



Communicating Significance in Fellowship and Award Applications

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Communicating Significance and Impact

“When I read a proposal, I want to know **immediately** that the person is analytical. I don’t want her to **hide behind a vocabulary that is meaningful only in a small subfield**. I want to see that she is really able to **explain what the problem is and to probe where the topic fits with other scholarship**....I want applicants to convince me this is really significant, and to do so **in language that is not limited** to where their discipline is right now.”

- Elizabeth Cohen, Dean, Radcliffe Institute (quoted in Raphael B. Folsom, *How to Get Grant Money in the Humanities and Social Sciences*).

Communicating Significance and Impact

Your claim to significance/impact should

- Explain significance in broad context for non-specialist audience (no jargon/technical terms!)
- Indicate how your work connects to and departs from previous work/practice in your field (i.e., establish what's new)
- Quickly answer the question, “With this work, we will be able to **answer X, do Y, or better understand Z.**”

Communicating Significance and Impact

- In short, you should identify the problem/question, offer your solution/approach, and explain the benefits of your solution/approach
- For instance, if you had invented the steamboat, you might say:
Current ship designs rely on sails for propulsion, but sailboats are limited by the strength and direction of the wind. My new ship design uses steam engines for propulsion, a technology that allows ships to move independently of the wind. My steam-driven vessels are ideal for river navigation, for instance, since they allow captains to steer the best route along twisting river channels regardless of the wind's direction.

Considering the Audience

Your claim to significance/impact should be tailored to the audience/review criteria for the award you're applying to

- Different audiences will care about different aspects of your work.
- Some review processes include multiple rounds that move from field-specific reviewers to a broader set of reviewers: you may need to make a multi-tiered claim, where you address both the specific and broad significance.

Considering the Audience

Knowing your audience will determine the level of specificity needed to communicate the significance of your work

Expert Audience: My work helps us understand how middle-class shopkeepers used civic rituals, symbols, and styles of dress to shape a revolutionary culture in Early Republic New England.

Nonexpert Audience: My work examines the public culture of democracy in the early United States

Even more general: My project examines how democracies work.

Considering the Audience

Researching your target award/fellowship will also help you understand what will be significant to that review audience.

- What is the mission of the funding organization?
- What is the goal of the specific fellowship/award?
- What aspects of your work is it most interested in supporting?

You may need to emphasize different aspects for different opportunities.

Considering the Audience

Scenario: You're seeking funding for "Mapping Occupation," a digital history project that uses GIS to explore the U.S. occupation of the former confederate states after the Civil War. You want to apply for both the Graduate Sabbatical Grant from the Institute for Humane Studies and the Mellon/ACLS Dissertation Innovation Fellowship.

- IHS promotes research on "the classical liberal tradition" and is interested in democracy, pluralism, equality, free inquiry, etc.
- Mellon/ACLS wants to fund innovative approaches to humanities research.

Considering the Audience

- For the IHS application, you'd want to focus on how the project helps us understand the role of military occupation in shaping emancipation and the establishment of a multiracial citizenry and democracy in the former slave states.
- For the Mellon/ACLS, you'd want to emphasize the innovative methodology driving the project—the use of GIS to explore the spatial dimensions of occupation—and the innovative publication method (interactive website).

Communicating Significance and Impact: Main Points

In general, your claim to significance should:

- Avoid jargon/technical terms (and define them if you must use them)
- Use metaphors/similes to relate difficult concepts (if needed)
- Use familiar examples to build common ground
- Focus on the most universal elements of your work
- Relate what is most intriguing about your work

Example 1

The focus of my research is understanding what processes maintain high levels of genetic variation in nature. From the remarkable song repertoire of the northern mockingbird to the elaborate coat colors of domesticated cats, evolutionary biologists have long been fascinated, but perplexed, by the diversity of life. We find diversity puzzling because natural selection should reduce diversity by selecting for uniform traits that enhance the survival and reproduction of individuals, yet we see many instances of incredible trait variation. Understanding how this diversity persists has fundamental implications for conservation management, which requires the restoration and maintenance of biodiversity, especially of small, isolated populations experiencing the negative effects of inbreeding and climate change; my work has direct applications for what methods of conservation we can use to save species on the brink of extinction.

