

How to Write a Successful White Paper: Tips from the ODH

Introduction

The **White Paper** is one of two forms of documentation that the NEH Office of Digital Humanities requires of Digital Humanities Advancement Grant (DHAG) and Institute for Advanced Topics in the Digital Humanities (IATDH) awardees.

Interim Performance Reports and **Final Performance Reports** are internal documents read by NEH staff. We use these reports to confirm that you are in compliance with the grant program expectations. We also use them to keep track of all of our projects and to evaluate the impact of our grant programs.

White Papers, in contrast, serve as the public record of your project after its completion. They are made available publicly through the NEH [Funded Projects Query Form](#), and sometimes hosted on project websites. White Papers are a resource for future applicants and digital humanities project designers, as well as students, researchers, and a general public interested in learning about digital humanities at the NEH.

These guidelines are designed to help you think about how to write a white paper that documents your project in a way that will continue to serve the field. They are not program requirements. Please also refer to the [Performance Reporting Requirements](#) document in the [Grants Management section](#) of the NEH website for additional guidance.

Audience

Before you start, think about who you are writing your white paper *for*. Depending on your project, the audience of your white paper may include:

- Future grant applicants interested in learning about NEH awards.
- Digital Humanities project managers looking for insight into project design.
- Digital Humanities researchers interested in learning from your project and its outcomes.
- Digital Humanities project teams seeking collaborators on a new project.
- Undergraduate or graduate students learning about the digital humanities.
- Prospective attendees of Institutes for Advanced Topics in DH
- University administrators, community members, or other project stakeholders
- Staff at funding agencies like the NEH and the IMLS

Length and Style

Your white paper should be written in a style and tone appropriate to the audiences you have identified. In general, this will mean a simpler and more conversational style than a scholarly article.

We find that short paragraphs, subheadings, and limited jargon is helpful. Sometimes, applicants like to produce stylish reports [like this one](#) written by a team at the University of Pittsburgh.

Many applicants organize the outcomes of their projects using bulleted lists, figures, tables, and diagrams. We encourage you to think carefully about how you are using data visualization to communicate outcomes. Annotating or captioning visuals may help.

When referring to other projects or research, make sure to provide attributions through citations, embedded links, or a bibliography. You may use whatever citation style you prefer.

Be sure to think about accessibility when producing your white paper. Here are some resources for learning about accessible design:

- [Adobe's guidelines to accessible PDFs.](#)
- [Microsoft's guidelines to making accessible Word documents](#)
- [The Diagram Center's guidelines for accessible design](#)

White papers are generally 5-15 pages in length, depending on the type of project. For example, a white paper from a Level I convening might be short, while a technically complex Level 3 DHAG could be extensive. IATDH white papers tend to be longer, because they often include the full curriculum, bios of participants, and results of pre-, concurrent, and post-institute evaluations. The length might also increase if you are including numerous screenshots in an appendix.

Unlike grant application, there are no requirements for the length of a white paper.

Content

What follows is an outline that we recommend you use when organizing your white paper. The guiding questions are designed to help you think about what you want to write. Because ODH projects vary so widely, we expect that most awardees will need to modify this outline to meet the specifics of their project. Not every guiding question will apply to your project.

When writing the white paper, it can help to return to your original application as you reflect on what you proposed and how your project has changed. In fact, you are welcome to include content from your grant application in your white paper, especially if you conducted preliminary research when writing your proposal. This allows you to share the work you did in your initial application with a wider audience.

1. Project Summary

Begin with a brief 1-2 paragraph introduction that summarizes your project's goals, outcomes, and primary collaborators. Include links to the project or institute website and any other key content available online.

You may wish to include a Table of Contents.

2. Project Origins and Goals

The primary purpose of this section is to introduce readers to your project, describe how it came to be, and summarize its impact on the field.

Guiding questions:

- What questions or needs motivated you to develop and seek funding for your project or institute?
- Who were the intended users/audiences for this project?
- What fields of study did your project or institute engage in?
- What past work did your project or institute build on?

3. Project Activities, Team, & Participants

The primary purpose of this section is to help readers understand how you did your project. This is particularly helpful for project managers looking for insight into project design. It's also an opportunity to give credit to project participants.

