

Preparing a Proposal for Dissertation Research Abroad

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Most grants are highly competitive and completing an application requires a commitment of time and effort. Generally you should plan to begin work on an application one year in advance. Before addressing specific guidelines for preparing a proposal for dissertation research abroad, it is first necessary to discuss some general rules for preparing proposals.

Your initial step in the process should be to contact the sponsoring agency to obtain as much information as possible. It is, of course, important to obtain the application materials, but you should also inquire about the agency's funding priorities, their suggestions for a successful proposal, and any other information that might be available (such as a summary of successful proposals from past competitions or a sample application). It cannot be stressed enough how important it is to read all instructions and to follow all directions. As you prepare your proposal, it is important to attend to the formatting rules of the funding agency, especially as regards to space allotments.

A complete proposal will most commonly include the agency's application form, a research plan, a curriculum vitae or resume, original transcripts, and references. Many agencies require that you submit multiple copies of your proposal. Presentation is important. The outward appearance of your application reflects on your appeal as an applicant.

Generally, references should include how long and in what capacity the referee has known you, your technical and scholarly qualifications for the proposed research, an evaluation of your long-term promise as a contributor to the research in your field, your competence and stature in your own discipline, and any further information the referee deems appropriate. When asking professors for references, remember to allow them ample time to meet the stated deadline. Also, it is important that they be briefed on the details of the specific proposal you will submit.

Grant application forms are similar to most academic admission applications. In addition to the usual practical information (name, address, education history), you may also be asked to list other funding sources to which you have applied, academic or professional honors and fellowships received, and publications or research to which you have contributed. For those programs that require second languages, you may also be expected to provide proof of language proficiency. At times you will be required to submit itemized budgets for projected research expenses. And you will often be invited to submit copies of letters of affiliation from in-country contacts. If you are applying for a grant that is not exclusively for research abroad, you may be asked to justify doing your research overseas.

Some countries require prior research clearance or more specific authorization to use

libraries or archives. Obtaining these authorizations will require time — in some cases several months.

When preparing your application, you should keep in mind the goals and objectives of the grant agency. In general, your proposal will be required to:

detail the intellectual background, preparation, and skills that you bring to the project, especially your ability to undertake research in a foreign environment;

describe the research you plan to undertake in as much detail as possible, including research sites, courses you will take if applicable, individuals with whom you will be collaborating, and a timetable for your activities;

identify the research questions to be asked, including their broader, intellectual context;

specify the proposition or hypotheses to be tested;

detail the methods of finding, gathering, and analyzing the data you are drawing upon; and

explain the potential of your project for adding to the existing body of research in your particular field.

Many of these issues should already have been addressed by you and your advisor as part of the dissertation topic approval process, and writing your proposal should not entail additional work beyond molding your proposal to meet the agency's specifications.

Even if you have determined that you will not need a foreign language to accomplish your research, it is advisable to learn the language before you go. Being able to speak at even a rudimentary level will help you communicate in and become more involved with your host country culture, and therefore be a more successful researcher. Many grant agencies are more favorably disposed to candidates who demonstrate a commitment to acquiring an advanced knowledge of the language and culture of the country in which research will be conducted.

Remember that different cultures have different values and norms of behavior. For example, there may be great differences in sex roles in your country of research. You may be expected to dress or act accordingly. Also, the student/professor relationship may be more formal than in the United States. Please remember that these are cultural phenomena, and need to be respected. You may not agree with the policies and norms, but you should learn to function in that context to accomplish your goals. These cultural differences will need to be factored into your research plan and time line. Cultural rules for access to resources, people, and materials also should be taken into consideration. What constitutes good research strategy in the United States may not work well elsewhere.