Writing Research Statements
for Graduate Student
Fellowship and Grant Proposals

Workshop Writing Kit

by

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and
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PURPOSE OF THIS KIT

The Hume Center’s Workshop Writing Kit is meant to accompany Hume’s workshop for graduate students, “Research Statements for Fellowships and Grant Proposals.” This workshop is intended to help Stanford graduate students, particularly doctoral students, write effective statements describing their research when applying for Fellowships and Grants, either to external organizations or within the University, to support their research or doctoral studies. This kit provides worksheets for activities conducted during the workshop. It also offers essential take-away information that guides you through the general elements of research statements and encourages the practice of strategic writing by focusing on the process before, during, and after writing the statement. The kit provides concrete advice on answering narrative questions, writing abstracts, and revising while also offering worksheets to help you tailor our general advice to your specific proposal. We acknowledge the support of the Office of the Vice Provost for Graduate Education in developing the workshop and the kit.
ART OF THE RESEARCH STATEMENT

The take-away lesson for this workshop (and the objective of this workshop writing kit) is to help you understand that it is not enough to describe your research, or even to describe it well. You need to describe your research project with the intention of persuading your readers. Research statements for fellowship and grant applications are read by selection committee members who must select your application over other equally meritorious applications. For this reason, we emphasize paying close attention to audience and context, and using persuasive strategies in your writing. By being aware of the context of your “conversation” with funders and the manner in which you present yourself in writing, you will make a more compelling case for the value, quality, and feasibility of your research project.

Statement Basics: Research statements and project descriptions for fellowships, scholarships, and grants can be formal and long with multiple sections. They can also be as short as 100 words. In addition to length, you can also think about research statements in terms of the type of funding you are seeking: funding for doctoral studies or funding for dissertation projects. There are also internal funding sources (funds specifically for Stanford graduates) and external funding sources.

Research statements for all these types of fellowships and grant applications share the same basic purpose: they propose an idea for a project to a funding source. However, as we noted at the start, it is not enough that you think you have a good idea: you must make a persuasive argument for why funders should award you or your project. In other words, you must know your audience and speak to their needs and interests.

Write to your audience: Grant and fellowship programs usually rely on faculty members or those with academic backgrounds as reviewers, but it is best to assume that these readers are not specialists in your field. Consequently, you should avoid using the jargon of your field whenever possible. Jargon is disciplinary shorthand—packing a lot of meaning into one word or phrase. Jargon could be technical terms, acronyms, or disciplinary phrases (e.g. “discursive interactions,” “the Global North,” “bean-bag genetics”) that are understood by members of your field but not by non-specialists. Imagine that you are in conversation with an academic, non-specialist reader, who need you to concisely define or clarify some field-related concepts or terms. Show your consideration for readers by anticipating questions and explaining processes explicitly and plainly.

Write in context of funding mission: In addition, the proposal should describe the idea of the project with the interest of the funding source in mind. This may mean using key terms that highlight how your research idea fits the funder’s requirements or goals. Adjusting and framing
your idea in a different way and using appropriate language are critical to writing a successful proposal narrative.

**Write with confidence and purpose:** One key characteristic that selection committees seek in applicants is the writer’s ability to communicate expertise, knowledge, and competence through explicit, purposeful writing. In reading the project description, reviewers should feel that your project is feasible, well planned, and worth doing. Moreover, reviewers should feel that you (and possibly other investigators) are well qualified to execute the project within the frame of time and budget.
BEFORE WRITING
Six tips before you start

1. **Carefully read the guidelines** for details about information you need to supply and the structure of the proposal (length, content, formatting). Some, like a National Science Foundation (NSF) proposal, are very specific and rigid—deviations from format need to be authorized in advance by NSF; they provide directions for how to get written approval for this.

2. **Make a list of the formatting specifications and content components of a complete application so that none are overlooked.** (Refer to the worksheet on page 9.)

3. **Look at samples whenever possible.** Reviewing successful applications can be a really helpful way to understand how to convey your ideas clearly, how much space to spend on each section, and how to avoid common problems. You can look in several places for successful applications:
   - Talk with your department—many departments keep a folder of samples.
   - Ask graduate student colleagues who have received grants or fellowships.
   - Ask your faculty advisor—he or she may have some samples or may be able to direct you to other faculty members or graduate students who have received grants or fellowships.
   - Ask the funding organization—they may keep samples.
   - Review the online sources listed at the end of this kit as well as other resources on grant writing that your department might have.

4. **Create a writing schedule or timeline.** Give yourself plenty of time to revise your application. A schedule will not only help you set up deadlines but also prevent you from being overcommitted. Writing schedules should allow extra time for unforeseen complications or other commitments. (See the scheduling worksheet on pages 7-8.)

