

Near Eastern and Judaic Studies Graduate Student Guide to Grant Proposals

By Professor ChaeRan Freeze

The single most important part of a fellowship application is the proposal itself: good letters of recommendation will open the door, but only a well-designed and realizable proposal will be successful. Each fellowship or grant organization will have special interests, but a well-crafted, cogent proposal is a precondition for success. It is *your* task to make the proposal easily comprehensible and cogent—that, is, elucidate the substance of your research, demonstrate that the requisite sources are extant and accessible, and explain the broader significance of the project (the mere fact that it has not been done does not suffice).

Also bear in mind that the proposal will be read by people who have other things to do; if you cannot make your proposal instantaneously clear, they are most unlikely to rack their brains to discover what you wanted, but failed, to say.

Some rules of grant-writing are fairly universal. Above all, do not write for specialists, but for a general educated reader. Even in a highly specialized competition (e.g., Jewish studies), some members of the selection committee may know the geographic region (i.e. Israel), but not the specific field. It is therefore absolutely essential that you make the proposal immediately comprehensible to a non-specialist: selection committees normally include people from different disciplines and fields.

Moreover, your proposal must clearly demonstrate the significance and feasibility of the project. It is not enough to identify a problem of gigantic importance; you must also present a clear explanation of how you intend to “operationalize” the research—the theory, sources, and methods that you will use to solve the problem. If the subject is huge, be sure to explain how you will slice this into manageable proportions; if the sources are vast, explain the principles and logic of and how you will select and sample these materials.

Treat the proposal as a formal academic paper: avoid colloquial language, use footnotes (in proper form). Do not exceed the stipulated limits (usually about 5 pages).

If a fellowship or grant stipulates a specific formula (i.e., it asks the applicant to discuss existing literature, significance of the topic, etc.), *structure your proposal to fit those categories and even insert these categories as subheadings in the text*. If you do this, committee members can easily move through and “grade” your application in terms of foundation’s explicit categories. Indeed, some government agencies and foundations literally use grade-sheets, with numbers applied for each category; you should not leave it to an overworked committee member to ferret out your response to individual subcategories. You may wish to add other categories at logically appropriate points, but be certain to cover those that the committee will use in judging your application.

If no specific structure is required, you might consider using the following set of subheadings.

Summary (Executive Summary)

Even if the specified categories does not include this, you would do well to provide an “executive summary” at the outset of your proposal. This single, concise paragraph should provide a clear, tightly-worded synopsis of the entire proposal: the problematica, sources to be used, the research strategy, and historiographic significance of the project. An effective executive summary can greatly facilitate a reading of the whole proposal, especially for committee members who tend to eyeball an application.

Problematica

Pose explicitly the problems(s) you seek to answer. What are the issues, questions? You might begin with a paragraph of background on the general subject, then move to the one, two, three etc. main questions that you wish to propose to resolve. For example, a proposal on the black-hundreds antisemitic movement in prerevolutionary Russia might have a paragraph describing the phenomenon and significance of the movement—i.e., enough information for a chemist to know, and appreciate the import of, what you are talking about. Then the proposal might identify and elucidate three basic questions about the movement: the substance and sources of its ideology, the active membership of the movement and its ostensible constituency (ethnic, social, geographic, age, gender--based on voting records), and its impact on politics and society.

Historiography

Provide a critical analysis and general characterization of the existing literature. If the topic has not been treated, what assumptions prevail in the general literature? If specialized literature does exist, why is it unsatisfactory? One might cite such factors as prejudice, lack of access to archival sources, and the like. Do not turn this into a paragraph of bibliography; you might cite a few major works (as examples), but concentrate primarily on indicating the main characteristics of the existing scholarship. You might bear in mind that the authors of any purportedly “inadequate” literature (or their advisers or students) sometimes serve on selection committees. Be precise, but tactful and fair.

Research Strategy

Now that you have stated the problematica and demonstrated the need for a fresh examination, explain how you intend to solve the problem.

First, define the exact spacial and temporal parameters of your project. For example, if the historiography has dealt with a general problem but inadequately (because of conceptual, methodological or source deficiencies), you might propose to do a case study of a given place or

period. You would then explain why you chose this particular focus for the case study and why/how it can shed light on the larger problem.

