

Department of History
University of Wisconsin-Madison
College of Arts and Sciences

History 710-01: Professional Development Seminar

**Writing Dissertations and
Grant Proposals**

3 credits/ in person

Fall 2025

Monday 3:30-5:25

5257 Humanities

Professor Louise Young
OH Monday 1:30-3:20 and by appt.

4102 Humanities Building
louiseyoung@wisc.edu

Seminar description/ Grant writing is a crucial skill for academic careers and yet it is often assumed that students simply possess this skill by virtue of being in graduate school. This seminar is focused on strategies for planning, writing and revising effective proposals for external fellowships to fund dissertation research. Since we will break down the components of an effective dissertation project summary, the strategies you learn can also be used to develop a dissertation prospectus. They will be transferable to other proposals as well, such as dissertation completion and post-doctoral fellowships. Participants will take part in a 14-week hands-on, workshop-style seminar with the aim of writing and refining a dissertation prospectus or grant proposal tailored to competitions available in the participant's field of study.

Learning objectives/

This seminar will help you learn how to:

- research and plan the external fellowship competitions appropriate to your topic and discipline
- break down dissertation proposal/ grant writing into a series of manageable skills and component parts
- produce a coherent and fundable description of your dissertation project with appendixes: bibliography, personal narrative, curriculum vitae
- produce an individualized timetable/schedule for your dissertation proposal/ grant writing to share with your advisor.

Course workload/ This is a 3-credit seminar, requiring a total of 135 hours of work. I anticipate that you will need to set aside an average of 6-8 hours/week for reading, research and writing assignments in addition to class time, but in all honesty, this will depend somewhat on where you are in relation to your dissertation project. You will come out of the seminar with a much firmer grasp on how to articulate your topic and the mechanisms involved in collecting and analyzing your data.

Grading/ This seminar is an opportunity to make progress on and improve your grant writing. The purpose of grading in this class is two-fold: to help you maintain engaged participation in the workshop and to give you regular individualized feedback on your proposals outside of the group

context in which much of the material you produce will be evaluated on a weekly basis. Your grades will have two components: a letter grade and written/oral comments. Your letter grade will be based solely on timely *completion* of all assignments (as scheduled) rather than on content. In addition to the letter grade, you will receive candid feedback on the content (organization, style, ideas, articulation, originality, etc.) of your proposal. Please recognize that the comments are intended to be helpful as well as brutally honest; almost all of us write dismal first drafts of our projects, however brilliant, that contain all sorts of unnecessary, pedantic, and/or downright incoherent prose as well as other verbal and conceptual baggage.

All assignments indicated with a (*) need to be completed and turned in as scheduled in order to receive a grade of “A” in this seminar. Minor variations in the assignment due dates are acceptable *with prior approval* from the instructor — but please be cognizant that this is intended as a hands-on workshop-style seminar and class meetings will be unproductive if you have not completed the assignments as scheduled.

Discussion posts are due **Saturday evening at midnight** to give class members and the instructor ample time to read each other’s work prior to class on Monday.

In-class writing exercises/ Some of the guided in-class writing exercises we will use in this seminar are adapted from the SSRC Dissertation Proposal Development Workbook. Others are activities developed by faculty in various grant-writing workshops that students found particularly helpful. We will try out these activities and change or adapt as needed. Please feel free to give lots of feed-back about what methods are working best for you as we go along!

CLASS SCHEDULE

September 8 **Week 1/ introduction**

Introductions; overview of the components of a research project proposal.

Post: a one paragraph description of your dissertation project.* This can be rough and speculative. This is your starting point—we will be building on this over the course of the semester. What is the topic of your dissertation? What are the key questions you want to answer? Why is this important?

In class writing: rework your topic description based on discussion and feedback.