5. **Find or create a Writing Group** that will give you emotional and writing support as you work on the application. Even if fellow students are applying for the same funding, try not to see them as competitors. If you can use each other as resources, you will all write better applications. You are also developing habits of colleagueship, and networks of advisors, that you can call on throughout your career. The Hume Center has created a Dissertation Writing
Group Starter Kit, which could be used to start any Writing Group: http://vpge.stanford.edu/docs/DWG_starter_kit.pdf.

6. **Find several readers for your statement.** Having a second, third, or fourth pair of eyes to look at your statement will help you gain perspective of your own language, persuasiveness, tone, and conciseness. Your readers could be both specialists and non-specialists—so that you can ask about content accuracy as well as structure, flow of argument, and language. The Hume Writing Center should be one of your stops to receive feedback from trained, non-specialist academic readers. You might want to see more than one Hume Center tutor to get different feedback. In addition, you might want to ask colleagues in your area, friends, and, lastly, your advisor. (Please refer to the “Feedback” section of this kit for recommendations for who to approach, how to ask for feedback, and how to take feedback.)
BEFORE WRITING  
Scheduling Worksheet

One of the most important tasks you have before you write your research statement is to schedule your writing timeline. Scheduling is key to a successful application because it helps you manage your time, integrates feedback and revision as part of your application process, and takes into account time required for other obligations (such as personal appointments, conferences, classes, family, etc.) Work backwards from the application deadline, and give yourself as much time as possible to craft several drafts.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Due Date</th>
<th>Recommendation</th>
<th>Task</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Identify suitable funders.</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Read the guidelines of each application carefully; prepare a schedule for each application.</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>The following tasks relate to each application you will be preparing.</td>
<td>Discuss applications with your faculty advisor; confirm level of support he or she will offer for your writing.</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Develop focus questions to help guide your writing.</td>
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</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Start drafting/ brainstorming application sections.</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Read samples from other successful applications.</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Write a complete draft application.</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Share application with an inside reader: one or two peers, a writing center tutor, or colleague.</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Revise application.</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Share application with an outside reader: a writing center tutor or colleague in another field.</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Revise application.</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Four weeks before application deadline</td>
<td>Make sure you have all required accompanying material (recommendation letters, transcripts, curriculum vitae, etc.).</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>At least two weeks before you wish to submit the application</td>
<td>Show application to faculty advisor.</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>mail application</td>
<td>Revise application.</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>---------------------------</td>
<td>------------------------------------------</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>At least one week before you wish to submit application</td>
<td>Show final application to reader (peer, writing center tutor) for final editing.</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>One day before deadline (one week, if it has to be mailed)</td>
<td>Submit application.</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
BEFORE WRITING
Format and Section Specifications

One of the common reasons proposals are rejected is because writers ignored directions for proposal format and section specifications. Since this is a requirement that everyone can meet, be meticulous and careful about meeting all specifications.

WORKSHEET: IDENTIFY FORMAT SPECIFICATIONS

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>PAGE FORMAT (such as margins)</th>
<th></th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>FONT SIZE, TYPE</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>COVER SHEET</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>PAGINATION</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>OTHER SPECIAL REQUIREMENTS</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

WORKSHEET: IDENTIFY SECTION SPECIFICATIONS (LONG PROPOSALS)

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Sections:</th>
<th>Specifications:</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Abstract</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Introduction (statement of problem, purpose of research goals, significance of research)</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Literature Review</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Project Narrative (methods, procedures, objectives, outcomes or deliverables, evaluation, dissemination)</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Personnel</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Budget</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
BEFORE WRITING

Structuring a Research Statement

“A good proposal is always readable, well-organized, grammatically correct, and understandable.”—National Science Foundation A Guide for Proposal Writing

Before writing a research statement, you should consider the following basic structure that will help you present a coherent argument following academic writing expectations.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Introduction</th>
<th>1. Hook</th>
<th>Makes the research topic relevant to the audience.</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>2. Context</td>
<td>Introduces the study or project in context of current research and theory, processes, or large, compelling problems (e.g., poverty, climate change, genocide, educational disparities).</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>3. Reason for Writing or Conducting Research (Thesis)</td>
<td>Establishes the main argument/thesis/claim; or provides an argument for why the research is needed.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Main Argument</td>
<td>4. Research Description and methodology</td>
<td>Describes method of analysis, experiment process, and/or research approach and types of evidence</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>[5. Qualifications and/or Potential Results]</td>
<td>In scientific proposals: Lists others who are involved in the research. Provides potential results of the project.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Conclusion</td>
<td>6. Significance and/or Implications</td>
<td>Summarizes the project’s relevance and potential impact of the project in the field/discipline or to the community, etc.</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Argument sections and the “argumentative moves”: Generally, most advice on writing research statements recommend a structure similar to the one we provide here—but with different names for these sections. The structure, though, should be familiar to most writers. There are three major parts: introduction, argument, and conclusion. Here we divided the introduction into three distinctive argumentative moves (introduction to the problem; context of current research in the field; reason for writing or conducting research). The argument section is also divided into two major argumentative moves: research description and qualifications (for scientific proposals). Finally, the statement ends with a concluding section that focuses on significance or implications of research. There is usually some flexibility within
argument sections. The hook and context, for instance, do not necessarily have to appear in this order, but the main argument sections usually follow this sequence.

