THE PROFESSOR IS IN

THE ESSENTIAL GUIDE TO TURNING YOUR PH.D. INTO A JOB

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First Edition

To Kellee, who inspires
To Miyako, who questions
To Seiji, who challenges

FIFTY-ONE

The Foolproof Grant Template

Grants are essential to a competitive record. First, because they are evidence of peer review that demonstrates the intellectual viability of your project. A major grant shows you to be, in a sense, "pre-vetted" by a set of scholars in your field. And second, because you need the money to finish the work without adding to your debt.

Grant writing is the most formulaic of all genres of academic writing. I learned this as a new assistant professor through the good graces of a senior colleague, a full professor who had recently moved to West Coast U from an Ivy League institution. He kindly took me under his wing, and one of the things that he told me in my first year was to apply for major national fellowships, and not stop until I got a year of research leave to write my book. He had received the National Endowment for the Humanities Fellowship a few years earlier, and he urged me to apply.

I demurred—how could I compete for a major fellowship that even senior scholars struggled to win? Nevertheless, he encouraged me, and passed on to me his own successful proposal to use as a model. He explained that this proposal drew from another proposal written by one of his former senior colleagues at his previous institution. I was at least the third generation to draw from the model. The projects of the three proposals were not remotely similar in terms of topic or geographical area; rather, it was only the proposal structure that he was telling me to study. The first

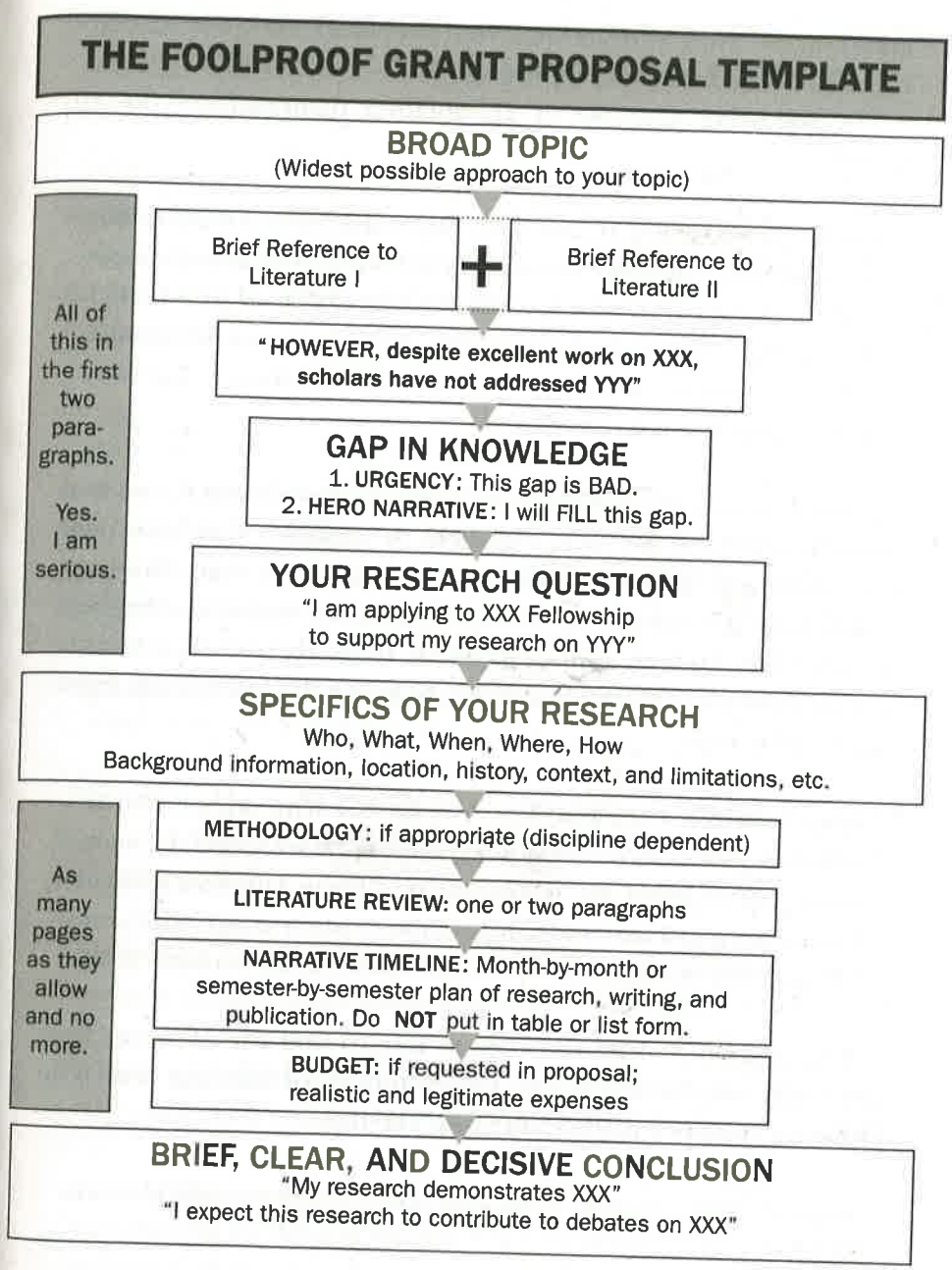
iteration, and then my colleague's, and then my own, all followed a consistent organization. And, lo and behold, it worked for me for the NEH competition, just as it had worked for them.

