

Captatio benevolentiae: Notes on Grant Writing in the Humanities

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Thank you for inviting me to talk to you about grant writing. I'd like to begin with a brief summary of the experiences on which I will be drawing in these remarks. Over the years, I have been lucky to receive funding from three kinds of philanthropic organizations: from private research libraries, such as the Folger, Huntington, and Newberry; from university and privately-funded interdisciplinary research centers, such as the Stanford Humanities Center and the National Humanities Center; and from the Guggenheim Foundation. For a brief time, I was a member of a committee at the Folger Library that discussed the criteria that the fellowship committees now use for awarding long- and short-term grants, and currently, I read applications in my field for the National Humanities Center, as many former fellows do.

If you have questions about the selection process at these institutions, I will be happy to tell you what I know, which is not much. However, I discourage you from believing that more knowledge about the selection process will improve your application or its chances of winning. At each of the institutions that I know, applications pass through more than one stage of evaluation, and every year the human population of readers changes at every level. So there's no way to predict who will be reading your application, much less to anticipate the sensibilities of all those unknown people. In my opinion, thinking about the selection process only leads to anxiety and to wasting time and energy that you could spend thinking and writing about your ideas. The more I focus on the mysteries of the selection process, the more I surrender to it my freedom to determine what the meaning of the work that goes into grant writing will be. If my remarks have no other benefit, I hope

that they will at least suggest that more is at stake in grant writing than winning a competition. What's at stake is the development of your own thought and writing--for me the highest goal to which all of my writing projects, including grant writing, are subordinate.

In this more confessional part of my remarks, I want to be clear that I am not speaking to you as someone who has discovered a certain method for success in grant writing. Like you, I work by trial and error. I win sometimes and I lose often, and I think of grant-writing as an art rather than a science. It's in this context that I'm addressing you as practitioners of a common craft--craft in the sense of any activity to which we commit ourselves wholly for its own sake or for the sake of doing it well. From my perspective, the craft of grant writing is the search for a form of expression in which our unique personalities as thinkers, the materials of our research, the resources of the institutions to which we apply, and the constraints of the application guidelines, may all be fitted together in the eloquence of tactful self-promotion.

By describing grant writing in this way, I am encouraging you to approach your proposals as ends in themselves, not as means to an end. A *fellowship* is a means to the end of sabbatical. But if you fall into the habit of thinking about your *proposals* that way--as instruments rather than ends--then you put yourself at the mercy of a process that defines success as the rarest of outcomes. Given the scarcity of fellowship resources and the ever-growing number of applications for them, many more deserving projects will lose these competitions than can ever win them. Doubtless you have figured that out for yourselves. In this context, it is a serious mistake to assume that the result of any competition is a reliable judgment about your proposal's merit, much less a recommendation about what to do next with your thought and writing. The only feedback that you will ever receive from a philanthropic organization is "yes" or "no". A "yes" is no guarantee that the project, as

you have proposed it, is actually viable, and it should not deter you from reworking your entire design as you bring the project closer to completion. By the same token, a “no”—far from pronouncing your project a failure before it has even gotten off the ground—may mean nothing more than “not to the liking of these readers” or “not this year”.

The first time that I applied for grants, anxiety moved me to imagine that the results of the competitions that I had entered were the most important measure of the value of my ideas. In this frame of mind, I overestimated the meaning of both my losses and my victories as perspectives on the project that I was undertaking. I also lost sight of the fact that the process of writing a very brief summary of one’s thoughts has a number of salutary benefits. And because writing an application is a great deal of work, it is essential that we imagine this labor in ways that are advantageous to us, regardless of the outcome of the competitions. In my case, I have come to think of grant writing as an annual exercise in critical self-reflection, leading to more rigorous scholarly work and to self-knowledge.

I start the process of grant writing early. Whether or not I intend to apply for funding, I set aside some time each summer—just a few days—to draft an informal, 1000-word synopsis of the work I have done over the preceding year. I’m using the word “work” in a broad and forgiving sense. Yes, I take stock of the formal writing that I’ve done—the essays or reviews that I have published and the papers that I’ve delivered—but more importantly, I gather together all of the ideas that I’ve accumulated from teaching, collegial conversation, reading for pleasure, and random inspiration. I try to connect these materials to each other as parts of one coherent argument; here I am using the word “argument” in the sense not only of “an evidence-based claim” but also of “plot or story”, its primary meaning during the period I study. Sometimes, the writing process ends there, with a list of suggestive ideas that don’t yet add up to a tale worth telling. At other times, I’ll discover in the field of thoughts that I enclose in this text a seed that asks for