Knowing the argumentative sections and the “movement” of the arguments in each section is helpful if you plan to apply for different fellowships which may require statements of varying lengths. For example, there are three common research statement lengths: abstract (5 sentences), 200 word-statement (about 2 paragraphs), and the 2-page statement. With the understanding of the basic structure of argument, you can then ask yourself: how long is the introduction? Where should I place my thesis? Where and how would I introduce significance/relevance of my project? How much detail of methodology should I include?

**ABSTRACT** (approx 4-5 sentences)

Effective abstract descriptions help non-specialists understand why you are conducting research on your particular topic, while clearly explaining the research and its significance. An example is the following Bio-X Doctoral Fellowship abstract:

“Plants are dependent on their ability to sense and respond to their surrounding environment. In such processes, stomata play a crucial role by controlling the flux of gases between plants atmosphere. Stomatal development and function have been independently described at a molecular and physiological level, but there remains a void in explaining fundamental connections between those paradigms, especially the environmental inputs that direct both. The goal of the Bergmann lab is to elucidate these multi-scale relationships controlling stomata to improve our understanding of plant systems biology and plant-environment interactions.”

In the first two sentences, the abstract introduces the topic and context in a way that a non-specialist can comprehend (plants’ sensory ability and the stomata). This is followed by the reason for the research (the “void” in understanding the connections between development and function of stomata). The final sentence combines the research description and implication of the study: it explains the “goal” of the lab and how the research will contribute to a larger “understanding of plant systems biology.” In this case, details of methodology are left out, yet the abstract remains compelling to the non-specialist reader. There are many more examples of winning Bio-X abstracts. To see them, visit [http://biox.stanford.edu/grant/fellowships.html](http://biox.stanford.edu/grant/fellowships.html)
The structures we’ve provided for the abstract, 200-word statement, and 2-page statement are rough guidelines to help you think about how you want to organize your statements. There is no rule or statement structure that fits all fellowship applications. When writing your statement, keep in mind that your statement reflects how well you know the fellowship mission/objections, how well organized and focused you are, and how you can relate the significance of your work. This requires knowing your research but also knowing the writing process in order to make your message clear, concise, and as persuasive as possible.
WHILE WRITING
Focus Questions for Research Statements

When you write your research statement for several applications, you may find that directions for writing the research statement will vary in requirements and amount of information. Some will give you specific “prompt” questions; others will merely ask you to describe the research project. As we have mentioned throughout the workshop and this kit, a successful research statement does not merely describe the research. Your statement aims to convince funders to select your application. Funders are persuaded, in part, by how well you answer focus questions in your statement.

Focus questions are questions that you infer and then answer in your statement to help you prioritize information and keep focus. Most funders want to understand why the project is significant (quality, currency, significance in field), whether it is feasible, and how you are a uniquely qualified person to do it. Regardless to whether or not these questions are made explicit to the applicant, the most successful proposals provide clear answers to focus questions of objectives, significance, and intellectual qualifications. Some basic focus questions are:

- why should your project should be chosen over other worthy research projects? (how is the topic interesting, important, or novel?)
- how does your research match the mission of a particular the fellowship or grant award?
- how are you prepared to successfully complete the project or doctoral studies?

Why should you write down focus questions? Even if you know the focus questions and the answers you want to provide, it is important that you write them down as part of your “pre-writing” and brainstorming exercise. The pre-writing helps you:

- Articulate your writing objective clearly (for the entire research statement or proposal sections).
- Give direction and focus to your research statement.
- Remind yourself of your writing objectives and the big picture throughout the writing process.

The last reason, in particular, is important as it not only defines your purpose before you write, but will keep you on track as you write, and help you to correct yourself, if you find yourself meandering, after your initial draft.

Suggestions: Focus questions can help you to reflect on your own writing habits and think of strategies that might best help you remember the parts of the application. For instance, if you
keep a daily “to do” writing log and check list, you might integrate a review of focus questions into your daily or weekly writing schedule. You can use Post-It notes around your monitor. You can write it on a white board or chalkboard if you work in a room with one.

