

Introduction: The dissertation proposal for a fellowship application, which is often an initial version of a dissertation prospectus, is a very special form of writing, a genre in its own right, with its own special context. Typically the committee reader of proposals is faced with the task of reading between 50 to 100 proposals, a strict deadline for selecting potential winners, and the reader is probably not a specialist on the proposal topic but qualified mainly as a skilled scholar. In this context it is imperative to make a clear and compelling argument for why the project should be funded, and it must be “reader friendly,” which means not leaving the hard work for the reader to figure out the major points of the topic and why it is important.

*In choosing what to say and when and how to say it, try to imagine that in all likelihood the committee reader will only absorb or retain approximately five major points from each proposal that she reads. The tips below indicate how to choose and treat those points; the tips also indicate some common tendencies that weaken a proposal and how they may be avoided. Also see below for **writing a fellowship abstract**.*

***The importance of Structure**

The structure of the proposal plays an important role in the strength of the proposal. The order in which you present your points should be a hierarchic order, with the most important items placed first, as early as the opening paragraph. The reader is likely to be grateful to learn sooner rather than later what the project is all about, and is likely to attach greater weight to what comes first. This means having a strong but succinct opening paragraph(s), in which all the major points of the proposal are presented in a concise nut-shell fashion, with further elaboration postponed for subsequent paragraphs.

***Identify the Main Topic**

In terms of effective hierarchic order, it is important to pin down the topic as early as possible, at the very opening of the proposal. This essentially means stating the central argument or question as early as possible. Instead, there is common tendency for the writer to engage in preliminaries, often providing extensive background material, and saving the actual topic for last. This deprives the proposal of much of its meaning until the main point is reached. The comedian may well postpone the punchline until last, this is not a good idea in a fellowship proposal.

***Distinguish Between the Main Central Question(s) and Subsidiary Ones**

There is another common tendency for the writer to present a multitude of specific questions in neutral fashion, scattered throughout the proposal, without distinguishing between the main central question and those that are subsidiary. Bringing these dispersed questions together benefits not only the reader, but also the writer. It can often lead to a clearer formulation of the central question or argument, helping to assure that it is a workable hypothesis that can be documented. In any case, it is not a good idea to leave it for the reader to do the hard work of figuring out what is central and what is subsidiary. Similarly, if the topic deals with a specific time and place, it's not a good idea to postpone giving these crucial features which help to orient the reader.

***Communicate Your Intention Up Front**

Recognize that the reader's main interest in the proposal is to find out what the writer intends to do with the topic, rather than the topic itself. There is a common tendency for the writer to hold back, avoiding a direct statement of intent, avoiding the use of the active voice.

*It is also important to make all statements concise and compelling. The use of fewer words is the best path to clarity. There is a common tendency of adding clause after clause, burying the main point of the statement and making it unmanageable for both reader and writer. Once you have written a strong concise opening, you can elaborate, as noted, in subsequent passages of the proposal. In fact, the opening paragraph(s), structured in hierarchic fashion, can then serve as an outline for the rest of the proposal where you elaborate on the opening points in a highly structured fashion.

***Present One Version of the Topic**

Another common tendency is to present the main topic in multiple versions that are just different enough from one another to leave the reader confused (all too frequently, there are even versions that contradict one another); once a topic is clearly and concisely presented at the opening, there is no need to repeatedly tell what the topic is. When further elaboration is presented subsequently, stay as close as possible to your opening formulation and then elaborate.

*Once you have accomplished the difficult task of making a concise and compelling statement about your topic, your opening should present a concise statement of how the project will contribute to the field, emphasizing how the project will fill a gap and make a difference in how we think about the subject. This is the single most important aspect of the proposal, and needs to be stated early. In this case, it is especially important to include a subsequent paragraph that deals at greater length with the existing literature. This subsequent elaboration needs to present a well organized and coherent picture of the relevant literature, making sure that you cover all the scholarly areas to which your project will contribute, since projects often contribute to more than one field. Here too there is a common tendency to scatter references to the literature throughout the proposal, which makes it harder for the reader to get a complete grasp of your contributions. A unified treatment of the literature is the most effective.

***Present Topic Before Contributions to the Field**

Another tendency is to present the gaps in the scholarly literature before telling what the topic is. In many cases, the best presentation of the topic is found in a statement of what is missing in the literature. It is far better logic to state what you are doing and then to note it is missing in the literature, rather than have the reader surmise that what is noted as missing is what you will be doing.

***State the HOW, Make it Match the What**

Your concise opening statements will also need a concise description of methodology, how you will document your arguments, what principal sources you will use, and what theoretical framework, if any, that you will use for analytic purposes. Some proposals create a disconnect between the WHAT and the HOW in the proposal: a topic is presented, but the method for implementation is poorly matched with the stated topic. Often the HOW is in fact the truer version of the writer's intent and the topic needs a more accurate formulation. You may need to elaborate further on the methodology after the opening, so continue to make sure it matches the stated topic.

***Put Your Topic Before Background**

There is a need to give enough background about the topic for the non-specialist; at the same time, this background should be postponed until the topic is stated so that the reader understands why the background is relevant. An exception is when the topic is so obscure that a lead-in background is needed prior to the topic statement.

***Don't Try To Do Too Much**

There is a tendency to present a project that has too many goals to be feasible, often too many countries to visit, too many repeat visits required, or too many years needed to complete the proposed research. Working closely with the dissertation adviser can help to avert that problem. The dissertation need not be the definitive work on the subject; it is possible to do a significant piece even while limiting the scope of the topic.

***Writing the Fellowship Abstract**

Many fellowship applications also require an abstract. All the principles described above should be followed in writing the abstract. There might be a close resemblance between the opening paragraph and the abstract, but repetition is perhaps inevitable when presenting the same project in two different formats. The abstract is likely to be more complete than the opening paragraph since it stands apart from the proposal, while the opening leads into the rest of the proposal.

For further details and winning samples, see *Scholarly Pursuits* available on the GSAS Fellowships Office web site. For an appointment to review your proposal phone 495-1814.