



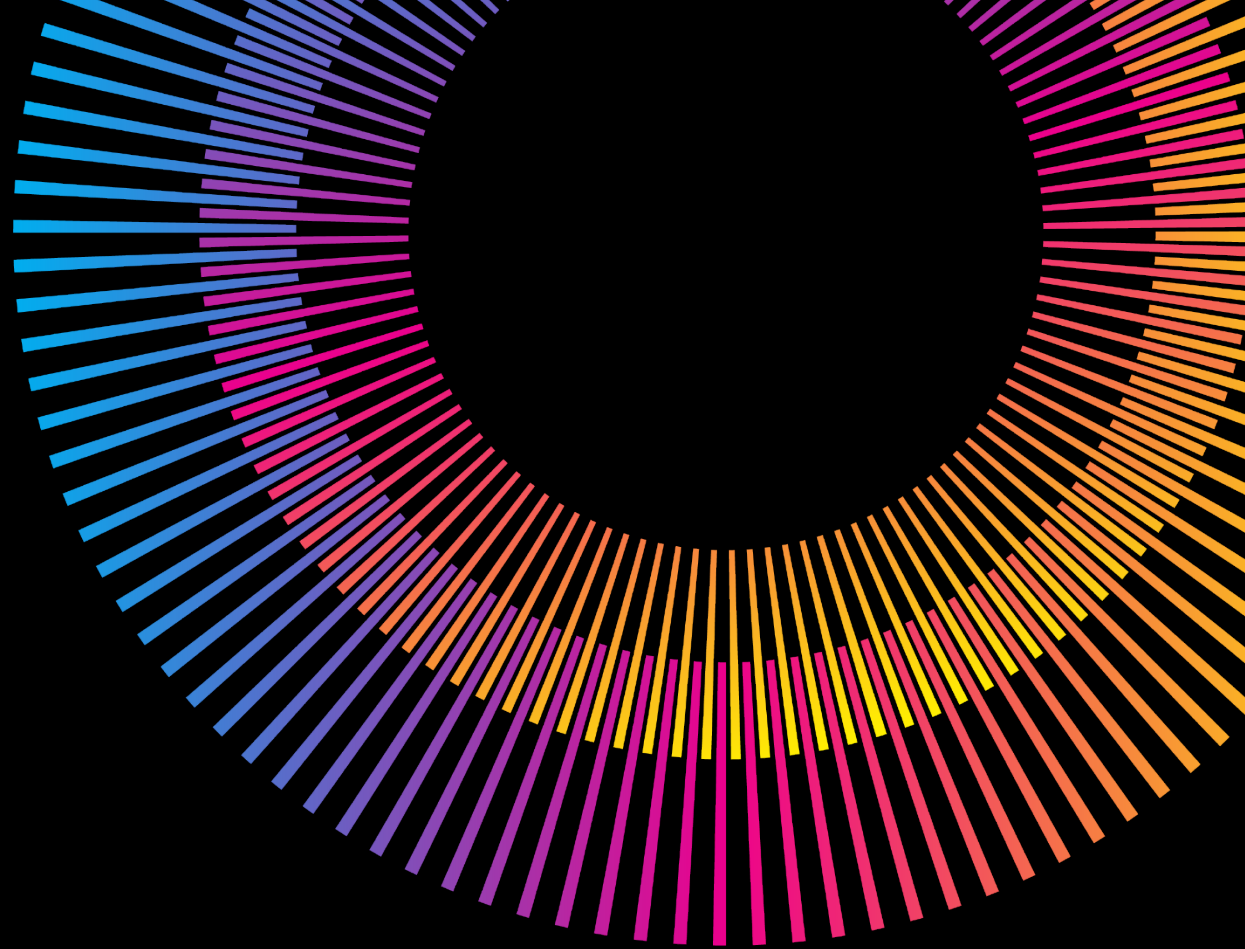
ACLS

American Council of
Learned Societies

Application Tips

Chris Thornton, PhD
Kolb Fellow since '02

April 10, 2026



The Application Process



REVIEW PROCESS

Phase 1

Eligibility and Prescreening

- ACLS screens applications for eligibility
- Eligible applications proceed to first round of review conducted by subject experts
- A group of finalists are chosen

