



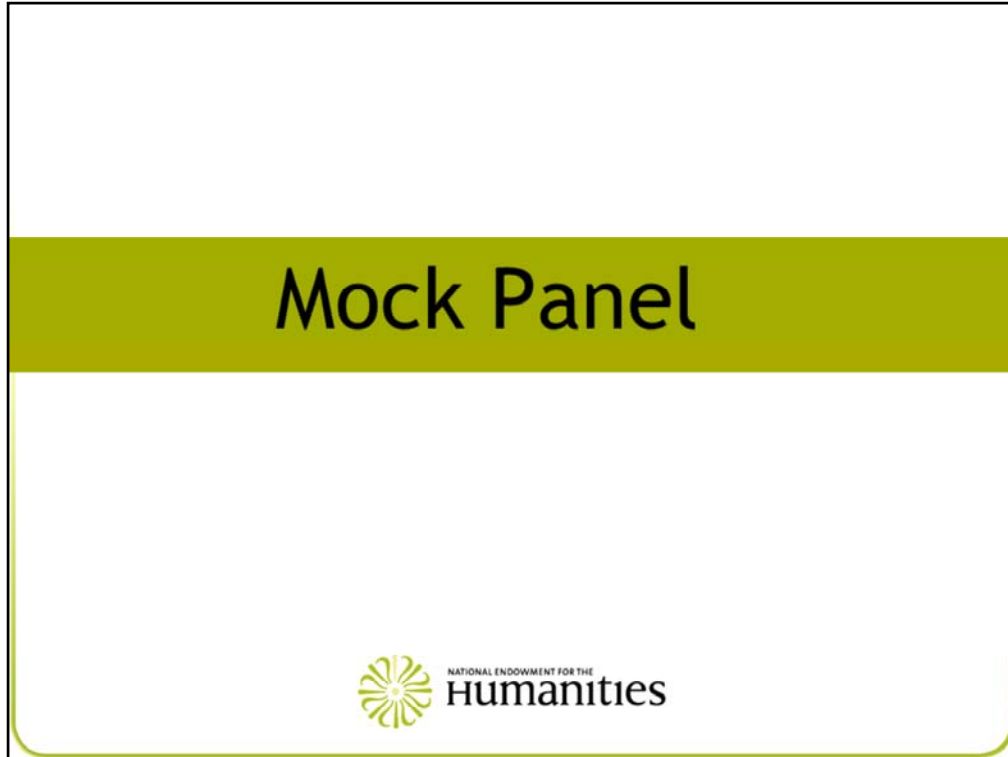
NATIONAL ENDOWMENT FOR THE  
**Humanities**

# NEH 102: Peer Review and Hints

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I mentioned at the end of the last session that the acceptance rate for many of our programs is pretty low. In this session we'll focus on ways to improve your odds. The key to that is understanding how applications are reviewed, so we will run a mock panel. I'll then offer some hints on writing a good application. I'll focus today on fellowships and summer stipends, which I imagine a lot of you are interested in. The criteria are somewhat different for the other grant programs, but the basic process is the same. And what we say here may be useful if you are applying to other foundations, too.



As I mentioned in the first session, the heart of the NEH’s work is the peer review process—we ask scholars from across the country to help us evaluate the quality of applications, to find the most excellent ones. We’ll demonstrate that process by having a mock review panel here today. Invited three local faculty to act as panelists. We’ll do what we normally do in a panel session. At this point, go to **OPENING REMARKS**

## Evaluation Criteria for Fellowships and Summer Stipends

1. The intellectual significance of the proposed project, including its value to humanities scholars, general audiences, or both.
2. The quality or promise of quality of the applicant's work as an interpreter of the humanities.
3. The quality of the conception, definition, organization, and description of the project and the applicant's clarity of expression.
4. The feasibility of the proposed plan of work, including, when appropriate, the soundness of the dissemination and access plans.
5. The likelihood that the applicant will complete the project.



## Rating Scale

- E      Excellent
- VG     Very good
- G      Good
- SM     Some merit
- NC     Not competitive



## Stages of Review



## Mock Peer Review Panel

Application 1: “Monastic Recruitment, Novitiate Training, and Monastic-Lay Relationships in Twentieth- and Twenty-first-century Sri Lanka”

Application 2: “A Colored Man’s Constitution and the Act of Writing”

Application 3: “Moliere and the French Revolution”



On to the applications. You have three real applications—with names removed. Our panelists have read them and come up with preliminary grades.



