

August 2019

Summer Stipends: Application strategies

Daniel Sack and Gwen Yates
Division of Research Programs



Thank you for joining us for this webinar about the NEH Summer Stipends program. In June we did a webinar introducing the program. It includes a lot of questions and answers, and is available on our web site. This webinar will focus on strategies for writing a stronger application. It is designed for prospective applicants and for those who advise them. These thoughts are useful for other NEH grant programs, and for applications to other foundations and agencies.

A quick introduction. I am Dan Sack, a program officer in the NEH Division of Research Programs. I am a historian of American religion, and have been at the NEH for nine years. I am joined here today by Gwen Yates, a program analyst for the Summer Stipends program. If you call or write the Summer Stipends program, her friendly voice will be able to help you. She will be helping me answer questions today

Agenda

Summer Stipends Program

- Program overview
- Review process
- Review Criteria
- Application format
- Tips for writing a good application
- Common errors
- Questions

Guidelines: <https://www.neh.gov/grants/research/summer-stipends>



Here's the agenda for this session. I will talk during the first part of today's presentation. I'll give a brief overview of the Summer Stipend program, describe the review process, the application format, and offer a bunch of tips for writing a good application—including a list of things to avoid. As I talk, feel free to type in questions. I'll answer after I have finished with the slides.

A lot of what I'm saying is also on the NEH web site.

NEH staff



—NEH



Before that, a quick note: Since the Endowment is a federal agency, you may assume that the staff are all federal bureaucrats. Well, we are, but Endowment staff are scholars, many with faculty experience and research records. We see our job as supporting public and scholarly engagement with the humanities, and we do it because we believe in the humanities and in scholarship. If you take away nothing else today, know that, unlike some foundations, NEH staff are happy to talk to you by phone or email. We want to be your allies.

Program Overview

\$6,000 for two months

- Providing small grants to individuals pursuing advanced research that is of value to humanities scholars, general audiences, or both.
- Supporting projects at any stage of development, but most especially early-stage research and late-stage writing in which small grants are most effective
- Encouraging applications from under-represented and under-served individuals and institutions (including independent scholars and faculty at Hispanic-Serving Institutions, Historically Black Colleges and Universities, Tribal Colleges and Universities, and community colleges).

DEADLINE: September 25, 2019, for awards made March 2020

NUMBERS: Five year average: Received 834 applications, made 77 awards, funding rate 9%

Please see the program guidelines for complete details.

<https://www.neh.gov/grants/research/summer-stipends>



The Summer Stipends program supports individual scholars pursuing advanced research in the humanities. The awards are \$6,000 for two months—usually but not necessarily in the summer. Projects are eligible at any stage of development, but many of our grantees are either at the beginning of a project, just laying the foundation of their research, or at the end, finishing their writing.

Applications from people at all institutions are welcome, but like all NEH programs, the Summer Stipends program welcomes applications from independent scholars and faculty at community colleges, Hispanic serving institutions, historically black colleges and universities, and tribal colleges and universities.

As you'll see here, over the last five years we received 834 applications per year and made 77 awards per year, for an average

funding rate of 9%. Do not let these numbers discourage you. You can't get a grant unless you apply. But do be aware of the level of competition in this program. Our goal here today is to help you write a good application.

All of this is described in our program guidelines. That document is lengthy and a bit bureaucratic, but you should read them. They will tell you what is eligible, what an application should include, and how it will be reviewed.

The life of your application



One key to writing a strong application is understanding how it will be reviewed. That will give you a sense of the audience for your application. You should write your application understanding who will read it and what they're looking for. All applications for NEH grants go through a peer review process, which has several stages. The first and most important stage is the peer review panel. We group applications in disciplines or topics and then look for experts in those areas. The Summer Stipend review panels are made up of three scholars. Our aim is to assign applications to the most sympathetic possible reviewers. You should assume that your reviewers have some background in your field, but do not know as much about your topic as you do. I'll say a bit more about this in a while. The panelists read the applications, write comments, and post a rating. Summer Stipends panelists do not meet in person. NEH staff reviews all the comments from panelists and recommends which applications should be supported. Those recommendations are considered by the National Council on the Humanities, 26 people (scholars and others) nominated by the president and approved by the Senate. The Council makes recommendations to the Endowment's chairman, who takes all this into consideration and makes the decision on which to fund. It's a long process, but it allows for rich review. Throughout, the peer review panel's comments are taken

very seriously. After grants are announced, applicants can request the comments from their evaluators. Not every funder does that, but we see it as a service to our applicants, to get the feedback on their application from four or five smart people. Our panelists are incredibly generous with their comments.

