

Proposal Preparation Strategies and Tips

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- Start early—well in advance of application deadlines.
- In choosing a topic, think about the impact on the field and broader issues that your topic will address. Beware, however, of taking on a topic or project only because you think it fits program guidelines.
- Talk with colleagues, mentors, etc. about possible funding sources.
- Check funding sources, now usually on the internet, for possible grant support; create a grid of deadlines and materials needed.
- Read the guidelines. Follow them.
- Make sure to know and address the criteria for judging your application.
- For NEH individual grants (fellowships, faculty research awards, summer stipends, etc., you must register at grants.gov. Set a personal deadline at least two weeks before actual deadline). Submit at off-hours—before the deadline.
- Submit only what has been requested.
- Contact program staff with questions.
- Ask for sample proposals or check those provided with guidelines for some programs.
- Ask seasoned colleagues, preferably those who are not in your field, to read a draft application.
- Discuss ideas with others. Read outside your own discipline to help broaden your scope.
- Do preliminary work. Know the literature, issues, questions, and controversies in your area. Are scholars in other disciplines doing similar work?
- Demonstrate a topic's significance rather than making assertions about its significance.
- Discuss your project's strengths, but avoid hyperbole.
- Write clearly and concisely. *Avoid jargon.* Many proposals are not funded because the writing is abstract, unclear, or jargon laden. Define concepts and terminology.
- Discuss methods. If applicable, include selection criteria.
- Imagine your audience. Try to take yourself out of your mindset and think like an evaluator or a general reader.
- Avoid making unsubstantiated claims. Provide examples.
- Provide a realistic time line and work plan.
- Describe source materials. Where are they found? What can you expect from them?
- If you foresee potential problems, discuss how you will address them.
- If you are revising a dissertation, explain how the outcome proposed differs from the dissertation. Explain how the work plan relates to research accomplished for the dissertation.
- Proof read your work.
- For NEH fellowships and stipends, manage your referees.
- If you don't succeed, ask for feedback and try again.