

A Blade of Grass

Is My Proposal Ready for Primetime?

Generally speaking, the best fellowship proposals have been reviewed by people who aren't familiar with your project, and considered from the viewpoint of a prospective funding partner. With that in mind, we have put together a few questions that we hope will help you get useful feedback on your letter of interest.

1. Have you answered the basic questions of who, what, where, when and how?
2. Is it declarative instead of narrative? It's legitimate to write a first draft in which you get to the point over time by telling the story of the project's evolution. If you've written your first draft narratively, find the core idea (probably at the bottom), and start your next draft by putting that core idea first. Then write to support the declaration of that core idea.
3. Is it externally focused? Coming up with internal language or shorthand to describe or define a project can be an important part of creative work, particularly if you are working collaboratively. But a proposal written in this type of internal language can be unconvincing and difficult to follow. To overcome this, get other people to interrogate the parts of your writing that they don't understand.
4. Can it be easily understood by a general audience? Keep in mind that fellowship proposals are read by a selection committee that includes people from all over the country and non-artists working actively in communities. Relying on art theory or jargon, or assuming that people already know about your project could work against you in the selection committee.
5. Does it balance vision and implementation? Some people are really good at laying out how a project will happen, and wind up shortchanging the vision piece, or what makes it art. Other people are good at making it sound like art, but wind up shortchanging its credibility. To be competitive, your proposal should do both.
6. Are the relationships clear, and do they have purpose and integrity? It can be difficult to clearly define and describe the relationships between individuals in these projects, but it's important to keep in mind that this is what social practice is made of, and that the descriptions of relationships and their ethical meaning will be a primary subject of discussion. Make sure other people read your proposal and think through the ethical relationships, worst-case scenarios, power dynamics, why people might want to participate, and so on.
7. Does it read like an artist's statement? Unlike the format that is often encouraged by MFA programs, where the motivation behind the work is outlined, the selection committee will be reading the proposal solely based on how well it fits the selection criteria. They will be more interested to read about what you are doing and how it is aesthetically meaningful or otherwise innovative.
8. Does it read like a bio? Your CV should tell your professional story in clear and abbreviated form, so leave that information out of the limited real estate of your proposal. Focusing instead on the project, the community you're working with and how you intend to do your work will help the committee understand how your project fits the criteria.
9. Have you asked people to interrogate the premise of your project? Is it sending the intended message, by the best means? Is it relevant to the people you want to serve? Are there pitfalls that you might have missed, or perspectives you haven't considered? We strongly recommend that you have experienced colleagues, including non-artist experts in the social issue or community you're working with, take a look at the idea, and its context and meaning in the world.