**Doctoral Studies vs. Doctoral Projects:** The focus questions may need adjustment based on the objective of the application. For instance, there are two basic types of funding for Stanford graduate students: funding for doctoral studies (which may cover a year or more of tuition and stipend and are awarded based on your promise as a researcher and scholar) and funding for your dissertation or a specific research project. To better understand how these two different types might impact focus questions, let’s look at one example of a Stanford award from each type. The table below lists some differences between funding for doctoral studies and funding for research or doctoral projects. In what ways are these two fellowships different and similar?

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Funding for doctoral studies (Humanities Dissertation Fellowships) <a href="http://shc.stanford.edu/fellowships/stanford-students/graduate">http://shc.stanford.edu/fellowships/stanford-students/graduate</a></th>
<th>Funding for doctoral project/research (VPGE Diversity Dissertation Research Opportunity Fund) <a href="http://vpge.stanford.edu/programs/ddro.html">http://vpge.stanford.edu/programs/ddro.html</a></th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Fellowship Objective</td>
<td>AWARD STUDENT WITH ACADEMIC DISTINCTION AND PROMISE. The Geballe Dissertation Prize Fellowship aims to award students with “accomplished work” and great intellectual potential in humanities research.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Funding amount</td>
<td>Stipend for 2008-9 was $24,000 plus TGR tuition fees. Bonus: Winners receive an office at the Humanities Center, take part in the Center’s programs, and receive an additional $2000 in research funding.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Research statement/writing requirement</td>
<td>1. <strong>A statement of significance.</strong> Please provide a concise statement on the significance of your research topic (100-word maximum). 2. <strong>A brief description of a research project</strong> (no more than 1,000 words).</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Notes</td>
<td></td>
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</tbody>
</table>
### WHILE WRITING

Focus questions exercise

1. Now that you’ve read the descriptions of two fellowship examples, **identify** the type of focus question next to the question: objectives (O), significance (S), or qualifications (Q).

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Sample focus questions</th>
<th>Doctoral studies</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>How does your research support your intellectual development as a scholar/researcher?</td>
<td>Humanities Dissertation Fellowship</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>How will you conduct your research?</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>What is your research about?</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Why is there a need for your research?</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Why should we care about the research?</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>How will your research contribute new knowledge to the discipline or field?</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>How have others discussed or approached the research topic?</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>How are you ready to conduct the research and successfully complete it?</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

2. **Identify three focus questions** that are most relevant for doctoral studies (Humanities Dissertation Fellowship’s description of a “research project”) and/or doctoral projects (VPGE DDRO’s “project summary”). Some may be used to support both.

3. How would you **prioritize** them for the Humanities Fellowship? For the DDRO?
WHILE WRITING
Focus Questions Worksheet

This worksheet aims to help you write focus questions for shorter research statements (up to 2 pages) by reviewing the application’s “objective” and the description of the research statement or writing requirements. For longer 15-page research statements, such as NSF proposals, you would break down the focus questions based on argument sections (please refer to the sample on page 19).

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Name of Fellowship and Objective</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td></td>
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</tbody>
</table>

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Research statement/writing requirement</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Focus Questions</th>
<th>Notes (how will you answer these questions?)</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
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</tbody>
</table>
WHILE WRITING
Sample Focus Questions for Short and Formal Statements

Sample focus questions for short research statements (SIGF). It is not uncommon for fellowship applications, particularly internal ones such as the Stanford Interdisciplinary Graduate Fellowship (SIGF), to require concise research statements that are 100 words or 200 words long. The SIGF funds doctoral studies and it provides three years of tuition and a stipend to “promising graduate students while they pursue interdisciplinary research projects” in three categories: Environment, Energy & Sustainability; Bio-X Biomedical Research and Biosciences; and General submission for other interdisciplinary research. Its research statement is limited to 2 pages in “readable font size” and one-inch margins.

In most other fellowship applications, you will be asked to describe your research (with a specific word count limit) without the guidance of focus questions. You will need to write down your own questions. However, in this case, applicants for the SIGF are provided focus questions (listed below) and are asked to consider answering some of them:

• What is your broader scholarly and research agenda?
• What makes it interdisciplinary?
• What questions are the foci of your research project?
• What is the research plan?
• What is your anticipated contribution and why does it matter?
• As you look ahead to your career trajectory, how will your work be different, important, and innovative?

Once you have your focus questions listed, you might prioritize them through the following steps:

1. Think strategically: Which focus questions should you answer or expand upon? Which questions are most important to making your research relevant to the selection committee? Regardless to whether or not fellowship applications provide you with focus questions, you will encounter the challenge about what to cover (in what detail) and what to leave out. With SIGF’s two-page requirement, you might be able to answer all the questions, but some questions may be more critical than others because of the specific objective of the grant-providing institution and your own unique research situation.