I immediately saw the utility of the proposal structure, and used it again and again. Once I mastered it, I won virtually every grant and fellowship for which I applied. When I had graduate students of my own, I passed my NEH application on to them, calling it my "grant template." All of my students used it to organize their grant and fellowship applications and they, too, won almost every major fellowship for which they applied.

I freely shared my proposal with any grad student who asked during my years of teaching. Eventually I left my academic career and came back to West Coast U, where I briefly worked as an advisor in the McNair Scholars Program, a program providing graduate school preparation and application support for first-generation and underrepresented advanced undergraduate students, very green in the ways of the academic world. These students were all working on applications for much-needed fellowships, and I knew that the template would help them, but I saw that they were too inexperienced to be able to decipher the organization themselves. So I took the next step, and I broke it down for them.

I reduced my old NEH proposal into its elemental building blocks, and provided a basic explanation for its parts. I saw that the formula is, at root, a Hero Narrative, and that it establishes the three goals of legitimacy, urgency, and viability.

The first step is to identify the general topic of wide interest that your specific project relates to. This will be a topic that anyone in your field would agree is significant. If your work concerns urgent topics such as immigration, sustainable energy, curing cancer, new social technologies, environmental degradation, global climate change, and so forth, this is easy. But even if you work in an obscure area of study, you must begin at the widest possible level of interest. Until you can identify a broadly interesting theme, you will never be completely successful in applying for grants. Your application must excite readers, and the readers are likely from a range of different disciplinary locations. They will not be compelled by intellectual minutiae and the angels on the heads of the pins of your



micro-niche. They want to know that your work and your scholarly vision are broad and encompassing.

The following example of an opening demonstrates the approach.[1]

> The history of civil rights and black power activism in American history and public memory has come to the fore in recent years, especially with the rise of new monuments, like the Dr. Martin Luther King Jr. Memorial in Washington, D.C. The question of who should be considered the most important black leaders in these movements, however, has been contested.

Once you have established your topic, you then identify two bodies of literature from your own field or subfields that have dealt with this topic. This brief survey will be no more than three sentences long. It is not a comprehensive literature review, the bugbear of graduate student applicants fresh from their comprehensive exams. Instead, it is merely a sketch to prove the intellectual legitimacy of the topic.

> Some scholars of African American history have argued that research should focus on the primary ideological leaders of the movement (Jeffries 2002). Yet, scholarship on African American women's history has noted that leadership narratives often marginalize women's activism (Robinett 2000, Gore, Woodard, and Theoharis 2009).

This section is brief in order to foreground the However Sentence, the axis on which your entire appeal for funding rests. The However Sentence reads something like this:

> However, none of these works have addressed the central question of X.

X in this case is what your research has revealed to be essential to an accurate understanding of the big topic identified in the first one or two sentences.

In our case:

> To date, however, little work has thoroughly examined African American women's central role as intellectual and ideological leaders in the black power movement.

Notice that the However Sentence operates without any passive aggressive or judgmental rhetoric about other scholars' failings ("the stunning failure of the field to account for X"). A neutral observation of a gap in the literature suffices.

This brings us to urgency. What are the stakes of not knowing this thing?

> As a result, scholarship endorses a narrative that characterizes African American women primarily as activists, making their intellectual role marginal or nonexistent in one of the largest social movements in American history. Without an adequate analysis of African American women as activists and intellectuals, we undervalue their impact in the civil rights and black power movements, ultimately leading to a one-sided conceptualization of the movements' importance and legacy.

Enter the Hero. As the Hero, you are the one who shall save us from ourselves, and our devastating ignorance about the true significance of X.

> My project, *Title,* remedies this gap by analyzing the intellectual production of black women radicals during the black power movement.

This is immediately followed by a concrete statement of the proposed work. This is one of the most often forgotten elements.

> I am applying to the X University Postdoctoral Fellowship in order to transform my dissertation into a monograph, *Title,* a study of the impact of African American women on the ideological and organizational direction of the black power movement.

This can be followed by a brief preliminary elaboration of the methods and the argument of the research.