cultivation, initiating a new process of research and critical reflection. If that happens, the next step I take is to revise my synopsis in order to clarify the goals of the work that I am doing in relation to the areas of scholarship in which that work takes place. Then I start testing the adequacy of different words and figures of speech as metaphors for the project as a whole, in an effort to find the style that is best suited to my perception of the materials at hand. For the rest of the summer, I devote one morning every two weeks to rewriting this document, until the inessential parts have been pared away and I find the right balance between fresh ideas, the particular features of the materials I study, the scholarly context in which I do my work, and economy and elegance of expression. At each stage of revision, I strictly adhere to the word limit, because writing concisely is a skill that can never be practiced too often. By the end of the summer, I have a text that, with slight modifications, could be sent into grant competitions or used as a letter for a job search. More importantly, I have a closely-reasoned answer to the question, “What have I been thinking about this year?”, and that’s worth more to me than the text’s instrumental utility.

Every two or three years, I also spend a little summer-time turning my *curriculum vitae* into a text that is less like an itinerary of the places that I have been and the things that I did there, than it is like a career narrative or intellectual autobiography. In this document, I also adhere to a limit of 1000 words. I would never have written such a cv if the application for the Guggenheim did not require it, but I encourage you to try your hand at this genre, whether or not you want to apply for the Guggenheim. In the context of the fellowship competition, there is a obvious, *practical* benefit to being able to suggest that one’s current projects are episodes in an unfolding story of personal development, since the Guggenheim Foundation is clear that its mission is to support interesting *people* as well as interesting *work*. But the *intellectual* benefits of this kind of self-examination transcend any

competition. You may be surprised by what you learn about yourself and the trajectory of your thought as you go through the process of uniting the truth of your varied experiences to a form that tends to make everyone sound the same. The standard cv works well as a record of achievement, but it is singularly incapable of suggesting, much less explaining, what those achievements mean in relation to each other or what they mean to the person who made them. In other words, our ordinary cvs rely a great deal on readers to fill in the gaps in our careers; I imagine that readers often make mistakes as they read between the lines of these documents, mistakes that are not always to our benefit. By contrast, a narrative cv, or professional autobiography, gives us more control over the interpretation of our stories by obliging us to make explicit what paths we followed in our careers and what rationale we used in taking them. For me, the experience of writing a narrative cv and of trying to explain--first to myself, then to strangers--how my successes and my setbacks are all episodes in a story that leads irresistibly to my current projects, reveals my work to me in surprising and generative ways. Honestly, no other genre and no amount of advice or criticism from colleagues produces the insights that come from encountering my own career as an ambiguous text that calls for careful and ingenious interpretation.

I may not have persuaded you to approach grant writing as spiritual exercise or as a technology of self-formation, but I hope that I have made a good case for integrating this kind of writing into your scholarly habits not once every three to six years but every year. When I say that I write a grant proposal each summer, it may sound as though I am recommending that you spend much more time on grant writing than you want to do or that you think is possible or worthwhile. In fact, I am only suggesting that you start the process of writing a proposal early in order to make better use of the time that you are able to give to the task. These documents need time to ferment, like all the writing we do; we

need time to rethink and revise them in light of new learning. The more you are able to form the habit of thinking about your development through such exercises, the less daunting it will be to deliver your thoughts in the highly-constrained format of the applications for the fellowship competitions. This kind of writing will become second nature to you--or at least it did to me.

I want to shift now from a confessional to a dogmatic way of speaking and make a few recommendations about grant proposals themselves. Having had a chance to read a number of outstanding proposals written by Connecticut faculty this month, I know that you need no advice from me. Even if you believe that you do, I ask you to take what I say with a grain of salt. My recommendations are the result of my experiences as a writer and reader of grant applications. As to the former, I can't say for certain that the way that I write proposals leads directly to success in competition. It might be dumb luck. As to the latter, I have no way of knowing that my tastes as a reader of applications are shared widely, or at all, by other readers; and in any case the multi-layered selection process is a safeguard against any reader's judgment having too much influence on the outcome. The most important thing for you to do is to find the form of expression that is appropriate to your temperament and project. Don't do what I suggest if it does not work well for you. On the other hand, I have been as conscientious as I could be about making suggestions that are representative, rather than eccentric, in their relation to the norms of grant writing these days, and I hope that they will be of benefit even to seasoned applicants for fellowships.

I offer you not commandments but beatitudes. The first is, **Happy are they who find their authority within.** Over the years, I have read, and I've written, a number of unsuccessful grant proposals that were more like frames around a scholarly tradition than

they were like pictures of the ideas that the applicant had made with materials the tradition provided. Of course it is important to create a context for your project and to show that your thoughts arise not from total eccentricity but from a broad and deep involvement with your field, your discipline, and the humanities in general. Moreover, all excellent proposals teach their readers something new. But every word that you devote to someone else's ideas, even in paraphrase, is a word that you cannot give to the description of your own thought; every name you drop diminishes the novelty of your work. Yes, you must show your readers where you are coming from, but I recommend that you point out the direction rather than drawing them a detailed map. Keep your own ideas at the forefront and at the center of your proposal. I rarely make reference to the work of other scholars in my grant writing, and I never quote it unless doing so is a particularly economical way of clarifying some aspect of my own thought. If you must refer to, paraphrase, or quote authorities in your field, make sure that you do so sparingly, that the work you invoke is genuinely important, and that you refrain from both praising and blaming it. In the field of grant writing, there are many more straw men than there are ripe crops.

