

How to Write a Good Proposal

**a guide for undergraduates on summer travel grants
for senior thesis research**

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Welcome to the Center for European Studies

The Minda de Gunzburg Center for European Studies was established in 1969 to promote teaching and scholarship on modern European affairs across a variety of disciplines. The Center is home to faculty members and graduate students from different departments whose work is on Europe. The CES community also includes affiliated scholars from area universities such as MIT, Brandeis, Boston University and Brown. In addition, every year many scholars come from Europe, the United States and the rest of the world to be in residence. The result is an exciting atmosphere where people with common interests come to meet and share ideas.

CES has a full calendar of speakers, conferences and seminars that are open to the Harvard community. Take advantage of the chance to come listen and talk to prominent politicians, policy makers, scholars, journalists, and activists in a cozy setting. Pick up a copy of the monthly calendar at the front desk or visit us online at www.ces.fas.harvard.edu/.

Our undergraduate brochure, *Program for Undergraduates*, describes the internships, grants and other opportunities at CES available to

individuals and organizations on campus. You are also invited to browse the library, drop by to read a foreign newspaper or check out a movie from our collection of videos from or about Europe.

Summer Travel Grants at CES

CES offers summer travel grants to juniors (and in exceptional cases, sophomores) in the Harvard Faculty of Arts and Sciences who are preparing senior theses on political, social, historical, economic, cultural and intellectual trends in modern Europe. The Center funds research in Western and Central Europe. Grants must be used for research abroad during the summer break. The maximum amount of the award is \$5,000. In some cases, funding will be shared with other grant programs. Funding is provided by the Krupp Foundation and the Minda de Gunzburg Center for European Studies. This booklet answers questions that you might have about the grant process and gives some tips about how to put together a good proposal.

How do I apply for a CES grant?

Many of the Centers at Harvard that offer summer thesis research travel grants use a common application form. The application process is coordinated by the Office of Career Services. The application form and the instructions are available on the OCS web-site: www.ocs.fas.harvard.edu

You will need to submit the following materials:

- . Six copies of the application form, and six copies of all other required materials, including:
- . Resume
- . Research Proposal
- . Transcript
- . Budget
- . List of additional sources applied for

You will also need to fill out the Application worksheet (to determine total number of required copies to submit), the Fellowships Office Registration Card, and have two confidential letters of recommendation sent.

Although your application will be the same, if you are applying to other Centers that use the common application, you should know that each Center has its own committee and reviews only the proposals submitted to that Center. If you submit a proposal

to more than one Center, it will be evaluated by each Center separately. The decision to fund a proposal is made independently by each Center. However, if more than one Center decide to fund your research, they will share the funding costs of your project.

What type of proposals does CES fund?

As the description of the grant suggests, CES funds a wide variety of proposals that have to do with Europe. The selection committee is not looking for a particular department or concentration when they review applications. They are much more interested in a well-argued proposal that states the research question clearly and gives a good indication of what the person plans to do and how that activity will help answer the research question. Some examples of recent senior theses funded by CES include:

“Poland's negotiation strategies in the debate over EU enlargement and the European constitution”

“The impact of remittances from abroad on agricultural productivity in rural Romania”

“The Legacy of Muslim Epic and Modern Bosniak Identity”

“The Irish Language Movement in Belfast: Identity and Contested Ideas of Nationalism”

“Wolfgang Koeppen and the Holocaust Memoir Scandal in the German Press”

Suppose that I want to compare Europe and another part of the world; can I apply to CES?

Yes. Some projects may involve Europe’s relationship to another part of the world but the fieldwork is to be carried out in Europe. Recent examples of this type of thesis include:

“A Comparative Study on the Origins of the Battered Women’s Movements in Great Britain and the U.S.”