Example 2

Two areas of investigation are currently of great interest to developmental biologists. The first being vertebrate early embryonic specification and patterning of the kidney and the second being the ability of various stem cells to obtain broad developmental potentials. Combining these two areas of interest, one would be able to ask two important questions: What types of stem cells have the potential to give rise to kidney and are there any stem cells that occur normally in the fully developed or adult kidney? The importance of pursuing these questions is to gain an understanding of the basic biology of kidney formation, from the first inductive events to the end point of tissue development. The questions are also important for exploring the potential use of stem cells (whether derived from kidney or induced to form kidney from other types of stem cells), for example, to repair damaged kidney tissue, either through transplantation or activation of endogenous cells to provide self-repair (Gage). In the long-term, an understanding of both these topics will have positive medical applications with respect to treating damaged kidneys or kidney disorders and will have advanced the current understanding of kidney development and stem cell differentiation.

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Example 3

While the establishment of the museum institution in Meiji Japan (1868-1912) has largely been understood as part of the mass implementation of Western culture and concepts, the idea of the museum as an instrument for the re-evaluation and re-presentation of Japan's own traditional arts has yet to be explored. My study, which will focus on the network of three Imperial Museums, installed in the cities of Tokyo, Nara, and Kyoto, respectively, centers on the premise that the museum of late nineteenth-century Japan forged its own direction in the adaptation of the Western museum typology; it distinguished itself from its foreign model as well as the nation's extant artistic practices, and acted as an essential force behind the creation of a newly defined national aesthetic that was being mobilized for Japan's self representation in the international arena. By examining the original documents, set of objects, and architectural designs that led to the physical and conceptual generation of the Imperial Museums, I hope to provoke a rethinking of the Japanese government's pioneering effort at defining a uniquely "Japanese" art.

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Example 4

I am applying for a Fulbright to Spain in order to conduct research for my doctoral dissertation on Andalusian popular religion in the 1800s, a century of belief and practice virtually untouched by scholars. Although a good deal of research has been done on the institutional history of the Spanish Catholic Church in the nineteenth century, the history of popular belief in that period remains largely unexamined. This lack is only emphasized by the excellent analyses that exist for the early-modern era and the twentieth century. As these works have demonstrated, the study of popular religion can offer important insights into how “average” people conceived of, and attempted to influence, the world around them. By focusing on the nineteenth century, an era in which traditional beliefs collided with new ideas introduced by the Enlightenment, industrialization, and other forces of modernization, my study will help explain how the rural population of Andalusia made sense of the rapid changes occurring around it...Indeed, preliminary archival research I conducted this past summer has convinced me that nineteenth-century popular religion effectively articulated collective concerns, both old and new.

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Exercise

Quick Pitches: Using the “ABT Method”

ABT stands for “**And, But, Therefore,**” and it’s basically a “fill-in-the-blanks” exercise, which will provide the very bare bones of a strong story.

Start the story with a few facts, setting out what the situation currently is. Join these facts together with **AND**. Then something happens (or a problem is identified). Introducing the word **BUT** indicates that this is the start of the *real* story. This then leads to the action of the story, **THEREFORE**, where you set out the consequences of this problem.

For example:

Epilepsy affects 600,000 people in the UK **AND** is often treated using anti-epileptic drugs. **BUT** for 30% of people with epilepsy these drugs fail to control their seizures. **THEREFORE** scientists are looking at new types of treatment which will work better.

Exercise

Quick Pitches: Using the “ABT Method”

Example based on Mapping Occupation

- Military occupation is important to the history of Reconstruction **AND** a fair amount of work has been done on the role of the US Army in settling labor disputes, quelling violence against freedpeople, and rebuilding infrastructure in the US South.
- **BUT** because the data is scattered and hard to find, most of this work has been local in nature, focusing on the role of military outposts and personnel in specific locations, and has not paid sufficient attention to the actual geographical reach of the US troops.
- **THEREFORE**, my study, which uses GIS mapping to explore the spatial dimensions of occupation across the Reconstruction South, provides a new and more holistic way to understand how the geography of US military occupation shaped emancipation. Preliminary data shows, for instance, that proximity to a US army post correlates positively to wage rate and negatively to violence against freedpeople, demonstrating that freedpeople farther from army posts faced worse social and economic conditions.

