



CHRISTINA M. GILLIS

## *Writing Proposals for ACLS Fellowship Competitions*

---

Proposal writing is a genre of its own. If rhetoric is the craft of persuasion, proposal writing is especially so. The goal is to persuade reviewers that the proposed project has the special merit to deserve funding—that the project will stand out as novel and significant, and that the methodology will be recognized as careful and thorough.<sup>1</sup> Whatever the project may mean to the author of the proposal, it is for the reviewers inseparable from the language in which it is presented. In the economy of proposal writing, every element must contribute to the argument and to the idiom of persuasion.

Like essays or articles written for publication, a proposal is an integral part of the scholar's professional life. Unlike essays or articles, though, the proposal is addressed to readers who focus their attention on whether the described project is the one to support. While the professional article constitutes the dissemination stage in the process of scholarly communication, the proposal belongs at the production end. The author asks the reviewers to select the project under review for funding that will help bring the project to fruition.

There is no one-size-fits-all formula for success in this genre. At the same time, however, certain fundamental rhetorical points should inform one's choice of the most effective language and organizational structure to argue for your pro-

posed work. The following remarks speak to those points.

### AUDIENCES

When a scholar submits an application to ACLS, it is not filed away in a giant database, never to be seen again. Rather, submission of an application is the start of a substantial peer reviewed selection process in which diligent readers give the application their fairest consideration and judgment.

These reviewers are the proposal writer's *audience*. It is important for the applicant to try to enter into the thinking of those reviewing one's application, and to understand how it may be read. The structure of ACLS competitions is suggestive in this regard: The first-round reviewers are in the discipline of the applicants—or represent the range of disciplines that are the ingredients of an interdisciplinary project—though in any case may represent specific areas or subfields quite different from those of the applicant. The second-round reviewers, who meet as a selection committee, represent a number of disciplines across the humanities and social sciences. In sum, each of the reviewers judging any given application will have differing levels of familiarity with the particulars of the research represented by that application. The tricky task for the applicant is to find the

right tone and deploy a strategy that will persuade them all.

It is easy to imagine the audiences one is addressing because they are already familiar: The reviewers are colleagues, in a broad sense, sharing with the writer general academic experience and professional awareness. Reviewers from within one's discipline could be thought of as colleagues from down the hall; those from outside one's discipline would more closely resemble colleagues from across campus. With a clear sense of who these audiences are, the proposal writer can speak confidently and persuasively about the nature and value of the proposed project, avoiding narrow, issue-specific language. This does not require "dumbing down" one's work but it does require pitching the issues at a level of generality sufficient to making them clear to the general scholarly reader.

Projects in some disciplines of the humanities, such as philosophy of physics or formal semantics in linguistics, may seem further afield from the rest of the humanities than do other projects. How might such projects appeal to reviewers in other, less technically-oriented areas in the humanities? Applicants in these and similar disciplines must aim to introduce their projects at a level conducive to understanding by the intelligent layperson—and to speak to the relevance of their main claims and arguments for other, more familiar concerns (whether historical or contemporary) of scholars in the rest of the humanities. This is something of an exercise in translation and, as such, a classic element of proposal writing that transcends the technical nature characteristic of such proposed projects.

Just as important, if not more so, is the need to avoid jargon. The reviewers, whether they represent particular fields or the humanities and social sciences in general, are assumed to share something of a common language. Nothing turns

off a reviewer like language that seems purposefully to obfuscate or exclude.

## STRATEGIES AND STRUCTURES

There is no one strategy for writing proposals, no prescription, no single all-purpose format or outline. Each applicant must develop her or his own rhetorical and argumentative strategy. Audience awareness, sureness of voice, and clarity and cogency in stating the question at hand are essential. Yet a proposal can be carried through in any number of ways. At all events, the applicant should use the beginning paragraphs to announce his or her voice, clearly establish the main question to be pursued, and set up the reader's expectations regarding the principal research statement of the proposal—the central claim—and how it will be





Now fast forward to another spring. The proposal has been out of the scholar's hands for five or more months, but the project itself has not. It is still there, and so it will remain. Whatever news the letter brings regarding the fate of the proposal, the scholar should still look to his or her research as worthy of further development. Next year will bring another competition with another group of readers and another applicant pool. The

emphasis on the intellectual and scholarly terrain previously covered by the writer may serve as an effective framework for presenting the proposed research and writing project. This strategy may suit the scholar who already has significant publications in a particular area and whose new project, while at a less advanced stage, is demonstrably