The mock panel gives you an idea of how our panelists consider applications. As I said earlier, our goal is to find sympathetic readers for all applications—a bit harder here today because of our diverse panel and set of applications. Based on this panel, and my experience with other panels, here are some hints for writing a strong application for a NEH grant—and most likely for other agencies and foundations as well. Much of what I'll say is for our fellowships and stipends programs, but true for others as well, too. Note that there is a handout with a lot of this information.

## Prepare

- Think of this as a multi-year process
- Study the guidelines
- Look at samples
- Talk to program officers.



As your faculty development or grant office people will tell you, you should think of grant-seeking as a multi-year process. Think about your planned research in the longer trajectory of your career. Anticipate a research leave or a sabbatical several years ahead of time. The grant process is lengthy and you may not get a grant the first time you apply, so you should apply early and often. Here are a variety of things to lay a good foundation for a successful grant application.

Look at the guidelines. As I said, they are long and somewhat bureaucratic, but they can be really useful. They will tell you what is eligible and what is not, and what an application should contain. Most importantly, they will tell you the criteria that evaluators will look for when reviewing applications. They vary a bit from program to program, so make sure you are using the



ones for the program to which you're applying. They might also change slightly year to year.

The web site also contains samples of previously successful applications. Don't use them as a model, but as an example of how someone else made a case for their project. They can help you think about structure and form.

Talk to program officers. That's what we're there for. Ask questions, discuss ideas, etc. We can't read drafts for the fellowship or stipends program (too many), but we do for the others.

## Make your case

- Start with the criteria.
- Focus on significance.
- Put the project in a larger context.
- Intrigue the panelists.
- Make it sounds interesting.
- Dissertations: What's new?
- Make work plan explicit, and make clear it's doable.



The application is a tricky document. It is different genre from a journal article or a book proposal. We were never taught how to write them in graduate school. Think of it as a rhetorical enterprise, making a case for your project.

Start with the evaluation criteria. The reviewers will use those to assess your application. You might even explicitly address them in your narrative—"The project is significant in this way" or "I will disseminate the project in that way."

For almost all NEH grant programs the most important criterion is significance. Tell the evaluators why the project is important and how it will change the field. You might start by thinking about the target audience for the book. Who should read it? Scholars? In what field? How will it change the way they

understand the topic or the way they do their own research?

As part of making a case for your project's significance, put it in a larger context. Explain how your work fits in with other work in the field that has addressed the same subject. It shouldn't be a full literature review, but show evaluators that you know about the other work done on your topic. Emphasize what is unique about your project and how it will enhance scholarship in the field. Less well known individuals, movements, or subjects, will need more effort on your part to explain their importance.

Our panelists often read 40 applications. They will give your application more attention if you intrigue them. Make them want the answers to the questions you are asking. Help them feel your passion for the topic. Make them feel that this will be an astonishing project. On the other hand, don't oversell it. Panelists will not be convinced by "This project will transform all scholarship in the humanities." The most intriguing projects pose important questions, use unique research materials, and have a fresh, interesting approach to their subjects.

If you are revising your dissertation, tell us what is new. We will not support small-scale revisions, but we will support projects that significantly expand on a dissertation or take the previous project in a new direction.

Be clear about what you're going to do during the grant period—it's what we call a work plan. "I'm going to spend six months working in libraries" won't cut it. Better is, "I'm going to spend

the second month of my fellowship working in the Mencken papers at the Baltimore public library; I have been in contact with the librarians there and know what it's in the collection."

Panelists are not convinced by fishing expeditions. The comments most often found on the evaluations of applications not recommended for funding are "unfocused" or "vague." Also, be realistic about what you're going to do in the grant period.

Evaluators—who are fellow scholars—can be skeptical when an applicant promises to write a whole monograph in a year.