Happy are they who write well. I feel foolish telling you that good writing matters in a fellowship application, but you would be surprised how poor the writing can be. It's true that applications are often marred by typographical and grammatical errors and often disregard the explicit requirements of the fellowship competitions. But I am thinking mainly about the more serious problem of grant writing that lacks ambition, courtesy, excitement, and wit--those hallmarks of a deep and passionate engagement with one's materials. As academics, we suffer from a certain sobriety and reserve. We tend to think of our contributions to knowledge as slight, incremental adjustments to complex discourses. But fellowship competitions favor sea changes and bold reversals rather than fine tuning--as I learned when I read my way through the binder of winning applications at the

National Humanities Center the year that I held a fellowship there. Philanthropic institutions want to fund *important* work, and it falls to us to explain how our work fulfills that desire--and to explain it not only in *what* we write but also in *how* we write. Yes, there is a fine line between ambition and pomposity. Nevertheless, I encourage you to write about your work in a way that reveals its most original and consequential aspects. Think big and write big. In your proposal, lead with your best ideas; don't hold them in reserve for a later paragraph or depend on readers to infer them. If you don't engage them at the outset, they may not reach the end or fathom why the journey matters.

Remember that scholarly experts are common readers too, and pay them the courtesy of eschewing abstract or technical vocabulary. No matter how alluring you think it is, it will probably be off-putting. Ordinary language is always less alienating than the jargon of our fields of research, and often it's just as precise.

Finally, keep in mind that your proposal is, from the perspective of its readers, a writing sample. Philanthropic institutions want to fund *good* writing. That is why I discourage you from adopting the conventions of grant writing that work well in the social and natural sciences; I mean the explicit division of proposals into functional component parts: introduction, survey of scholarship, methodology, summary of elements, conclusion, and schedule of progress. In my opinion, that kind of writing may be clear, but clarity that's purchased at the cost of gracefulness is unlikely to intoxicate your readers or to move them to help you. Whether you think of your proposal as a sketch of a work of art that you haven't made yet or as a piece of the work itself, your writing should exhibit the energy and play of mind that first gave life to otherwise inert materials. Give your readers a taste of the style in which you pose and approach the central questions of your work and, in that way, make them hunger for more.

My third beatitude is, **Happy are they who argue from necessity**. A proposal may be an exercise in self-examination and a specimen of stylistic virtuosity, but it is also a claim on very scarce resources, one of thousands of such claims that are made every year to an increasingly over-worked volunteer staff of readers. In this context, I am surprised that applicants, as often than not, make no reference to the fact that they *need* the fellowships for which they are applying in order to advance or complete their work. Maybe it seems indigent to do that, or in bad taste, or maybe it seems that the fact of necessity can be taken for granted. I don't agree. In my judgment, proposals that clearly state, in a single sentence at the beginning of the text, that the project's completion depends on having the time and resources that the fellowship offers, are more effective than proposals that bury their need in shamefaced indirection or don't assert their need at all.

Of course, arguments from necessity must be supported by evidence and made convincing. Here, I am not suggesting that we tally up all the hours that we spend teaching, doing administrative chores, commuting to work, or raising our children. The proposals that I have read that take this tack fall flat. Rather, I am emphasizing the importance of explaining why the particular resources of the institutions to which you are applying are necessary for finishing your work. Again, it is noteworthy how many applicants neglect to do that, or do it only superficially. If you are applying for funding at a private research library, for example, it is essential that you weave its collections into your proposal--the more substantially, the better. Anecdotally I can tell you that at the Huntington, this is absolutely the case. At the Folger, there appears still to be some leeway for other kinds of proposals to succeed.

