NEH APPLICATION TIPS

Information from an April 2016 presentation at Villanova University by Dr. Ann Meyer, Senior Academic Office in the Division of Research and the NEH website

Please visit neh.org for more information

Guidelines

- Every word counts in the guidelines/evaluation criteria. Learn it and know it thoroughly, long before you even begin grant writing, even a year or two before you hope to get funding to do the actual research. You can read actual sample applications online at http://www.neh.gov/grants/research/fellowships
- Every element required in the application is very carefully looked at.
- Follow formatting instructions to a T, do not leave left over space.
- The Fellowships require a 3 page narrative, 1 page bibliography, 2 page CV and 2 letters of recommendation. The Public Scholar also requires a letter from your chair

Evaluation Criteria

1. *The intellectual significance of the proposed project, including its value to humanities scholars, general audiences, or both*.
   The case for intellectual significance is the number one criteria! Without that, you do not have an application that will be reviewed. This can often be the hardest criteria to meet. They do review works in all stages of development, but the relationship to the bigger picture has to be clear. Even if you can't identify what you expect to find, you still need to be able to present the big picture, how does the stage you are in fit into the whole? NEH does not want to see you say "I hope to discover."
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.*

Narrative

- There is a 'craft' to writing a good grant narrative, especially since it is so short. It's not the same as writing for a journal review or a book chapter.   It takes a lot of time, and resubmissions, to develop a strongly crafted narrative.
- Think about the audience, always. What kind of experts might be chosen for your panel? Are you extremely specialized? If so, be sure not to include jargon, or include definitions of things your panel might not be as familiar with as you are. Don't assume. Is it likely your topic would be widely known amongst a scholarly review panel? If so, do not go into great detail, save space for more important information.
- It is preferential that you include the guideline headings, but you don't have to, as long as content is there as the guidelines indicate.
- Examples can make or break an application, even if only one is included. It helps identify the bigger picture/intellectual significance.
- Methodology – sometimes in describing this, you can also identify the bigger question or findings you expect to see.
- Appendices are allowed. E.g., an example of how you collect data or anything directly relevant to the project.
- Keep in mind that you want to make it easy on your reviewers. Reviewers are also keeping in mind fairness, if you fudge on formatting or content, then it isn't fair to others.

Bibliography – this convinces the review panel that you know your stuff, especially beyond your own field. Be VERY selective in what you choose here. It needs to include foundational work that is both contemporary and historical.

CV – do not pad your CV. The review panel is made up of scholars like you, and they can tell. If it's not really a contract or a publication, don't say it is. If you need to, put some things in paragraph form and include only relevant course listings.

Note: The bibliography and CV count for a lot during the evaluation - they suggest the kind of work that you do and can let the review panel know relevant information that you might not have space to include in the 3 page narrative.

Letters of recommendation do not need to be from big 'players' in the field, but they do have to pertain to the actual project that you're doing, rather than being repurposed letters of recommendation you might have already received.

Evaluation process
- The application is based on merit alone. Including financial need makes it very difficult to add to evaluation process.
- The evaluation criteria and process are very important to understand, because they help you in understanding your audience and what they are looking for in a well-crafted application.
- Review panel – Proposals are sorted by field and for each section, 5 panelists are chosen to review a section, to which your application is assigned. Panelists are all scholars, and you can be a panelist. NEH staff tries to carefully select panelists and assign your application to a section that includes at least one person who is a specialist in your field, and certainly who are experts in your general area.
- Closely following the Evaluation Criteria, Reviewers send in a grade: E = Excellent, VG = Very Good, G = Good, SM = Some Merit and NC = Not Competitive. They then meet either virtually or in DC to discuss those that have been sorted to the top tier. There is no voting at the meeting, it is strictly an intellectual/academic discussion. Sometimes their individual grades can change. If your application falls to the top, again using the evaluation criteria as a guide, panelists discuss your application in detail (this does not happen for summer stipends).
- NEH Staff – summarize comments and scores, create a score chart and write recommendations regarding the top tier applications to the National Council. NEH Academic Officers are all highly accomplished scholars themselves and they are involved in the application from start to finish.
- National Council – they review the Staff summaries of the most promising applications. Sometimes they ask to see an entire application. The National Council is made up of 26 people, some of whom are scholars, and some who are not. They rely on staff summaries, but also use their own judgement, and decide by vote which applications should go on to the Chair for final approval.
- The Chair meets with the Staff to review the National Council's decisions and then makes the final decision.
- Throughout the process, the peer review panel's comments and NEH officers reviews are taken very seriously.