Exercise

Reverse Engineering “the pitch”

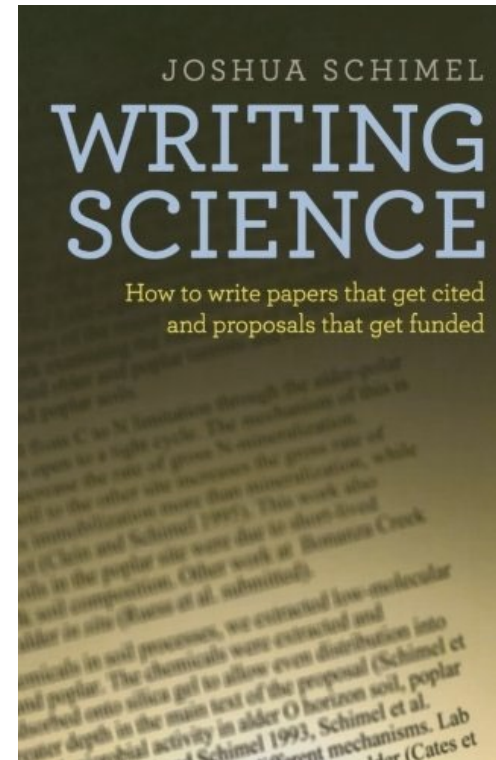
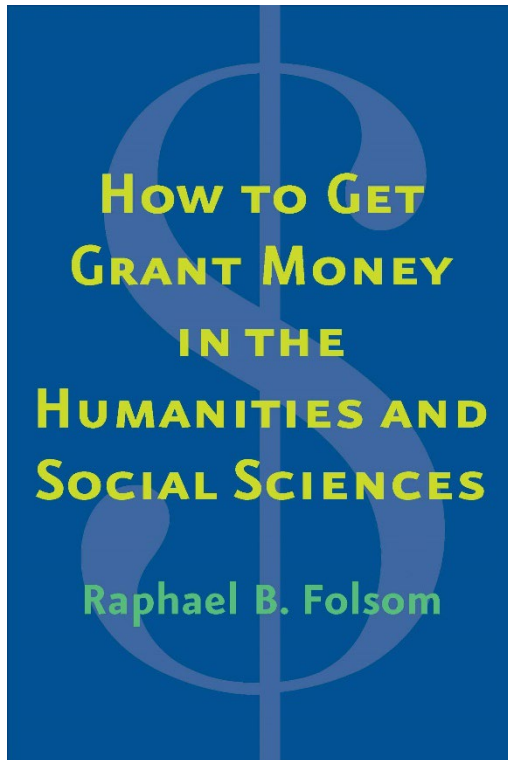
A good exercise to do on your own from time to time is to take an important book or article in your field and think about what its different grant proposals and elevator pitches might have looked like.

Break it down quickly into:

- What’s new, unique, or innovative
- How it departs from previous scholarship/work in the field
- How different aspects of the book/article would appeal to different audiences

Then, try to think of the most exciting or interesting way you could have explained that project (if you were the researcher/author seeking funding)

Resources:



Credits / Resources

John A. Dutton, *Writing Personal Statements Online*: <https://www.e-education.psu.edu/writingpersonalstatementsonline/>

<https://writingcenter.uagc.edu/writing-clearly-concisely>

<https://writingcenter.unc.edu/tips-and-tools/conciseness-handout/>

<https://writingcenter.unc.edu/tips-and-tools/style/>

<https://writingcenter.gmu.edu/guides/writing-concisely>

<https://writingcenter.gmu.edu/guides/advice-for-writing-personal-statements>

<https://writing.wisc.edu/handbook/assignments/grants-2/>

<https://gwc.gsrc.ucla.edu/workshop-videos/grant-hum-soc-sci>

<https://gwc.gsrc.ucla.edu/resources/writing-fellowship-and-grant-proposals>

Ford Predoctoral Fellowship materials: <https://www.heidiwaite.com/post/ford-foundation-predoctoral-fellowship>



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