When I served on the Folger advisory committee that I mentioned earlier--and this is several years ago--we debated whether--as a way of coping with ever-growing numbers of applicants--the selection committees should give priority to applications that made

clearly compelling cases for the usefulness of the Library's collections over applications that the committees agreed were outstanding but that did not make such a case. I and others argued that this was something of a false dilemma. Libraries such as the Folger, though they have a reason to fund proposals that have specific uses of their collections in mind, also have a great interest in funding proposals that are less specific about those uses--projects that will change and grow in unpredictable ways in the presence of all those resources. Regrettably but not surprisingly, the recent surge of interest in the history of material texts and other bibliographical studies has led these philanthropic organizations to somewhat narrower ideas about the kinds of projects that deserve support. In that environment, any proposal that articulates a special need for access to rare books is likely to seem intrinsically superior to proposals that do not, whatever its actual merits might be. But remember: The claim that you need access to a library's collections is not the ace in the hole that it once was, now that databases such as EEBO, ECCO, Gallica, and other digital archives are widely available. In that context, applications from candidates at schools that don't enjoy these digital resources, and applications that assert a need for access to manuscript materials (which for the most part have not been digitized), probably have an advantage over other proposals. When applying to these institutions, it is important to assert your needs in a way that takes these factors into account.

Happy are they whose proposals are in harmony with the rest of their applications. One of the greatest challenges in grant writing--a challenge that is partly beyond our own power to overcome--is the reconciliation of every aspect of the application--the cover letter, cv, proposal, bibliography, and letters of recommendation--to a coherent plot that leads inerrantly to the funding that one wishes to obtain. In my time as a reader of applications at the National Humanities Center, I've seen several applications falter because the relationship between the proposal and the bibliography

creates doubt or is too difficult to fathom. More often, the proposal and the letters of recommendation are out of tune. It considerably enhances the competitiveness of an application if the letters of recommendation speak not only to your merits and promise as a scholar but also, and more importantly, to the originality and importance of your project. In a well-coordinated application, it often turns out that the letters provide the scholarly background for the project that the applicant does not have time and space to furnish in the proposal. Of course, you can't tell your recommenders what to write in your dossier, but you can approach them early; send them a draft of your proposal, cv, and bibliography; explain how you would like your full application to represent you; and ask them to evaluate your proposal candidly in the letters that they write. At an absolute minimum, send them a 250-word abstract of your project which includes the title that you are using in your application. No matter how much credit your recommenders have with philanthropic organizations, its value for your application can plummet if their letters give the impression that they know little or nothing about your current work.

A fifth and final beatitude: **Happy are they who persist in grant writing.** Do not be discouraged if a proposal on which you have spent a great deal of thought and work does not succeed in a given round of competitions. I say this particularly to the assistant professors in the room, for whom winning fellowships may feel more urgent in practical terms than it does for their colleagues with tenure. As more people apply for funding, philanthropic organizations tend to cope with the onslaught by looking to prior productivity as evidence that the current project is viable and will be completed. At the National Humanities Center, for example, it is extremely rare for fellows not to have published a book already. This creates a very unhappy paradox: One must have sabbatical funding in order to be able to write a book, but in order to obtain that funding, one has to have written a book beforehand. I urge you to apply for every fellowship for which you are

eligible, but I also suggest that you not set all your hopes on winning a long-term fellowship. I can't state it for a fact, but the odds of an excellent proposal winning more than one short-term fellowship are probably better than the odds of it winning one long-term fellowship; and with that in mind, always apply for the maximum fellowship period for the short-term grants (usually it is three months).

I leave you with an Aristotelian thought. Toward the end of his discussion of friendship in the *Nicomachean Ethics*, Aristotle comes to reflect upon the difference between benefactors and beneficiaries. The essence of this distinction is not that the benefactor has an abundance of resources that the beneficiary lacks. For Aristotle, the difference between benefactors and beneficiaries comes down to the way that they feel. "The author of a kindness", writes Aristotle, "feels affection and love for the recipient even if he neither is nor is likely to be any use to him." Then he draws an analogy to craftsmanship. "This is just what happens in the crafts too. Every craftsman loves the work of his own hands more than it would love him if it came to life." "Well," continues Aristotle, "the case of the benefactor is much the same. What he has benefited is his own handiwork; so he loves it more than the work loves its maker. The reason for this is that life is to everyone an object of choice and love, and we live through our activity; and the practitioner of a craft lives, in a sense, through his activity" (1167b30-1168a10).

Fellowship competitions, by their very nature, lead us applicants to believe that nothing could be better than receiving philanthropy; and that idea, the more it gets hold of us, shapes the somewhat abject way that we tend to understand the work that we put into grant writing and the way that we understand ourselves. For Aristotle, just the opposite is true of philanthropy. He says that it's better to be a benefactor than a beneficiary, in large part because it *feels* better to be one--feels better to have the feelings that craftsmen have

when they are making things. That feeling, Aristotle says, is love--an absorption in the work for its own sake. It's this very ancient thought that moves me to encourage you to approach grant writing as a craft that is intrinsically worth practicing for its own sake, and as a choice that we make about how to live. I wager that if you can imagine your work in these terms, you will feel better about the process of grant writing, and about the proposals that you write, no matter what happens in the competitions. Because in this frame of mind, it will always be in your power to be your own benefactor.