Review Criteria

Evaluators are asked to apply the following five criteria when judging the quality of applications:

1. The intellectual significance of the proposed project, including its value to scholars, students, or general audiences in the humanities.
2. The quality or promise of quality of the applicant as a humanities researcher and (for course revision projects) as a teacher.
3. The quality of the conception, definition, organization, and description of the project and the clarity of expression in the application.
4. The feasibility and appropriateness of the proposed plan of work, including, when relevant, the soundness of the dissemination and access plans for the proposed audience or audiences.
5. The likelihood that the applicant will complete the project (not necessarily during the period of performance).

Evaluators may or may not be specialists in the proposed field of study of each application. Some review panels will be disciplinary, others interdisciplinary. Thus applicants should make sure to write for a broad scholarly audience and to avoid or explain technical terms whenever possible.



We ask our peer reviewers to use a focused set of criteria when evaluating applications. Applicants should keep these criteria in mind as they're writing their applications. They are listed in the guidelines—another reason to read the guidelines carefully. Print them out and keep them on your desk as you prepare your application. The most important criterion is the first one, significance—why is the project important? How will it change the way scholars or other readers under the topic and do their own research? The second is about your preparation to do the project. The third is about method—is it clear what you're going to do? Will your method answer your research questions? An important factor here is the project's clarity—it's important to avoid jargon. Our reviewers are fellow scholars with some expertise in their field, but bear in mind that they may not have expertise in your specialty, so you shouldn't assume that they know as much as you do about your

topic. You should write your application for well-educated generalists, explaining terms when necessary. The fourth criterion is about what you're going to do during the grant period. Describe in as much detail as possible what you'll do and what you hope to achieve. And describe how your work will reach the audience or audiences for your research. The fifth criterion is about the likelihood that you will complete the project—not necessarily during the grant period.

Remember as you write your narrative that evaluators may or may not be specialists in the proposed field of study of each application. Some review panels will be disciplinary, others interdisciplinary. Thus applicants should make sure to write for a broad scholarly audience and to avoid or explain technical terms whenever possible.

What you'll need to prepare

- Three page narrative
- One page bibliography
- Two page C.V.
- Any necessary appendices
- Names/contact info for two references

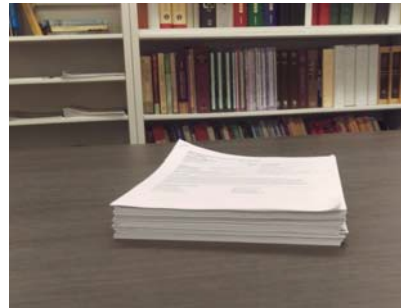


The application is actually a pretty short document. It involves a three page narrative, one page bibliography, two page CV, and the names of two references.

These documents should work together. Think of them as separate chapters of the same book.

What the narrative should include

- Research and contribution
- Methodology and work plan
- Competencies, skills, and access
- Final product and dissemination



In three pages!

Look at the guidelines and samples

Details on all this are in the guidelines, but the narrative should include:

- A discussion of the project's contribution to the scholarly discussion. This is crucial. Scholarly context. What work has already been done on the topic—state of research? How will your work contribute? Will it build on, disagree with, or provide a new interpretation? You might discuss the audience for your project, and explain how it will benefit from your work. What are your research questions?
- Talk about the method—how will you answer your research questions? What is the current stage of the project: How much have you done on the project? What will you do during the grant period? It's what we call the work plan. Give us as much detail as you can.
- Tell us why you are the right person to do this project.

Discuss your previous research and publication record, language skills, access to the necessary archives, etc.

- Tell us how you will disseminate the results of your research. Book or article? If a book, maybe a brief outline. Have you talked with a publisher? Not necessary, but helpful if you have. This is only a two month grant, but it would be helpful to know how these two months fit in the larger trajectory of your project.

You need to do all this in three pages!

Look at the guidelines—they give you a helpful outline of what the narrative should include. Our website also offers some samples of previously successful applications, to give you a sense of how someone else made a case for their project.

Prepare early

Find the right program

Grants.gov

Read the guidelines
and samples

Contact a program
officer



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.

Make sure that you are applying to the right program—that you are eligible and your project fits. The NEH web site has information, including the guidelines for each program. If you're not sure where your application fits, contact a program officer who can help you think about that.