“Fieldwork in Madrid with Ecuadorian Immigrants”

Other projects may actually entail travel to two different parts of the world. For example, if you wanted to write a thesis comparing the electoral effects of gender quotas in political parties in Spain

and Argentina, or compare British responses to the 1857 Indian Rebellion in Britain and in India, you might need to plan two trips. In such cases, CES would consider funding the European portion of the project-related travel and would expect you to apply to other relevant centers on campus to fund the non-European travel component.

What other funding options are available?

Many other Centers in FAS and at the Kennedy School of Government offer funding for students who are writing senior theses. In addition, there are alumni funds available as well as fellowships outside of Harvard. A complete listing of resources is available at the Office of Career Services. Their website address is: www.ocs.fas.harvard.edu.

I receive financial aid and am expected to earn money over the summer. Does that mean I can’t accept a summer travel grant if I am awarded it?

No. The Dean’s Summer Research Awards are designed to give rising seniors who receive financial aid the opportunity to devote the summer to thesis research. The awards provide students who have already received a research grant with an additional

grant to cover the summer savings requirement of their financial aid packages. Funded by the Dean of the Faculty of Arts and Sciences, this program reflects the faculty's commitment to undergraduate research and to providing equal educational opportunities for all students. You can find out more about these from the Student Employment Office at www.seo.harvard.edu.

Is there any other sort of help available for the thesis writer?

Yes. CES has workshops for undergraduates on subjects such as *Choosing a Senior Thesis Topic*, *Working in Archives Abroad*, *Interviewing Strategies*, and *Writing a Proposal for Funding*. All students are welcome at these workshops, not just those with an interest in Europe. The strategies and advice discussed in these are widely applicable to many thesis writers. Check the CES website for dates and times. CES will hold office hours close to the proposal deadline where students can get individual feedback on their proposals before turning them in. Examples of past winning proposals are available for perusal in the CES library.

Also, you should look at the Weatherhead Center for International Affairs (www.wcfia.harvard.edu)

and the David Rockefeller Center for Latin American Studies (<http://drclas.fas.harvard.edu/>), which both sponsor workshops for students.

Writing the Proposal

As many of your professors and teaching fellows will tell you, good proposals take time to write. Several drafts may be required and it is a wise idea to have someone else look over what you have written for style, clarity and substance. The advantage of taking the necessary time is not simply that your proposal has a better chance of being funded, but the process helps you refine your ideas and gives you a better sense of what your thesis is really about.

Picking the right topic

A good proposal starts with the right topic. First and foremost, the topic must be right for you. Remember, you are planning to spend the summer and much of next year working on it so it needs to be an idea that will hold your attention. There are many sources of ideas for a senior thesis. You may have taken a course and been particularly intrigued

by a topic and want to pursue it now in much more depth. Perhaps you have an insight about how two topics you know something about may be linked in a new and interesting way. You may be frustrated by the uncertainty of explanations given for some event or state of affairs and want to see if you can provide a more satisfactory answer. An outside interest or hobby may be your source of inspiration. Sometimes an idea that you have been reading about for a class or researching for a professor might link to an outside interest and a senior thesis is a change to bring the two together.

Once you have the germ of an idea of what you might like to work on, you need to do some further investigation about what is known about the topic. If it is an area where you have already done some reading, a good place to start is by looking at the bibliographies of books or articles for further readings that seem close to what you want to do. Sometimes a line or idea in a book or article might strike you as an interesting thing to investigate further. Check to see if that idea is footnoted and begin with a search of the source there.

Online searches for material are also a good idea and may be especially useful for helping you think about a topic that you haven't done much reading on. The online resources available through Hollis

are an excellent place to start. Some of the best include:

- Academic Search Premier, which provides full text articles from over 3,500 scholarly publications
- JSTOR, which offers full text of more than 500 academic journals covering a wide range of disciplines

These, as well as many individual journals, are available and searchable by keywords. You can access them with your Harvard ID at <http://lib.harvard.edu/e-resources/index.html>

Google has also recently launched 'Google Scholar' which enables you to search specifically for scholarly literature, including peer-reviewed papers, theses, books, preprints, abstracts and technical reports from all broad areas of research. The address for that is www.scholar.google.com.