Phase 2

Finalist Review and Selection

- Finalist applications proceed to a committee of experts (Selection Committee or SelCom)
- Committee meets to select the award nominees

Phase 3

Fellowship Award Nomination

- ACLS notifies nominees
- Nominees accept or decline the award
- ACLS confirms eligibility of nominees and announces fellowship awards

“Interpretive Social Sciences”

For many ACLS fellowship and grant competitions, eligible projects may include sociology, linguistics, anthropology, and other fields in the social sciences as long as they **provide a theoretical framework for exploring the complexities of human experience, emphasizing the importance of context and historical interpretation in understanding social phenomena.**

Please be sure to review the eligibility requirements and FAQs for individual competitions to confirm qualification.

When in doubt, ask program staff before applying!

Tips for Applicants

Prepare & Plan

1. **Start Early**: it takes time to make contacts on campus; sign up for program updates at acls.org/stay-in-touch, etc.
2. **Review Application Guidelines and Program Criteria**: Detailed Competition and FAQ pages associated with each program are available on the ACLS website.
3. **Tap Into Resources**: Join free office hours, watch webinars with ACLS program officers, and review sample projects on the ACLS website.
4. **Draft early and solicit feedback**
5. **Don't Delay**: Don't wait to submit your application.

Tips for Applicants

Engage

1. Think About the Specific Genre of Writing a Proposal

- It is not a book proposal nor an essay
- You must convince your reader that your proposal matters

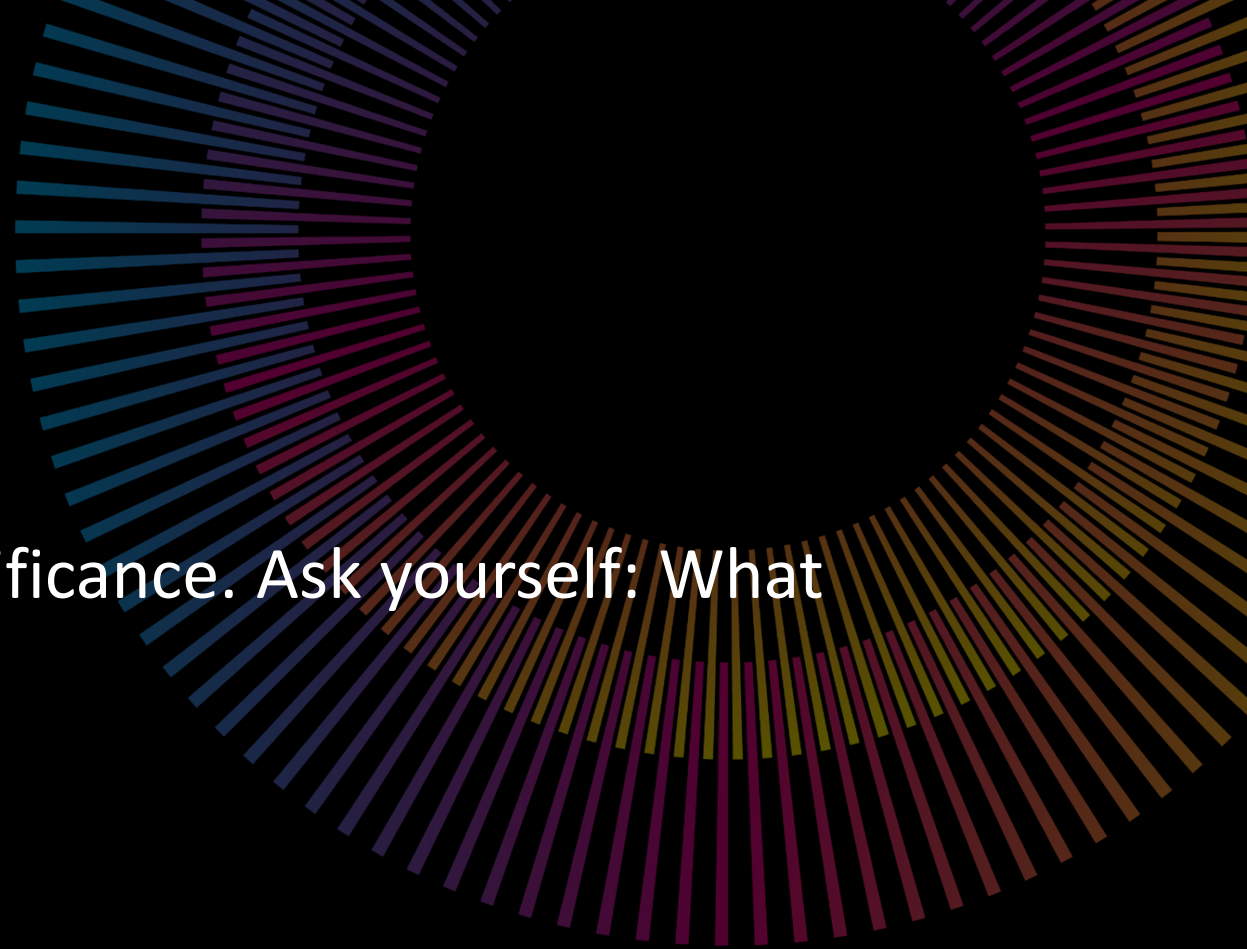
2. Think About the Audience(s)

