When Applying for Several Fellowships**

It is wise to apply for as many fellowships as possible, as long as they are appropriate for your project. Most fellowship announcements include a description of the fellowship, stating selection criteria and providing some details about the type of projects that the granting agency seeks to support. You may find that there are a number of fellowships, which are appropriate for your project, but that the fellowship descriptions vary, both in large and small details. While it is important to pay close attention to the wording in the individual fellowship announcements, it is also important to write a fellowship proposal that presents the most persuasive and logical argument in support of your project, following the principles outlined above. How can you write a proposal that does this and at the same time pays close attention to the wording of fellowship descriptions?

We would suggest that you first construct a “generic” proposal that presents your project in the strongest light. You can then adapt it, if necessary, to create individual versions that match individual fellowship announcements as closely as possible. This process involves, above all, careful choice of wording in order to incorporate key terminology from individual fellowship announcements. In some cases, it may also involve adding paragraphs that address specific questions asked by individual granting agencies. Most projects can be described with a subtly different choice of wording, without distorting the true nature of the project, and without disrupting the basic logic of the contribution argument. The main point is to get your arguments in place. Once that is done, then any tinkering with surface details will not weaken the basic structure of your arguments, which is ultimately what counts.

For further details and winning samples, see *Scholarly Pursuits* available on the GSAS Fellowships Office website. For an appointment to review your proposal please call (617) 495-1814.