## Think About Your Audience

- For the application: Generalists and specialists
- Don't make it hard on them—make clear what you're doing, limit the jargon.
- Explicitly address the criteria
- Balance abstraction and precision
- Show them you know what you're doing
- Anticipate and answer possible concerns



Think carefully about your audience. Who is the audience for the application? It is panelists, who are faculty like you, NEH staff members, and members of the National Council on the Humanities. All these folks have some background in the humanities, but in a variety of fields. Your application must inform them effectively about your project, no matter how far away it is from their own interests. You may be working in art history, but on the Council we have philosophers and political scientists as well as art historians. They need to be able to understand clearly what you want to do, why it is important, and that you know what you're doing. Your project can target specialists, but generalists need to be able to understand why the project would be significant to those specialists.

Make it easy on your readers. As I said, our panelists often have

forty applications to read, which can be daunting. They will like you and your application more if you make it easy on them. Make it clear what you're doing. You might even follow the outline suggested in the guidelines. Don't hide your topic or your thesis. Avoid allusions that would be obvious only to specialists in the field. Limit jargon, which often puts off our panelists.

If possible, explicitly address the criteria. They are key—we ask our panelists to consider them and only them when reading an application. It might feel clunky, but say, “This project is significant because” or “I will disseminate this research in this way.” That will wave a flag that evaluators will find helpful.

Balance abstraction and precision. While making broad claims for your project's significance, provide an example or two to show how your argument will work, perhaps drawing on the data that you have already gathered. If you are using some theory, explain what it means and why you're using it. If you're using case studies, explain why you're using these particular cases. This is a way to make your application not only much more understandable but also more credible and more interesting to your readers.

Show the evaluators that you know what you're doing. Show them that you know your topic, the other literature on the topic, and your sources. Show them that you know what needs to be done to bring the project to a successful conclusion.

Finally, and this is hard, but anticipate the concerns that a

panelist might raise, and answer them. Panelists may ask, why is this question important? Why this case study and not another? Can this scholar really do the planned work in the scheduled time? Answer those questions before they ask them. If you've been working on a project for a while you know the potential pitfalls. Anticipate panelists by raising those concerns and addressing them yourself.



**Attend to Details**

- Draft early and get comments.
- Check your bibliography.
- Proofread!
- Discuss your application with your letter writers.
- Reapply and ask for comments.

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Finally, the NEH is a bureaucracy, and bureaucracies pay attention to details. Your application will be stronger if you pay attention to details too.

Draft your application early—don't wait until the last minute—that may be apparent in the quality of your application. Get comments from colleagues or mentors, especially those who don't know the details of your subfield. The more non-specialist eyes you can get on your draft the better. Program officers at the NEH will read drafts for all programs except fellowships and summer stipends (because of large numbers). Get it to us at least six weeks ahead of time.

Make sure that your bibliography is up to date. Panelists often look at bibliographies to make sure that an applicant knows the



current literature on their topic.

Proofread! You don't want your wonderful ideas to be overwhelmed by silly spelling errors. And make sure that you are sending us an application designed for the NEH—don't send us an application that is written for some other funder. That happens.

Talk with your letter writers. The more they know about the project, the better they can be as advocates for your work. Ask them to focus their letters on the project and its significance, rather than on you. If your project spans disciplines, literature and art for example, you need letters from scholars in both fields. Don't ask friends or colleagues who are likely to write fulsome letters commenting on your outstanding service to the community or on the superb quality of your gourmet cooking rather than the substance of your proposal. Again, remember the criteria. We will often have panelists say that a letter explains a project better than the application, and that's not a good thing. You can prevent that by having your references read and comment on your application before you submit it. And our online system allows you to check to make sure that your references have submitted their letters. It is on you to make sure that they have done so.

Reapply if you get turned down. Remember the level of competition. We get a lot of applications, and cannot fund as many as we'd like. We could only fund 7% of our fellowship applications last year. So don't be discouraged if you get turned down. If you do get turned down, reapply. (That's why you should

think of it as a multiyear process.) Ask for the panelists' comments and—more importantly—pay attention to them. Our experience is that resubmissions are more likely to be successful the second time around, because the applicants have clarified and strengthened their application.

## Questions?

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Finally, let me repeat something I said at the beginning. NEH program officers are fellow scholars, and they want to help support your work. That's why we do what we do. Please contact us with questions. If we don't know the answer, we'll find someone who does.