After you have some sense of what interests you, faculty members, tutors and graduate students can help steer you toward developing a project that is intellectually sound and can be done given constraints of time and other resources. Talking to them should be a collaboration, not a one-sided conversation. You should have a good enough idea of what you want to do that you can have a productive exchange. If you go to them with only a

very vague idea and expect them to come up with a topic, you risk working on something that does not really excite you. You also need to avoid the temptation to please a favorite faculty member or advisor by working on a topic that he or she thinks is interesting but that you don't. The point of working with your advisor is to have a give and take that results in you working on the topic that you want to in a way that makes sense and is intellectually defensible.

The next step after you have refined your area of interest is converting the topic into a researchable question. Here you need to think about what you are trying to show, explain or discover and how to narrow that down into a specific plan for research. You might be fascinated by the very low fertility rate in southern Europe (the topic), for example, but you would need to turn that into a research question. A sociologist might wonder: what economic and social factors influence how couples in Italy approach the decision to have children? A student in government could decide to investigate: how do welfare state policies in southern Europe influence the birthrate? A historian could ask: how do today's birthrates compare with those in the past and what accounts for the change?

Another crucial aspect of the initial stage of thesis work is making sure that you have the appropriate skills, time and resources to carry out your study. Research questions are answered through particular methodologies and you want to be sure that a particular method is feasible for you. For example, if the only good way to answer a particular question were to conduct a large national survey, this would be a poor choice since you would be unlikely to have the time or funds to be able to do that. Similarly, if you wanted to do ethnographic research on a particular minority community in some country and only spoke the national language rather than the minority language, this could be a poor choice of topic. Research that would require very lengthy stays in many distant archives would likewise be inappropriate for a senior thesis.

Writing a good proposal

Once you have your topic and your research question, you need to convince others about its merits. You have a chance to do that when you write a proposal asking someone or some organization to give you money to do the work to be able to answer your question. A good proposal

shows them why it deserves support. Here are some suggestions for proposal writing.

Write for a Committee of Scholars. The first thing to remember is that committees read proposals and they are composed of people from different areas. In the case of CES grants, committee members are Harvard faculty.

Contrary to popular opinion, they are not experts in every conceivable area of study. In particular, they may not be especially familiar with the topic you are proposing to write about. Your job, therefore, is to make it clear to an intelligent, well educated but not necessarily expert audience why what you are doing is interesting.

This means that you should neither condescend to nor assume that the reader will automatically know what you are talking about. Give enough background for the reader to understand the importance of the topic. If there is a debate in the literature about your topic, indicate that. It is often very effective to show that you understand the different points of view surrounding your chosen subject matter. If you are taking a position on a topic, say so, but make sure that you do not indicate that you have already decided your conclusions before beginning the research. If very

little has been done on your question, indicate that but also say why it's a problem that little has been done. (You don't want the reader to think that the reason no one has looked at the question before is because it's not very interesting.)

It is all right to be enthusiastic about your topic. You do not want to gush or use exclamation points in your proposal but it is equally a mistake to convey the sense that this is a hoop you are dutifully jumping through. Faculty members do get excited by new ideas from students; this is your chance to let them see you shine.

Indicate what you are planning to do once you get to your destination. Too often, a student has a good topic and question but then fails to show how she or he plans to answer it. Be as specific as possible. If you are going to use archives, tell the reader which ones and what types of documents you will be looking for. If you will be at specialized museums or libraries, describe the collections and how you will make use of them. If you are going to interview policy makers, say which ones if you know or at least the type of person you will contact. Indicate your plan for contacting them. If your research is ethnographic, discuss your strategy for finding communities and describe what you will do when you are there.

Show why what you are going to be doing is an appropriate way to answer the research question that you pose. You need to show why what you are going to do will help you answer your central question. You do not want the reviewer to ask 'but what will that tell us?' when she or he reads your plans for the summer. What do you expect to learn from the archives, collections, interviews or observations?

