



**COLUMBIA UNIVERSITY**  
**GRADUATE SCHOOL OF ARTS & SCIENCES**

**Graduate School of Arts & Sciences**  
**Teaching Center**

302 Philosophy Hall • Mail Code 4997 • New York, NY 10027 • 212-854-1066 • smintz@columbia.edu

## **How to Write Compelling Fellowship Applications**

Proposal writing is something that you will do throughout your academic career. Many applications will be turned down. But don't despair. Fellowships are highly competitive, but you can turn the odds in your favor.

### **Which proposal are funded?**

Those that focus on a hot area or on an important issue within a discipline. Those that are do-able within the time frame. Those whose applicants have a record of prior accomplishment. And those proposal's accompanied by strong, highly specific letters of recommendation.

### **Why are good proposals rejected?**

Because the applicant failed to follow the guidelines. Because the applicant did not adequately explain why the project is worth doing. Because the methodology, work plan, or budget is vague or unrealistic.

### **Before you write:**

- Identify as many fellowship opportunities as you can.
- Make sure you understand the existing debates within your field.
- Identify a compelling research question and advance a tentative hypothesis.

### **Writing the proposal:**

#### **1. Capture the reviewers' attention**

Pose your research question or hypothesis succinctly, forcefully, and provocatively.

#### **2. Situate your proposal in a broader context**

- Describe the body of knowledge and theory or the debates to which you will contribute.
- Explain how you are filling a void, uncovering new material, reassessing a topic, looking at well known material in a new way, or researching a topic that has not been studied before.

#### **3. Demonstrate your awareness of previous research and alternate viewpoints.**

#### **4. Be original and innovative, methodologically and conceptually.**

#### **5. Underscore your qualifications to undertake this project and offer evidence that you are likely to complete the project successfully.**

#### **6. Be specific about your objectives, qualifications, methodology and procedures, work plan, budget, and outcomes.**

7. Make it clear that your project is feasible.

8. **Remember: An application is a writing sample.**

There can be no typos or misspellings, grammatical errors, or infelicities of language.

### **Re-read your proposal and ask the following questions:**

*1. Does the first paragraph spell out the purpose, goal, research question, and hypothesis of the proposed project?*

*2. Do you establish the significance of your project on the first few paragraphs.*

*3. Do you capture a reader's attention?*

*4. Do you make a compelling case that you are well-qualified to undertake the project and that you have the qualifications, training, and track record that suggest that you will bring the project to a successful completion?*

*5. Does the proposal demonstrate awareness of previous scholarship?*

*6. Is your proposal compelling to non-specialists? Is it clearly and economically written and logically organized? Is it sufficiently detailed and specific, or does jargon make the proposal difficult to understand?*

*7. Does your proposal spell out your project's contribution in terms of substance and content, conceptualization and theory, and methodology?*

*8. Is your plan of work sufficiently detailed and is it likely that it can be completed within the fellowship's time frame?*

### **Recommendations**

Recommendations often determine whether you will receive a fellowship. Hyperbole often turns off readers. Detailed, highly specific recommendations impress readers. Therefore it is essential that you **prep your recommenders by:**

- *providing them with a copy of your proposal in advance, and*
- *making sure that they can discuss your qualifications and scholarship in detail.*