Resources:

- [Guide to writing dissertation proposals and prospectuses](#)
- [Research topics/thought experiment](#)
- [Components of a grant proposal](#)

September 15 **Week 2/ no class meeting—individual work**

Prepare: review one or more of these [grant sites](#) and list several you can apply for. Note deadlines and requirements. Prepare an overview of a grant that is important in your field, to be presented to the class.

Read: the [SSRC Proposal Development Workbook](#), and take note of the different components of a dissertation proposal.

Small group work: revise your topic paragraph and workshop with your partner outside classtime

September 22 **Week 3/ getting started**

Identifying external grants, making timelines for proposal writing. We will discuss different fellowship opportunities and how to research grants in our fields. We will share and discuss your 1 paragraph statements and challenges.

Read: “Writing Effective Grant Proposals for Individual Fellowships in the Humanities and Social Sciences” by Susan Friedman and “On the Art of Writing Proposals” by Adam Przeworski and Frank Salomon (on canvas). Make notes on instructions and any questions that come up.

What are the particular challenges with respect to articulating your own project that you can imagine after reading these guidelines? Did the guidelines cause you to re-imagine any aspects of your data collection or analysis? Please bring these thoughts and reactions to class.

Post: 1 paragraph (250 words max) defining your project to be shared in class.* As succinctly as possible, introduce the topic of your dissertation and the problem you want to solve or question that you want to answer through this research. Be sure to explain what your project will do in a way that can be understood by scholars both within and outside of your discipline who may not be familiar with your topic or its context.

Make a list of issues and challenges that you discovered in the process of thinking through and writing this paragraph.

Small group work: workshop your topic paragraphs

In-class writing: revise your topic paragraph based on feedback from the class

September 29 **Week 4/ successful proposals**

What makes a grant proposal successful? We will be analyzing and “diagramming” 3 successful proposals in class. Some topics and strategies we will consider in class: organization, topic sentences, writing style, what makes a project “interesting”? Time management is essential to writing successful proposals. We will explore strategies for timelines and time budgets for different components of the dissertation proposal.

Read: model proposals ([model 1](#), [model 2](#), [model 3](#))

Prepare for class:

(1) [Worksheet](#) on the 3 model proposals

(2) Individualized timeline of grant competition deadlines and writing schedule to share with your advisor. Research the competitions you are eligible for and make a timeline to share with your advisor that details when you plan to be writing each application, when you will submit draft proposals for your advisor to comment on, and when you will submit the proposal. Include notes about when you will have materials ready for letter-writers. Every grant is different, so pay attention to how much time it will take to revise or reshape your basic proposal narrative for that individual competition. **OR**

(3) Individualized timeline of your dissertation prospectus writing schedule to share with your advisor. Make a timeline and time budget for the different components of the dissertation proposal. Think specifically of what you know now, and issues you will need to research. Make your best estimate of how long this might take. Take note of when the prospectus is due and work backwards, breaking time into months, weeks, and days that you will budget for specific tasks.

Make a list of questions, strategies, and anticipated challenges in the dissertation prospectus/ grant proposal process

In-class writing: work on your opening paragraphs defining your topic and research question. Make a bullet point list of how you might revise based on the models we read for this week: what is missing from your current draft? What are you inspired to add?

October 6 **Week 5/ research questions**

How to formulate compelling (coherent, provocative, fascinating, original, creative) research questions: in-class exercises and strategy session.

Read: Read two of the four book introductions: Robinson, Bradley, Chia, Winichakul (in canvas).

Prepare for class: find and make note of the research questions that form the basis for the projects described in each of the book introductions you read. (Highlight the paragraphs, identify page #s so you can refer to them in discussion). Write your own reformulation of each of their research questions.

Note that we are looking for underlying questions rather than arguments and conclusions here.

Post: 2-3 paragraph first draft description of your research questions, how they are original and why they are significant (to be shared in class)*

In-class small group work: workshop your research questions

In-class writing: revise your research questions based on feedback

October 13 **Week 6/ sources & archives**

How to identify and talk about sources. Students will share a 5-minute presentation on the archives and libraries you plan to use, and include one sample primary source and an explanation of how you plan to analyze it.