Guiding questions:

- What were the concrete activities that you did during your project or institute?
- What was the timeline for those activities and how did it differ from what you originally proposed?
- If you ran an institute, how did you recruit participants? If you ran a project, how did you build the project team and identify stakeholders?
- What social, technical, or institutional challenges did you face that impacted your ability to implement your project or institute?
- Who was involved in your project? What kinds of expertise did your project or institute require?
- What challenges did you encounter relating to project management, collaboration, or labor that impacted your ability to implement your project or institute?

4. Project Outcomes

The primary purpose of this section is to help readers understand what you *did* or *created* during the course of your project.

Guiding Questions:

- What were the final products and outcomes at the end of the award (i.e. a series of workshops, an institute curriculum, a website, a piece of software, a workflow, a scholarly article, etc.)?
- Who are the actual audiences of the project (how did that change from your application) and how did you reach them?
- What technical decisions did you make during the design of your project? For example, what platform are you hosting your project on? What code libraries or packages did you build upon and where can others find them? How did you decide on metadata standards? How did you identify a repository system for the project's digital assets?
- Did you face any challenges relating to documentation, accessibility, access, language use, copyright, or privacy?
- What personal or professional outcomes came from this project? For example, do you believe that your project helped members of your team to graduate, earn a promotion, get a job, or win additional grants?
- Where should readers look for more information about your project or institute (include URLs, future publication plans, citations, et al)?

5. Project Evaluation and Impact

The primary purpose of this section is to reflect on the achievements and challenges that your project faced.

Guiding questions:

- How did you evaluate the process and/or results of your project or institute? What were the results?
- How did you evaluate the impact of your outreach strategies and your ability to recruit participants, engage community members, or connect with your audience?
- How did this evaluation or testing change the way you proceeded with your DH institute or digital project?
- What did you learn over the course of the project or institute? What lessons would you like to share with future project directors?

6. Project Continuation and Long-Term Impact

The primary purpose of this section is to help readers think about the future of this work.

Guiding questions:

- Will you continue working on this project? Why or why not?
- What are the next steps for your project or institute?
- How do you plan to fund ongoing research?
- What new research questions does this project introduce? How would you like to see other researchers follow up on your project outcomes?
- How will you maintain relationships beyond the end of your workshop, institute, or project?

White Paper Examples

The ODH first introduced guidelines for writing white papers in 2020. These examples come from before that time, so they may not follow the guidelines described here.

DHAG Level 1

[HAA-256175-17](#) (University of Virginia) *The Development of Digital Documentary Editing Platforms*.

DHAG Level 2

[HAA-256122-17](#) (Johnson C. Smith University) *Mapping the Historic West End: The Digital History of African American Neighborhoods in Charlotte, North Carolina*.

[HAA-255990-17](#) (Cleveland State University) *Curating East Africa: A Platform and Process for Location-Based Storytelling in the Developing World*.

[HAA-255999-17](#) (University of Pennsylvania) *The Philadelphia Playbills Project*.

DHAG Level 3 (and the former Digital Humanities Implementation Grants program)

[HK-250641-16](#) (Carnegie Mellon University) *Six Degrees of Francis Bacon: Reassembling the Early Modern Social Network*.

[HK-50181-14](#) (Old Dominion University) *Archive What I See Now: Bringing Institutional Web Archiving Tools to the Individual Researcher*

[HK-50120-13](#) (Washington State University) *Mukurtu Mobile: Empowering Knowledge Circulation Across Cultures*

[HK-50037-12](#) (Alexandria Archive Institute) *Applying Linked Open Data: Refining a Model of Data Sharing as Publication*

IATDH

[HT-50086-14](#) & [HT-250993-16](#) (Middlebury College) *Scholarship in Sound and Image: Producing Videographic Criticism in the Digital Age* and *Scholarship in Sound and Image*.

[HT-231816-15](#) (George Mason University) *Doing Digital History 2016: An Institute for Mid-Career American Historians*.

[HT-50088-14](#) (Michigan State University) *Institute on Digital Archaeology Method & Practice*.