- Your ideas matter; how you present them matters too.
- Write for specialists and generalists
- Avoid jargon

Tips for Applicants

Make Your Case

- Start with the review criteria
- Demonstrate your project's significance. Ask yourself: What makes it significant?
- Provide context
- Use concrete examples
- Anticipate and answer possible concerns
- Results: What does the end product look like?



Tips for Applicants

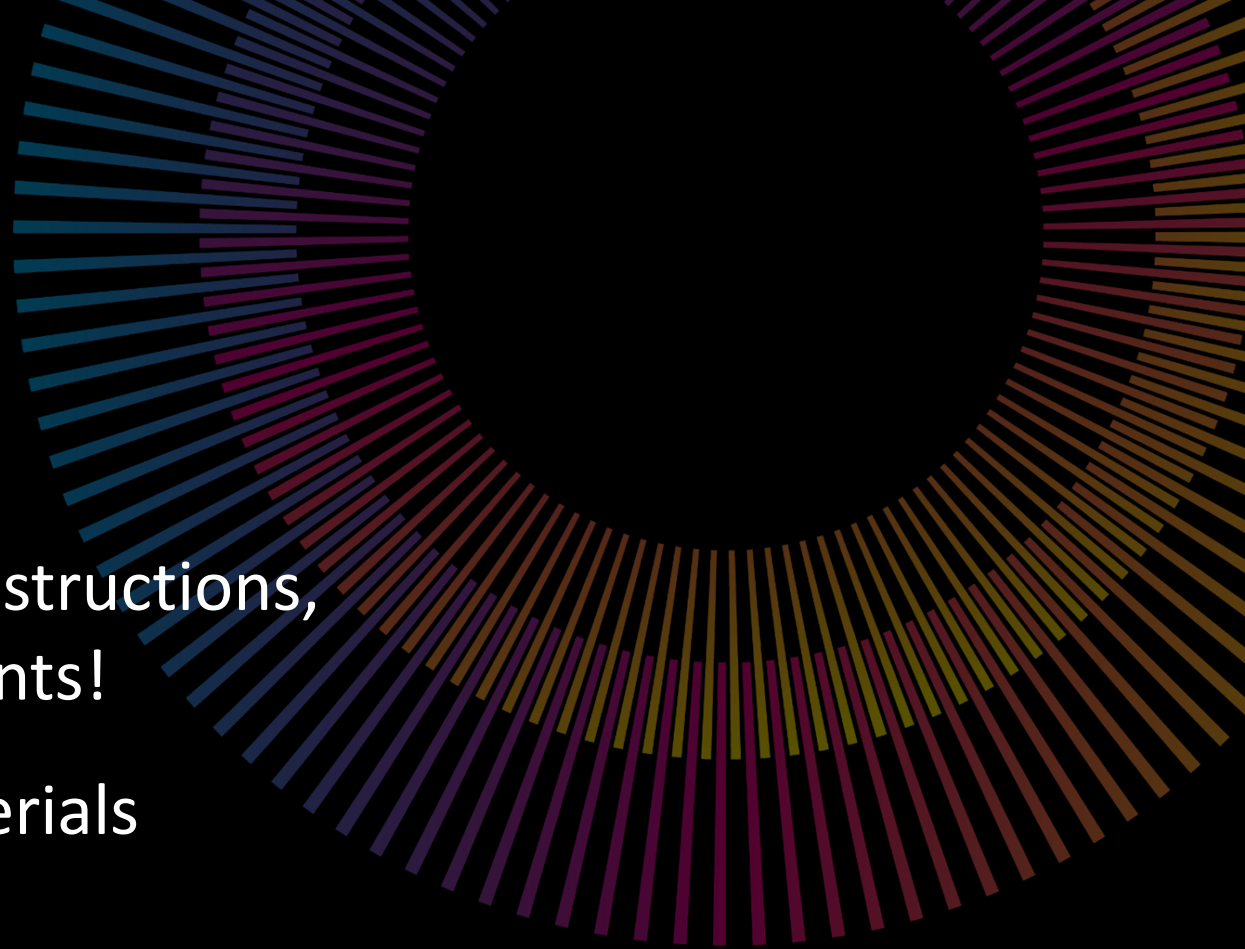
Work plan and bibliography

- Develop a clear and realistic work plan
- What will you do with the funds and other resources provided? Can you do the work described? How?
- Demonstrate your expertise and knowledge and capacity to do the work
- Check your bibliography

Tips for Applicants

Pay Attention to Details

- Rule #1: Follow the application instructions, guidelines and format requirements!
- Include required supporting materials
- Proofread



Tips for Applicants

Budget Advice

- Consult budget guidelines and samples
- Know what is and is not allowed
- Talk to ACLS program staff
- Talk to your sponsored research office



Tips for Applicants

Post Announcement

- Request your reviewers' comments
- Contact ACLS program staff with any questions
- Revise and Resubmit
- If you don't reapply, you won't get a grant



Tips for Applicants

Volunteer to read applications

- An excellent way to understand the application and review process is to serve as a peer reviewer.

*Graduate students are often not eligible to serve as reviewers

- Email us at fellowships@acsls.org and make sure to indicate which program(s) you are interested in

Tips for Applicants

Proposals: Common Mistakes and Recommendations

Common Mistakes

Clearly not meeting an eligibility criteria
(e.g., not enrolled in PhD Program)

Missing documents

Documents exceed page limits

