

Guide to Writing the MMUF Research Proposal

Identifying a project for your MMUF Research

Part of your MMUF application is an essay describing an initial research idea, in three pages. Most fellows find that their research idea changes as they work on their project, and some fellows change focus entirely. But students are accepted into the program based partially on what they can describe about a potential research project and how they hope to pursue it. Choosing a research topic that really interests you will help you make the most of the fellowship, and keep you motivated if you run into obstacles.

Choosing a Topic

Your research idea should be worked out in conversation with your proposed MMUF mentor, but your mentor is also your advisor for the project you want to pursue – so it's important to do some work on identifying a research topic before you begin talking to potential mentors. Some research ideas begin from things you learn about in a class, while some begin from experiences you've had, your interest in your community, or other things that are initially more personal in nature. Turning a topic of interest into the focus of your research takes some time and effort.

Narrowing a Topic

Most research ideas start with a general interest that you narrow down by asking some questions about it. A good research project is specific enough to be feasible in the time you have to spend on it, and with the skills you have or can develop during that time, but is also connected to larger questions. Sometimes, you can create specificity just by asking some preliminary questions such as:

- Who or what would be the focus of research on this topic (individuals or a group of people; a group of writings; a field of knowledge)?
- Is there a time-specific aspect to the research (a period of interest; a historical or contemporary phenomenon or event that matters)?
- Is there a geographically specific aspect to the research (a place or people in a specific place)?
- In the case of a project focusing on art, cinema, or literature, which particular works, films, or texts would form the basis of your analysis, and why?
- What is the broader significance of the subject you want to research (for our understanding or knowledge; for a certain discipline; for politics or activism)?

These are not necessarily easy or simple questions! They may require research using library resources, to see what information is already out there before you get started with your topic. But these are the kind of questions that can help you narrow down from a general topic to one that is manageable for a research project, while still keeping an eye on that big picture. This is what scholars do all the time in figuring out how to approach big questions through smaller ones, so it's excellent practice for a research career.

Planning your Research

Once you have a preliminary topic or two in mind, you can also consider some questions about how you would go about the research. This is an excellent time to review the scholarly literature on your topic(s) to see how others have approached it/them, and to discuss your topic(s) with your potential mentor. They can help you answer questions like:

- What is missing in the scholarly record about this topic? What could you contribute to our understanding of the topic?
- What sources do you need access to for this project? Are there people you need to talk to, and will you be able to talk to them?
- What skills (including language, or methods) do you need to undertake research on this topic? Which of those skills do you already have, and which can you develop in the near future?

Writing and Consulting

Once you have answered these questions, you are likely to have a good outline for what the application essay about your research idea will include. Most MMUF applicants ask their mentors and recommenders for feedback and guidance as they are writing. Be sure to collect citations for your bibliography as part of your review of the scholarly literature; we also recommend that you consult with the librarian in your subject area, who can help you find the best search terms and explore all the relevant fields. The Coordinators of the MMUF program (Cherlon Ussery, Faculty Coordinator, and Sindy Fleming, Staff Coordinator) and the Director of Student Fellowships (Marynel Ryan Van Zee) are also available to answer questions and read drafts of your application materials.