Read: several examples from Fulbright sample packet or the model proposals we looked at in week 4 (canvas): take note of how they discuss their sources and archives

Prepare for class: power-point presentation with 2-3 slides including one sample source. List of archives, collections, you will use + a brief description of these archives that includes all the information you can obtain in advance: finding guides, digitization and on-line access, catalogs, etc.

If at all possible, this would be a good week to visit (virtually) one or more of the archives you plan to consult.

In considering your primary source, explain how you will use it to solve the research problem or answer the question you have proposed. In your proposal, it will not be enough to say that you will “find and read” historical sources. You need to talk about *how* you will analyze them and discuss why these sources will help you to successfully answer your questions/address your problem. Take note of any challenges that you discovered in the process of thinking through your approach to your primary source.

In-class writing: Take a crack at your description of your archives and source material.

October 20 **Week 7/ methods**

How to talk about (historical) methods. We will discuss various scholarly constructions of methods and consider your draft methodology statements in class. In-class writing on situating your work with respect to previous scholarship and disciplinary conversations within the historical field.

Read: Look again at the book introductions we read in week 5 (Robinson, Bradley, Chia, Winichakul), and read the two you missed out the first time. How do these authors discuss their methodology? We are not looking at these texts as methodological models for your projects; rather, we are looking at them as models for how to successfully *talk about* methodology.

Prepare for class: find and make note of these author’s discussion of their methodology. (Highlight the paragraphs, identify the page #s so you can refer to them in discussion). How do they explain their methods?

Post: in two or three sentences, how would you characterize your approach? What historians or theorists have influenced your approach? Name a couple and identify aspects of their writing that inspire you or key concepts you plan to adopt. Is there a keyword or key concept that grounds your project? Respond to this prompt with a paragraph or list of bullet points on your method.*

In-class writing: Outline and if possible start to draft a description of your methodology. To help you get started on this task, you may want to identify scholarly works that inform your methods or approach. Briefly describe how the methods/ approaches used by these scholars inform your own, how you will build on them, correct, revise or enlarge them (etc). What if any are the shortcomings of these methods as used by other scholars and how will you correct them?

October 27 **Week 8/ more on methods**

Continue our work on methods; connect sources to methods.

Post: 1 page draft discussion of your methodology (to be shared in class).* Describe what you need to learn from your research in order to solve your problem or answer your question. In what ways have you chosen to focus your research (be it to study specific groups of people, places, time periods, texts, etc)? What method(s) or approach(es) have you chosen to accomplish these goals and how/why will they be effective? As you write, note any challenges that you discovered in the course of writing this assignment.

In-class group work: workshop methodology drafts, and discuss ways to connect the sources and methods components of your project. What kinds of evidence will you be using to make your claims? What connects your methods to your sources? How will you analyze your sources? What sources and methods of investigation will you employ to collect and record the information that you will need to complete your search? Why are your choices appropriate given your research question or problem?

November 3 **Week 9/ "lit review"**

Situating your project within a scholarly context, also known as the "lit review." What goes into a proposal and what doesn't; strategies for demonstrating that you know the scholarly literature on your topic without summarizing it at length. In-class writing exercise on situating your work with respect to scholarly conversations outside of your discipline. If time: making a detailed schedule and timeline for your research.

Read: Keppy, Rotter (in canvas). What are some of the rhetorical strategies they use for laying out both narrow and broad-ranging categories of related scholarly studies?

Due in canvas: Drawing on our work in the previous weeks, upload to the [assignment tab](#) a 3-5 page draft of the components of the proposal that we have worked on thus far: topic description, research questions, significance, sources and methods.* **(instructor feedback)**

In-class writing: outline your historiography section: what are the key literatures that you build upon? What are the debates that you are joining?