Insufficient connection to the humanities
and interpretive social sciences

Recommendations

- Start your application early and plan to submit early
- Follow all instructions on the application- do not leave anything out or go over page limits

Tips for Applicants

Proposals: Common Mistakes and Recommendations

Common Mistake #1

Proposal does not address
broader audience

Example: "I proposed an archaeology project, but the reviewers clearly were not archaeologists."

Recommendations

- Reviewing panels consist of multidisciplinary experts who may not know about your specific topic.
- Avoid using jargon and provide enough context to emphasize the broader significance of your project.

Tips for Applicants

Proposals: Common Mistakes and Recommendations

Common Mistake #2

Proposal does not stem from a humanistic approach

Example: "My project is in K-12 history education but the reviewers said it wasn't humanistic enough."

Recommendations

- Highlight how your research, engages with human culture, values, or history.
- Engage with the relevant humanities literature.
- Frame research in terms of identity, meaning, or culture.

Tips for Applicants

Proposals: Common Mistakes and Recommendations

Common Mistake #3

Proposal does not clearly articulate how it fits into the ACLS program

Example: "I proposed a study of Sanskrit texts across multiple religions, but the reviewers said it didn't contribute meaningfully to Buddhist Studies."

Recommendations

- Connect your research to the goals of the ACLS program.
- Clearly state how the research contributes to broader intellectual discourses.
- Highlight key contributions the research will make for achieving the stated goals of the program

Questions?





Christopher Thornton

cthornton@acsl.org

**Sign Up For
Program News and Alerts**



Follow Us



acsl.org