

## HOW TO APPLY FOR FELLOWSHIPS FROM THE ACLS

Panel Discussion by the College of Arts and Sciences, 4 March 2013; Notes compiled by Sarah L. Keller

**LINKS:** Overview of funding programs to which you can apply: [www.acls.org/programs/comps/](http://www.acls.org/programs/comps/)  
Criteria by which your proposal will be judged: [www.acls.org/programs/acls/](http://www.acls.org/programs/acls/)

**REVIEW PROCESS:** Review of applications is conducted in two rounds. In the first round, your proposal is reviewed by a small number of scholars in your field. You are asked to request letters of reference from two scholars in your field. Requesting at least one letter from a referee who is at “arm’s length” (i.e. who was not on your Ph.D. committee) may be a good decision, since it shows that you have a scholarly reputation beyond your inner circle. This letter often carries more weight than a letter from an insider, which can be read as an example of personal advocacy rather than as a professional assessment. (It is worth noting that you are also encouraged to suggest arm’s-length reviewers when you apply for tenure and promotions, for the same reasons of credibility). If your proposal is ranked highly by the scholars in your field, then it goes to a panel of several scholars with specialties across the humanities and humanistic social sciences that collectively decides if you will be funded; most of the scholars on the panel will be outside your field. Each participant in the panel reads and evaluates several dozen proposals. The list of scholars who serve on the panel changes every year as members rotate on and off of panels.

**WRITE WITHOUT JARGON:** Given that ACLS funding is awarded by a diverse group of evaluators, it is of the utmost importance for you to write in a manner that convinces a nonspecialist reader of the importance of your proposed work. Eschew jargon. Provide basic definitions of terms. It is especially helpful to provide basic examples to illustrate your point. (It is worth noting that writing without jargon to convince a panel of nonspecialists of the importance of your work is exactly what you do when you submit materials for your own promotion and tenure.) The easiest way for you to test whether your text is understandable to a nonspecialist is to ask colleagues far outside your field to read it – perhaps even ask someone in the physical sciences. Ask readers to identify words for which they don’t know the meaning. Ask them to repeat back to you what you will accomplish with the ACLS’s money.

**WRITE CLEARLY:** Imagine that your proposal is the 50<sup>th</sup> out of 50 that is read by a panel member, perhaps on the airplane en route to the panel meeting in New York. By this point, the panel member will be very tired, and highly attuned to academic blather and hogwash. Be as concrete as possible. Make it easy for the panel member to figure out what you will do. In a similar vein, explain the significance of your proposed work. You cannot guarantee that someone on the panel will be able or willing to describe the significance of your work to the other panel members. Be your own advocate by clearly outlining why your work is important.

**DESCRIBE WHAT YOU WILL DO WITH THE MONEY:** In one section, you will describe deliverables or finished products. Will you write a book? A journal article? Will you go to an archive? Will you travel somewhere to observe a culture? If it is reasonable for you to estimate what you will do quarter-by-quarter, provide that estimate. Can you provide an outline, a table of contents, and/or chapter lists for what you think that your final project will contain?

**FEASIBILITY:** The panel assesses the likelihood that your project will be completed within a reasonable time frame. Some aspects of feasibility relate to the nuts-and-bolts of your project. For example, if you need permission to access a resource, have you secured that permission? The panel also evaluates your track record of bringing projects to completion. For example, have you made it clear to the reviewers that

you have a record of previous publications to show that you are the type of person who completes projects? You should note within your application if you have already published any chapters on your proposed topic. It is not required that you already have chapters published, but you do need to be far enough along on the project that you can make a case that you will finish a significant piece of work within the allotted time and that you have a good grasp of your topic and where you are going with it. If you have a publication gap, it can be helpful to explain why this gap exists, especially if the gap arose because you were doing something interesting that might relate to your proposal. Of course, you don't want to go overboard in showing how feasible your project is. Specifically, you do not want to convey that you are so close to finishing the project that the work will get done whether or not it is funded. You do want to demonstrate to the panel that ACLS funding is needed.

**WHAT DOES THE ACLS FUND?** You can find a list of previously-funded projects on the ACLS website. Don't be discouraged if you find that nobody has been funded recently in your field. Apply anyway. The ACLS prefers to fund a portfolio of projects that span a variety of disciplines. The lack of awards in an area can become a self-fulfilling prophecy. Scholars can interpret a lack of awards in their discipline to mean that the ACLS does not fund in this discipline, and not apply, which means that the ACLS does not receive strong applications in that discipline to fund. It may be worthwhile consulting the list of scholarly organizations that are members of the ACLS: [www.acls.org/societies/learnedsocieties.aspx?id=136](http://www.acls.org/societies/learnedsocieties.aspx?id=136).

**TIMING** Suppose that your project is 2 years away from completion. You could write a strong proposal this year, but you think that you could write an even stronger proposal next year. Other than your investment of time in writing your proposal (which may actually help you in the writing of your final text), we have not heard of any concrete disadvantage in submitting a strong proposal. Even if your proposal is rejected, you'll receive good feedback. Remember that there is some luck of the draw concerning which reviewers you will get, so it may be wise to time your submission so that you have more than one chance at funding.

**THREE ISSUES SPECIFIC TO THE ACLS** 1) Nearly all of the comments above pertain to any grant proposal. For the ACLS application in particular, you are given the opportunity to submit a separate abstract, so take advantage of it. You could just submit the first paragraph of your proposal as your abstract, but since you are given this separate opportunity to communicate with your committee, why not summarize your work in a way that is distinct from your first paragraph? 2) The ACLS asks you to comment on your work's broader humanistic significance, which can include how your work is relevant outside your field. 3) An academic quarter is shorter than an academic semester. So, if you received a quarter's release from teaching, you still qualify for ACLS funds.

**FIELD WORK VS. WRITING** In disciplines in which field work is done, does the ACLS prefer to fund the field work, or the subsequent writing-up? The answer is "both." The ACLS has indeed funded field work. In this case you would state that you would rough out the project during your year of funding and then do the fuller writing on your own, perhaps during a sabbatical, or perhaps through other funding mechanisms.

**WHERE ELSE COULD YOU APPLY?** Participants in the panel discussion suggested the following: 1) See the "Linguist List" website for language-related funding. 2) Some libraries have funding available to support scholars who work with the library's collections. Look at the websites of the libraries. 3) The Canadian government reportedly supports scholars who do research on Canada. 4) If you are an artist, see Artist Trust at [artisttrust.org](http://artisttrust.org) or the New York Foundation for the Arts at [www.nyfa.org](http://www.nyfa.org). 5) Look through the acknowledgements sections of the publications of your closest colleagues to find who funded them.