Second, discuss any methodological issues: what new approaches, conceptual tools and methodologies shall you employ? These obviously should correspond to the problematica that you seek to address. To take the black- hundredist example again, you probably would want to include a prosopographical analysis--i.e., a statistical study of such things as ethnic, social and geographic origin, education, occupation, prior and subsequent political record, age, and gender. Your proposal should indicate the variables and your computer program to demonstrate that you are really prepared to carry this out.

Chapter Structure

If the proposal is for a grant to *write*, you would do well to include a table of contents to indicate how you plan to structure the dissertation. This will serve both to concretize the proposal for the reader and to demonstrate that you are well on the road toward completing the research and will indeed be ready to write by the time the grant starts.

Source Base

Now that you have defined your research strategy, you must demonstrate that the sources for such a study exist. You might first discuss the printed sources available for preliminary search in this country (e.g., newspapers); this will show that you can and presumably already have completed some basic research. For various fellowships to study abroad, however, it is essential to demonstrate that much basic material--printed and archival--are only available outside the United States. So your second paragraph might systematically discuss (with examples) those printed sources unavailable at major research libraries in the United States. Obviously, be certain of the examples you cite.

The next paragraph(s), however, normally constitute the core of this section: a description of the various archival sources that are both *extant and accessible*. The selection committee must be persuaded that you not only have an important subject and brilliant research strategy, but that the requisite materials exist in rich abundance. Beware of over-kill: if you indicate mountains of archive materials, the reader is likely to wonder how you shall ever process these files or at least what principles shall guide your selection. If the archival material is classified or proprietary, you must also demonstrate that you either have been granted access or (on the basis of others' experience) have every reason to expect this.

Ideally, you will have had some opportunity to explore these holdings in a summer research trip; you can therefore speak authoritatively about the quantity, quality, and diversity of the archival materials.

In addition, there are three other steps that you should take. First, consult specialists who have already used these (or analogous) materials and make reference to this in your application. With your advisor's approval, write the appropriate specialists and ask them for comments and references to any unpublished work-in-progress. This may be a good opportunity to learn what

your fellow graduate students are working on in Israel, Russia, or other countries. You might indicate that you will make a follow-up call. Apart from enabling you to speak more authoritatively about the quality and accessibility of the materials, you may also learn about parallel or duplicate projects already underway. Second, examine the pertinent archive guides; you might find some useful information; although this often tends to be too general to be of much use, it can at least outline the types and quantity (if not quality) of the archival holdings. Third, write the appropriate archival institutions to make inquiries about current accessibility, about the nature of the holdings (e.g., a list of pertinent collections and their approximate size), and the names of any scholars who might have recently been using them. You probably will not get responses by the time the application is due, but you can indicate that you have indeed completed this preliminary work. Obviously, cooperation here will vary considerably from one archive to the next, but smaller and private collections might prove more cooperative. In any event, they should be able to forewarn you of any plans to close operations (as in YIVO) or selected holdings during the period you plan to conduct your research. Reconstruction, relocation, and reproduction projects can all lead to prolonged closings, and it is your responsibility to clarify all this in advance.

Research Schedule

In one paragraph outline what you have already completed, what specific research you shall finish in the current year (prior to travel abroad), and then your research schedule next year (e.g., three months in archive X, then four months in archive Y, etc.; or, you will make city X your base the entire year, with short research trips to Y and Z). Your aim here is to demonstrate that you will be fully prepared to go (i.e., you have completed research on what sources are available in the U.S.) and that you have a plan to cover the sources outlined above.

If the grant is for writing your dissertation, you might substitute a brief “research and writing schedule” to demonstrate that all the research will be completed before the grant commences and hence have a reasonable expectation of completing the dissertation during the tenure of the grant.

Budget

The grant application may require an itemized budget. Be sure to include all of your anticipated expenses (i.e. airfare, photocopy and microfilm costs, housing, etc.) even if your budget exceeds the amount to be awarded by the funding agency.

Topic Significance

Explain the significance of the work for the field: what it contributes thematically, conceptually, methodologically and empirically to the field, and why this is important. *Some* grants (especially governmental) also ask you to explain the contemporary relevance; if so, and if appropriate, say something about how the dissertation will promote a broader understanding of gender, racial, cultural, or other problems.