2. Identify basic question categories to further clarify and focus your answers: These specific SIGF questions could be broken down to three basic categories that you see the objectives of these questions—to identify research significance (in the field or discipline), research
objectives, and academic qualifications and potential (your ability to conduct and finish the research; impact on your career).

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>SIGF Question</th>
<th>Question category</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>What is your broader scholarly and research agenda?</td>
<td>Significance/Qualifications</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>What makes it interdisciplinary?</td>
<td>Objectives</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>What questions focus your research project?</td>
<td>Objectives</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>What is the research plan?</td>
<td>Objectives</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>What is your anticipated contribution and why does it matter?</td>
<td>Significance</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>As you look ahead to your career trajectory, how will your work be different, important, and innovative?</td>
<td>Significance/Qualifications</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

By breaking it down to the broader categories, you can focus on the best questions that relay significance, objectives, and qualifications.

3. Highlight focus questions that help you address the funder’s primary mission. Since the SIGF is “interdisciplinary” you will need to answer the question “What makes it interdisciplinary?” However, depending on your subject, you might have more flexibility in selecting other questions to answer. Further research on the fellowship should help you make your decision. At the VPGE website, SIGF describes its ideal fellowship recipient in the following way: “Students should have demonstrated academic excellence and evidence of the potential for innovative research in an interdisciplinary area. Ability to link intellectual innovation with solving societal problems, an interest in communicating research to a broader audience, and a capacity for future leadership will also be considered as positive factors.” SIGF’s Selection Committee is interested in sponsoring an outstanding and innovative research project with the best potential to shape academic career and contribute new knowledge across disciplines. The heavy emphasis on qualifications and significance of research suggests that you should prioritize these questions.
**Sample focus questions for formal statements (NSF).** Formal statements (or proposals) such as those required by the National Institute of Health (NIH) or National Science Foundation (NSF) are longer than 15 pages and consist of many sections. For example, the following are basic questions that students might consider with each NSF proposal section.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>NSF Proposal Section</th>
<th>Questions being asked</th>
</tr>
</thead>
</table>
| **Project summary** (no more than 1 page, third person; statement of objectives, methods, significance; audience is scientifically literate lay reader) | What are you going to do?  
Why does it need to be done?  
How are you going to do it? |
| “not an abstract of the proposal but self-contained description of the activity that would result if the proposal is funded by NSF” -- NSF Guidelines | |
| **Project description and results** (no more than 15 pages, including all visuals)  
Objectives, significance; longer-term goals; present state of knowledge in the field; outline of general plan of work; plans for documenting, sharing of data. | Expanding upon . . .  
What are you going to do?  
Why does it need to be done?  
How are you going to do it?  
Plus . . .  
What have others done?  
What plans do you have to preserve, document, share data (publication)? |
| **Bibliography** (no page limit)  
Where have you gone for other information or literature on the subject? | |
| **Budget** (salaries and wages, equipment, travel, indirect costs, etc.)  
How much support do you need? | |
| **Biographic Sketch** (qualifications of the individuals involved in the project)  
Why should we think you can do it? | |
| **Current and Pending Support**  
(listing of funding, current and pending; listing of all other projects requiring time from the Principal Investigator and other senior personnel)  
What other support might you have? Do you have other possible sponsors? Will you be able to finish the project in time? | |
| **Special Information and Supplementary Documentation**  
This section has very specific guidelines if it is to be included, such as work in foreign countries or research involving field experiments with genetically engineered organisms.  
Project Description expansion. | |
WHILE WRITING

Abstract

Purpose and Types

**Purpose of the Abstract:** Abstracts are used widely in academic work. You will be asked to write abstracts when you submit articles to journals, papers for conferences, Ph.D. dissertation projects, and book proposals. In all these cases, abstracts provide a self-contained, general explanation of what the project is about, not a detailed explanation of it. Each sentence should say something concrete, specific, and worth knowing. Often the abstract is entered into computerized retrieval sources and databases as the project description, so it is worth taking time to write it well.

In addition to being read for relevance, reliability, and quality, the abstract for a grant proposal or research fellowship helps the reviewer decide whether the project fits the funding priorities of the organization and who to use as a technical reviewer. Consequently, how you “package” your abstract argument and clearly relate the research’s significance for your funding audience is crucial.

In general, abstracts should not exceed 200 words, although the length requirement may vary. You should refer to the application guidelines for abstract length. For example, allowing 200 words, with roughly 20 words per sentence, the abstract will have approximately 10 sentences. Abstracts may be divided into multiple paragraphs if the topic allows.