Be realistic about your goals for the summer. Don't forget, the selection committee members have all conducted research in Europe themselves and have a good sense of what it's like. You should try to contact libraries and archives to see what their policies and collections are like before you go or talk to someone who may have worked in them. Remember that many institutions have policies that are different from the libraries that you are used to. Open stacks are not very common in European libraries, which means that you may have to request information and documents and there may be a limit on the number you can request at any one time. Smaller collections may have limited hours, few electronic resources and lengthy waits to get xeroxing done. You may be surprised by what you find and feel that you need to explore an area that was not on your original agenda. Given all

this, it can take a while to get what you need, slowing down your time frame.

Similarly, with interviews, things will rarely go exactly as you plan. People will need to cancel and reschedule. Interviewees may suggest other people for you to talk to or the new ideas that inevitably emerge from the research process may lead you to want to set up additional interviews. Research takes time to do, especially when you are new to the setting. For that reason, CES is unlikely to fund summer research projects of very short duration.

In many countries, things begin to slow down toward the end of July when national vacations begin. If you say you plan to interview Portuguese civil servants during the month of August, the committee will not take your application very seriously. Try to show that you are trying to become at least moderately familiar with the relevant research setting as you plan your summer so that you can realistically assess the time you need.

Get an advisor and advice early. Your advisor will help you focus your ideas and should be willing to read, and comment on, a draft of your proposal. In addition, the recommendation letters are an important part of the application for funding. It is

much better to have letters, especially from your thesis advisor, that can comment knowledgeably on your project and your qualifications to carry it out. Your letter writers can only do this if they have time to get to know you and your topic.

There are other places to get advice on your thesis. CES has many visiting scholars from Europe who are familiar with research centers there and would be happy to give you advice. Seniors who spent last summer on travel grants are also an excellent resource and they are usually delighted to talk about both their triumphs and frustrations in doing research abroad.

Give a clear rationale why you need to go to Europe. Is your project general enough that it could be done anywhere in the world, including the US, or is the European focus truly forceful and compelling? Could the project be completed just as easily relying on material available locally? Since Widener has such a magnificent collection, why do you need to go abroad to do library work? Can you get the same information about what groups or individuals are doing from newspapers or journals, rather than going to Europe? If you cannot provide a good rationale for a trip to Europe, the committee is likely to turn down your request for funds, even when they think the topic is an excellent one.

Develop your budget. It is very important to give the committee some indication about how much this will cost. Thinking about this early on will also help you to focus on what is feasible in terms of your topic. Airfares are easy to find on the Internet and you might look there for information about living expenses as well as talk to students who have been to Europe recently. The *Let's Go* publications and other budget guides can also give you a sense of costs and where to look. The committee expects that you will stay in inexpensive accommodations such as student dormitories, shared apartments, youth hostels and the like. Don't forget to include the cost of gathering your information. Xeroxing, copies of microfilm, fees to use collections may all be higher than you are used to. If you will be traveling within a country or to different cities within Europe, you should include domestic and European travel costs in the budget.

Remember your manners. All along the way of doing a senior thesis, there will be people who go out of their way to help you. They are very happy to do so. As a courtesy, you should always remember to follow-up with someone who has taken time out of his or her busy schedule to meet with you or offer you advice, help and contacts. If a professor you've never met before sits down and talks about

your topic, send her an email expressing your appreciation. If you conduct interviews for your thesis or encounter an archivist who goes beyond the call of duty for you, write such people a brief thank-you note. Such behavior not only shows that you are a considerate professional, but it also helps people remember you and your project.

Summary points for writing the proposal

- **State your central question clearly**
- **Explain its importance**
- **Say what you plan to do**
- **Say why you plan to do it**
- **Be realistic about your research goals**
- **Show why you need to go to Europe**
- **Develop clear budget figures**