You will submit your application through a portal called grants.gov. It's worth your time checking it out ahead of time, so you know how the application process will work. You need to register for it. Your grants office deals with grants.gov all the time, so they can help you navigate it. Grants.gov also has a good help desk.

Look at the program guidelines, which are posted on the NEH web site. 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. They will tell you how to access and use grants.gov. 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 has 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 summer stipends program (we get too many applications), but we are happy to answer questions.



Make your case

Start with the review criteria

Demonstrate your project's significance

Provide context

Make it sound interesting

Dissertation: What's new?

Develop a clear and realistic work plan

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. I listed them on a previous slide. They're also in the guidelines. 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 two months working in libraries" won't cut it. Better is, "I'm going to spend the second month of my stipend term 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.

Remember your audience

Write for specialists and generalists

Avoid jargon

Address the criteria

Use concrete examples

Show them you know what you're doing

Anticipate and answer possible concerns



Think carefully about your audiences for the application. They are panelists, who are faculty like you, as well as 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. 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, even if it is not important to them.

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.

Give the evaluators confidence 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.

Pay attention to details

- Draft early and solicit feedback
- Check your bibliography
- Include required supporting materials
- Proofread!
- Discuss your application with your letter writers.



[This Photo](#)

[CC BY](#)



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. And don't submit your application in the last hour before the deadline. You may have issues with your application or grants.gov, and you want to have time to fix them.

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. You might even send them the criteria. Ask them to explain why the project is important. If your project spans disciplines, literature and art for example, it would be great to have letters from scholars in both fields. 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.

Post-announcement

Request your reviewers' comments

Contact a program officer

Resubmit



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 9% of our Summer Stipends 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.

Common errors

- Ignoring the guidelines
- Not making the case for significance
- Focusing on gaps in the scholarship
- Fuzzy methodology
- An incomplete work plan
- Using jargon
- Not moving beyond the dissertation
- Unhelpful references
- Not planning ahead



I asked my colleagues about what common errors they see in applications. Here's what they said:

It is clear from a lot of applications that the applicants have not read the guidelines. Those applications don't understand what we do and don't fund, or what applications should include. Too often we get generic applications as opposed to ones written for NEH programs.

The biggest flaw in unsuccessful applications is not making a case for the project's significance. Applicants need to make a case for why their work will be important. Reviewers want to see that you have an argument and that you are engaging the current literature on your topic.

Often applications will argue for a project's significance by noting a gap in the scholarship. That's not enough. Tell us the payoff of filling that gap. How will that change how the audience (scholars, teachers, the public) understand the topic?

Too many applications omit a discussion of their methodology. We do want to know your argument and why it is important, but we also need to see how you are going to make it. Discuss your method. Tell us why you have chosen that method and that you know how to

use it. Identify your case studies. Perhaps include something you have discovered in your research to date.

Many applications forget to include a work plan or have a vague one. Make it clear what you are going to do during the grant period and how it will contribute to the project's goals. If you are doing archival work, show that you know what you'll be looking for and that you will be able to access it. Reviewers are suspicious of fishing trips. Your plans may change, but a developed work plan gives your evaluators confidence that you know what you are doing and how you will do it.

We often get applications that use a lot of jargon, and that often turns off our panelists. We like to see that our applicants are up on the latest theories, but we also want to see that they can communicate their work clearly. Bear in mind that the evaluators for your application may not know the in-group language of your subfield. If you are using an esoteric term you may want to define it—or use a different word.

We get a lot of applications from junior faculty who are revising their dissertations into a book. Weak applications do not explain how the book will move beyond the dissertation. Tell us what you are adding and how it will be different.

Sometimes the reference letters aren't useful. They are unfamiliar with the project or spend too much time talking about the applicant's previous work. The best letters make the case for the project's significance, telling evaluators while this is an important project.

Finally, applicants often get into trouble when they don't plan ahead. You want to make sure that you have enough time to study the guidelines, plan your project, consult with colleagues and your administration (if necessary), draft your application, and get feedback from colleagues. As we said earlier, if you plan on doing a project in the next two years, start planning your application now.

Questions?

Daniel Sack
Program Officer
Division of Research Programs
dsack@neh.gov
(202) 606-8459

Gwen Yates
Program Analyst
Division of Research Programs
gyates@neh.gov
(202) 606-8466

General Questions:
(202) 606-8200
stipends@neh.gov



As I said at the beginning, if you take away nothing else from this presentation, remember this: We are here to answer your questions. Please do drop us a line or give us a call. We will be as helpful as we can. If we can't answer a question, we'll get you to a person who can. And now we have a good chunk of time to answer your questions.