Other tips
- Good ways into getting a full fellowship is to get a summer stipend (applications due October 1) and to also serve on a review panel, as they both serve as being incredibly informative, but in different ways.
- Most people do not get a full fellowship on the first attempt, funding rates are very low. Submit two-three times. The feedback you get is critical to helping you reapply. This feedback is not something you have to directly respond to, especially given that the panel is never made up of the same people, but you should find feedback incredibly helpful and rich. If they have some merit but haven't been funded, a lot of time was spent on your application. If you don't get comments back, be sure to contact your program officer. Also, share feedback with colleagues. (On a side note: because of the feedback, any application with the NEH creates an excellent foundation from which to create applications for other funding sources).
- Unless specified by the program guidelines such as "Collaborative Research," NEH does not look for interdisciplinary work.
- NEH does not want to see reworking of your dissertation.
- NEH does not care if you have other overlapping grants. They don't ask for a budget.
- You can't hold more than one NEH grant at any given time.
- You can't serve on a review panel if you have an application pending.

Public Scholar

- There is a new general emphasis at NEH currently on the 'public scholar' or work for 'common good' in which the audience is not just academic (you can read about it on their website). If your application rises to the top at the end of evaluation, but might not be getting funding, there is a possibility that if it also holds an element of 'common good' then it could be funded through the Chairman's special fund. Do not, however, try to include the common good element into your work if it is not relevant to the scholarly endeavor. This will hurt your chances, not help.
- There is a separate new Public Scholar application. Next round is due in March 2016. It requires a 5 page narrative, not a 3 page, and also a writing sample and previous publications.

If you're interested in becoming a panelist, go to https://securegrants.neh.gov/prism/

Current deadlines (check the website for changes, updates)

Research:
For Individual Scholars
Public Scholar (6-12 months) – March 3, 2016
NEH Fellowships (6-12 months) – April 30, 2015
http://www.neh.gov/grants/research/fellowships - SAMPLE APPLICATIONS
Awards for Faculty at HBCUs, HSIs, TCUs (Historically Black, Hispanic-serving, and Tribal Colleges and Universities) -April 15
Summer Stipends (8 weeks) –October 1, 2015
For Teams of Scholars
Collaborative Research – December 9, 2015
Scholarly Editions & Translations – December 9, 2015

Education:
Summer Seminars and Institutes – February/March
Landmark Workshops for School Teachers – February/March
Humanities Initiatives at HBCUs, IHHEs, and TCUs – June 25
Enduring Questions – September 10, 2015

Preservation and Access:
Education and Training Grants – May 5, 2015
Research and Development Project Grants – Late Summer 2015
Humanities Collections and Reference Resources – July 21, 2015
Documenting Endangered Languages (with NSF) – September 15, 2015
Sustaining Cultural Heritage Collections – December 1, 2015
National Digital Newspaper Program – January 14, 2016

Public Programs:
Digital Projects for the Public – June 10, 2015
Bridging Cultures Through Film – June 10, 2015
Media Projects – August 12, 2015
Museums, Libraries, and Cultural Organizations – August 12, 2015

Digital Humanities:
Digital Humanities Implementation Grants—February 2016
Institutes for Advanced Topics in the Digital Humanities—March 10
Digital Humanities Start-Up Grants—September 16

Challenge Grant: May 5

Common Good/Standing Together:
New: Humanities in the Public Square, June 24, 2015