Most abstracts usually follow the same general structure such as the one we provided in the section on “Structure of a Research Statement.” It contains:

1. Hook and/or Problem: What problem does the project attempt to solve? What is the main argument/thesis/claim?
2. Context and/or Reason for Writing: Introduction of the study or project in context of existing research.
3. Methodology: Description of methods of analysis, experiment process, and/or research approach and types of evidence.
4. Potential (or actual) results of the project (often in scientific projects).
5. Significance and/or Implication of study: Summary of your project’s relevance and potential impact of the project in the field.
Abstract Tips

• **Relate key points:** The abstract should give the reader a strong sense of the overall scope of the project and what is most important about it. While your abstract should be comprehensive, you cannot talk about all aspects of your project and will need to make decisions about what to include and what to leave out.

• **Be concise:** In an effort to say as much as possible in such a short number of words, you may want to write long, complex, and convoluted sentences thinking that this is the best way to say everything you need to say. However, this is a mistake. Instead, aim for clear and concise sentences, to the point, with active verbs and voice.

• **Open with hook and then follow with the thesis:** While a standard academic thesis argument is often the first sentence of an abstract, the research statement “abstract” is more like a pitch—you need to connect the readers (funders) with the topic first and help them understand its relevance or context.

• **Do not cite or define terms:** Do not include bibliographic citations or define terms in the abstract.

• **Do not refer extensively to other sources.** Spend more of the abstract describing your own project.

• **Write in present or past tense:** In general, you should write in present or past tense, not in future tense.

• **Read other abstracts:** Spend time reading the abstracts of successful applications for the specific grant or fellowship to which you are applying and, if possible, read abstracts outside your field—if you can understand the project and why it is important without having a strong technical background to the subject, you will know this is a well written abstract.

• **Get second and third opinions:** Ask as many friends and colleagues, inside and outside your field, to read your abstract. Ask them to explain to you in their own words the goals of your project and its significance. This will help you understand if you are being clear and emphasizing the most important aspects of your project.
## Abstract Worksheet

### Abstract Preparation Worksheet

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<td>Length Requirement</td>
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<td>Content and Format Requirements</td>
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### Brainstorm

<table>
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<th>List the key goals and expected findings of your research</th>
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Now highlight the points that are secondary and will NOT go into the abstract

### Scope—write one sentence for each of the following questions

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>What is the main goal of your project?</th>
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<tr>
<td>What is the key expected research result of your project?</td>
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<tr>
<td>Why is your research significant?</td>
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Revision Checklist

*Proofread and edit for the following elements*

- Abstract is focused on results (“This project seeks to prove...”) not methodology (“In this project, we will apply the theory of X to Y”).
- Each sentence says something different.
- Each sentence says something important to the abstract—there are no unnecessary sentences or phrases.
- Sentences are concise and straightforward in structure and wording.
- As much as possible, active voice is used.
- Verbs are active.
- No jargon (such as “resource utilization,” “structuralist conceptualization,” “heuristic”).
- All acronyms are written out in full when first used.
- Replace technical language (for example, “parametrize,” “impact” [as verb], “cost out”) with clear, simple substitutes that convey the same message with more economy and precision.
- Abstract is written in past or present tense.
- No grammatical or typographical errors.
- Hook relates the topic directly to the research.
AFTER WRITING

Feedback
(Approaching, Asking and Taking)

Feedback is a way for writers to learn how well their writing effectively communicates ideas, but feedback itself is a communicative art. When the request for feedback is vaguely worded, people seeking feedback may not get the specific answers they need. Without effective listening skills, people who receive feedback may not experience the benefits of the process.

Whom to Approach

While your faculty advisor should know about the applications you are preparing, you should carefully consider when you ask him or her to read a draft. If you generally work closely together or are in a program that focuses heavily on writing (such as English or History), your advisor might be willing to work with you on the wording of your application. In other programs, your faculty advisor will not want to read and comment on the application until it is close to being done. Talk with your advisor early in the process to set up the parameters of the support he or she can give you—this would also include asking your advisor for a letter of recommendation as early as possible. Even if your advisor offers to read several drafts, do ensure the drafts you send are as polished and complete as possible.

Assuming your faculty advisor will read one draft toward the end of the process, you might wish to follow this order when seeking feedback. Remember, the feedback and revision process will take several weeks, so allow time.

1. start by talking through your ideas with a colleague in your program (perhaps someone who is also working on an application).

2. show your first draft to one or two colleagues inside your program and get feedback on the strength of your proposal, especially the scope, methods, feasibility etc.