> Through close examinations of the political speeches, pamphlets, and drawings of women in black power organizations, I argue that African American women developed gender-specific political identity models that connected their gendered interests to black power ideology. I contend that the political models that African American women developed caused black power organizations, and the movement at large, to be more inclusive in their ideological and political priorities. Ultimately, my research shows that the models created through African American women's intellectual production caused the movement to be as radical in its critique of patriarchy as it was in its critique of racism.

The most important single rule of the Foolproof Grant Template is controlling the length of this opening. All of the above must be accomplished in two paragraphs, and no more. The tendency of far too many grant writers is to front-load obscure arguments and complaints, and to bury their topics in a sea of literature review and citation, leading to an organization in which the point of the grant is not arrived at until five or more pages into the proposal (or never!).

This is an error, because it doesn't take into account the state of mind of the reviewer. The reviewer is skimming what could well be hundreds of these proposals. The reviewer is exhausted and distracted. If the legitimacy and urgency of the project are not established immediately on the first pages, the proposal will be passed over.

The rest of the proposal provides substantiating evidence that the project is a feasible one, according to reasonable and well-thought-out disciplinary methods and timeline. That is, it establishes viability—that the project can and will be finished during the term of, and using the resources of, the grant or fellowship.

Specifics and Background: One or two paragraphs of specific information about the background, context, history, and scope of the research. This section often answers basic questions such as when, where, who, what, and how.

Literature Review: A brief sketch of the major literature related to the topic, no more than one or two paragraphs in length. This is not your comprehensive exams. All sources may be listed in an attached bibliography, which will likely not count against length or word count.

Methodology: If appropriate to your field, include the methods that you will use to conduct the research. These differ by discipline, and are not always required.

Timeline: A narrative, semester-by-semester, or month-by-month, plan of research. What will you do when? Be specific and give dates. Here is an example:

> The X Postdoctoral Fellowship will allow me to revise this project for publication as a scholarly monograph. During the first semester of the fellowship, I will continue conducting interviews with women like Q, who organized women's meetings and speeches at major political events. I will also finalize chapter 4, using this new material. During the Spring semester, I will finalize chapter 5, revise the conclusion, and submit the manuscript to scholarly presses such as University of X Press and University of Y Press. During the second year of the award, I will begin researching my next scholarly project, *"Title."* This project will examine A and B [about two sentences]. My preliminary research shows that . . . [about 1 sentence]. Resources for this project are located in the S Center for Research on Black Culture, etc.

Budget: This is not required in all proposal narratives. If it is, include both anticipated costs and any already committed funding sources. Break down your legitimate research expenses, including lab supplies, field supplies, travel both large and small, books and materials, Internet or computer access fees, and so forth.

Conclusion: Finish with a clear conclusion. Even one sentence suffices, but do not neglect to include it. It may read like this: "I expect

this research to contribute to debates on X and play an important role in shaping research on X and Y in the coming years."

> My scholarship reveals black women's previously hidden intellectual production, making their theoretical contributions more accessible. In the process, it reveals black women activists as key figures in the development and direction of black power activism, ultimately contributing to debates about the public memory of African American liberation movements.

This conclusion pulls together the disparate elements of the application and returns the reader to the urgency of the subject.

Do all of this, my friend, and you will walk away with abundant funding for every project. You will have the leisure to do the best work, and the best work will, in turn, legitimize you for the next major grant for which you apply. You will be on the grant gravy train, and that is the key to the most successful academic careers. As you gain these successes, be sure to pass on your own grant proposals as models to those coming after you. Stay alert to this kind of capital when it crosses your path, and always be ready to pass it on. It's good karma.

FIFTY-TWO

Proving Your Project Is Worthy

While the Foolproof Grant Template is highly formulaic, that doesn't mean it is easy to apply in practice. There are two places where grant writers working with the template routinely fall down: The first is in the first "large topic" sentence. And the second is in the articulation of the "gap" that occurs in the However Sentence.

In the Foolproof Grant Template, I ask for an opening sentence or two that quickly engages the reader in the topic of the research. This is more difficult than it seems. Young academics have been so disciplined to think in terms of analysis and citation that they cannot easily step back to remember that there is a phenomenon that precedes scholarly argumentation about the phenomenon. This phenomenon exists or existed in the world at large—the world in which people live, as opposed to the world that is inside your or your advisor's mind.

You will note that the Foolproof Grant Template does not open with the tedious line, "My/this research/dissertation is about . . ." That is because this is one of the most self-absorbed openings possible, and it displays indifference to the wants and needs of readers.

Consider these four opening sentences:

> "My dissertation is about declining polar bear populations."

> "I am applying to the X Fellowship to support my dissertation, which is on