November 10 **Week 10/ more on lit review**

Continue work on literature review/ historiography. Workshop historiography drafts in class. We will also continue our work thinking through the connections between historiography/sources/ methods.

Post: 2-page description of the literature(s) that you will reference in your project and the debates where you will make an intervention.*

In-class small group work: workshop your drafts on historiography/lit review.

November 17 **Week 11/ personal statements and vitas**

Strategies for succinctly presenting your qualifications and preparedness, and coordinating with vita. What needs to be in the vita? What is the connection between qualifications and vita?

Strategies for effective personal statements. We will discuss strategies and aims of personal statements and how they should and shouldn't intersect with your project statement.

Review: the model vitas on canvas as well as personal statements from the Fulbright handout packet. What do you notice? Which seems the most effective? Why? Note ideas to incorporate into your vita and personal statement.

Post: a copy of your updated cv. (A personal statement is *not* a narrative version of your cv but glancing at your cv may help you think through what you want to emphasize). You may also share a draft of your personal statement, if you prefer. (You have probably written personal statements – such as your grad school application personal statement, or other application letters. These can be helpful as you prepare a personal statement for dissertation research grants.)

In-class writing: Draft your personal statement. Where did your research project topic come from? What are the personal and professional experiences, interests, observations, questions and/or scholarship that motivated your research? What are the large underlying or overarching questions that run through your intellectual biography?

In-class group work: workshop vitas

November 24 **Week 12/ Timelines and qualifications**

Discuss research strategies: how to organize your time in the archives?

Read: timelines and qualifications sections from Fulbright handout packet or model proposals (week 4)

Post:*

(1) a detailed work plan (2 paragraphs) and schedule or timeline.* Describe how you will organize and carry out your investigations. What is your total timeline for your dissertation research? Where will you go and how long will you spend in each research site? What will you be doing there? How will this work contribute to solving your problem/addressing your question? When and where will you do the work of analyzing your data? Be forewarned that this will take some time to work out even though the amount of space devoted to it in your proposal is relatively

small. Plan to work on this with a calendar in front of you and think realistically about logistics. Sketch out your research plan in as much detail as you can, at least on a week by week basis. This can be an extremely valuable exercise (and a reality check) if you take it seriously.

(2) 1 paragraph (200 word max) draft statement of your qualifications, training and preparedness for conducting research on your topic (to be shared in class).^{*} Describe the skills you have gained that make you particularly well-suited to conduct your dissertation research. For instance, what languages and investigative or analytical skills have you learned that will be necessary for your research, and how did you attain them? What contacts or permissions or access do you have that will be helpful or essential to conducting your research? What if any unique qualifications do you possess? This paragraph should not be challenging to think through but cramming it all into 100-200 words will probably take strategic trimming.

In-class small group work: workshop timeline and qualifications

December 1 **Week 13/ TBD—writer's choice**

We can workshop sections of your proposal, or take a week off to draft your proposals. If the former, pick one component you want help with: topic and research question, sources and methods, historiography and debates, timeline and qualifications, personal narrative.

Post: the section of your proposal on which you would like feedback.

December 8 **Week 14/ proposal workshop**

We will workshop your 10-page proposal drafts in class today. Strategies for making revisions including the “topic sentence rule of thumb” and [“reverse outline”](#) methods.

Write: the first draft of your 10-page research narrative. You will be able to draw on many of the individual components that we have produced already but I recommend that you *not* simply cut and paste them into your proposal. Instead, work off of them but be willing to write new versions that flow out of the narrative you are constructing. You will need to develop an outline and subtitles for your proposal. Consult the model proposals for ideas but adapt the subtitles to your own project.

Post: by Saturday evening, a draft of your proposal to circulate to class.* Each person will be assigned two proposals to provide comments.

Due in canvas: Upload a copy of your proposal to the [assignment tab](#)*(instructor feedback)