3. after revising, share a new draft with a one or two colleagues outside your program, such as a Hume Center tutor and someone in a graduate program in another field. This time, get feedback on clarity, significance, and strength of proposal to a non-specialist audience. These readers can be alert for jargon, those discipline specific terms that other readers might not understand.

4. after revising again, share your polished and almost completed draft with your faculty advisor.
5. before submitting your proposal, show it to one or two more people for last-minute changes and clarification.

Asking for Feedback

When submitting writing ahead of time, notify your readers in advance what they ought to look for before they read your research statement. If you circulate the text via email, send the document with a cover letter or a note in the text of the email. The feedback request would include the following:

• **SUMMARY AND GOAL:** Provide a brief summary of your argument (one sentence) and what you would like to accomplish in this piece or in this stage of writing.

• **BIGGEST WEAKNESS:** Explain what you think is the biggest weakness in your research statement.

• **PRIORITIZED FEEDBACK LIST:** Help your readers prioritize their response by providing a short list of the kind of feedback that would be most helpful at this stage. The most effective requests for feedback are explicit about “macro” writing issues involving ideas, structure, sequence, transitions/flow) or “micro” writing issues such as grammar, syntax, diction, appropriate field language) that the writer wants to improve on. (See pages 28-30 for more information about macro and micro revisions.)
  
  ➢ Identify specific areas that you’d like them to target (Is the hook compelling? Is there jargon?) and how they should focus on it (macro or micro).
  
  ➢ Identify what you don’t want your readers to focus on. It is sometimes helpful to tell your readers that you are aware of some writing issues (such as citation styles) but that you would address later in the writing stage.

• **REALISTIC REQUESTS:** Be realistic in your request: do not ask your readers to do too much or to respond to writing problems that might not be within their professional scope. Consider different types of feedback from different readers. Ask content specialists like colleagues in your field to focus on the accuracy of your research description. Others like tutors at the Hume Center could focus on structure, diction, and writing issues related to English Language Learners (ELL). If you are a non-native speaker, you may want to get several native English speakers both in and outside your field to read through your statement.

**BEFORE MEETING WITH THE READER:** Print out your cover note and research statement if you plan to meet with the reader in person. You might review what you have written so that the reader is reminded of the kind of feedback you would like.
Taking Feedback

Now that we have reviewed whom to approach for feedback and how to ask for feedback, we should also consider how we should take or receive feedback. Some people find it difficult to receive feedback, perceiving it as negative or critical. Being so guarded, they might formulate a response even before the feedback is completed. While you will not accept or act on all feedback, you should try to be positive and open in the manner you take it if you are to maximize the feedback experience. The following are some suggestions for taking feedback effectively.

- **Listen to the entire feedback first.** If you are meeting with your reader, write down notes and questions. Listen without interruption or explanation. Try to respond or ask follow-up questions only after the reader has finished. Remember that your reader is trying to help you improve your research statement.
- **Be an active listener.** Listen carefully and try to understand the meaning of the feedback.
- **Be engaged.** If anything is unclear, restate your understanding of what you thought the speaker said.
- **Be respectful.** Try not to be too defensive.
- **Keep a feedback log.** Create a writing log to keep track of the kinds of feedback you get in your writing. Do readers often suggest changes in organization? Do people frequently tell you that they don’t understand words that you use? Do readers praise your clarity?
  - Identify patterns in the feedback you receive so that you can locate problems and strengths in your writing.
  - Address writing problems with a Writing Group, or by visiting the Hume Center.
AFTER WRITING
Revision Strategy

As you receive feedback, you will of course be revising your statement. Before you read further about revision, please answer the following two questions.

1. **What is revision to you?** (What are all the things you do when you “revise”?)

2. **How do you revise?** (What is your process of revising?)
AFTER WRITING
Macro-Revision and Micro-Revision

Revision is so crucial to the writing process that some believe it is when real writing starts. Revision isn’t just about correcting grammatical errors, improving flow and clarity, and constructing a readable and consistent argument. While these objectives are important, the revision stage of the writing process (after writing the first draft) allows you reflect on your statement’s quality of persuasion: that is, it allows you to reflect on your writing in light of your fellowship or grant-award institution and to write more strategically to appeal to its mission and priorities. It is the part of the process when the ideas become sharpened and more fully formed, meaning clarified, and arguments better supported or rearranged to be more persuasive.

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TALK IT OUT FIRST. After writing the first draft, we recommend that writers find a non-specialist audience (partner, spouse, friend) and “talk” through the statement in their own words. Have the listener note what they don’t understand, what is appealing, and what needs more explanation. This process may help writers clarify the argument, purpose, and significance and the spoken wording and language could be used in the revised statement.

STRATEGIZE REVISION PLAN. After talking through the statement, writers can more efficiently and effectively revise their work after receiving written and oral feedback if they break down their revision plan into two types, macro-revision and micro-revision.

• Sort your feedback answers in two “macro-revision” and “micro-revision” to-do lists
• Apply the macro-revision suggestions first. Then the micro-revision suggestions.
• Re-read again (a day or so later?), focusing on macro-revision issues. Then micro-revision issues.

FOCUS ON MACRO-REVISION. The macro-revision process examines the presentation of the “big picture” and addresses global writing issues. When targeting your statement for macro-revision, you will bring ideas into sharp focus by reviewing its organization, reassessing evidence, and sharpening your ideas. Macro-revisions include the following activities:

1. Re-arranging of your writing: moving sections or sentences around to present the most effective case, highlight an argument better, and improve the flow and coherence of argument.
2. “Trimming the fat”: eliminating sections that don’t fit; excluding extraneous or tangential arguments that can distract the reader.
3. **Making main points consistent and evident:** reviewing how the reader is reminded of the thesis or central idea throughout the piece; making sure that evidence and data are connected to the central idea; providing clear transitions between ideas (in paragraphs and between paragraphs).

4. **Bringing in new examples and including more explanations:** identifying “gaps” in argument to bridge the ideas better or illustrate a point better.

5. **Editing for coherent and consistent format:** re-examine the overall pattern of organization/structure to present a consistent format, including headings, bullets, numbers, formatting (underlining, indentations, spacing).

**FOCUS ON MICRO-REVISION.** The micro-revision process reviews the “little things” which matter a lot in writing: the language choice, syntax, and grammar. They direct the reader through your ideas, and shape what readers think of you as a writer, scholar, but most importantly as an applicant. The objectives of micro-revision in applications are 1) clarity, to provide papers that could be read and understood in one reading; and 2) compelling argument.

Working on micro-revision after macro-revision is more efficient because you avoid spending too much time on wording on text that may become deleted. Micro-revisions include the following activities:

1. **“Cleaning up”:** proofread for grammatical and typographical errors (punctuation, spelling, pronoun agreement, verb agreement, tense shifts, and accuracy of numbers.) Also check for redundancy and consistency of tone or level of formality.

2. **“Sharpening” sentences or words:** find a better phrase or word to make your writing smoother, more vivid, and more expressive. This includes replacing some passive verbs with more descriptive action verbs, improving the syntax of sentences and phrasing, employing language that would be understandable to a non-specialist.

3. **“Tightening” sentences—writing less to say more:** cut out extraneous words, condense points to clarify meaning, make sentences more concise, check appropriateness of diction (technicality of words).

Make a list of personal weaknesses in micro-writing and then systematically revise your paper in light of this list.
Review your answer to #1. Sort your revision “to do” list between “Macro Revision” and “Micro Revision.”

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BIBLIOGRAPHY

*Humanities and Social Sciences*

A short and concise essay on how to write a proposal or other grant application by focusing attention on the readers’ needs. Offers useful tips for how to craft various sections of the proposal in clear and persuasive language by “making explicit” some of the “unspoken norms” and expectations of committees.

This 37-page document focuses specifically on applying for Fulbright, Marshall, Rhodes, and Truman Scholarships. It includes a sample application, a comprehensive bibliography of additional resources, and three essays from three different writers on the “art” of proposal writing, which are useful for all application writing.


This document covers all aspects of a graduate student’s tenure; Chapter 5, “Grantsmanship,” is particularly useful for application writing. This chapter separates funding opportunities into “pre-dissertation” and “dissertation” years, and includes samples. URL: http://www.gsas.harvard.edu/images/stories/pdfs/scholarly_pursuits.pdf

*Additional Sources in Humanities and Social Sciences*

The Foundation Center’s Proposal Writing Short Course URL: http://fdncenter.org/learn/shortcourse/prop1.html
This short completely online “course” walks readers through the various steps of preparing for and writing a funding application. The course is written specifically for non-profit organizations,
and thus the information is generally applicable to academic funding applications. The course is available in several languages.


Covers the proposal development process for federal government, private foundation, and corporate funding sources. Answers twenty-five basic questions frequently asked by both inexperienced and experienced grant-seekers. Also presents many examples taken from successful proposals.


Presents general guidelines for writing proposals and specific instructions for creating proposals for private sector sources and federal agencies. Actual successful proposals are given for each type.

**Science and Engineering**


Offers a succinct overview on writing an NSF grant proposal, with a particularly useful discussion on how to contact and approach the program director. The section on “pulling together the proposal” asks pertinent questions to guide your writing.


While this guide was written for grants supporting activity in undergraduate programs, its advice and suggestions for clear writing applies to graduate programs.

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