



**Museums for America**

**FY2012 MFA**

**Tier 1 Reviewer Handbook**

For information, contact:  
[MFA-FY12@imls.gov](mailto:MFA-FY12@imls.gov)  
or  
202/653-4789

**Welcome to  
The MFA  
Program Review  
Process**

Thank you for offering to serve as a Museums for America (MFA) Tier 1 reviewer. We have selected you to review this year's applications because of your professional expertise in museum operations, programs, and activities. We have prepared this handbook specifically for Tier 1 reviewers to ensure the fair and candid review of all eligible applications and to provide you with the procedural and technical information you need. Please use it in tandem with the FY2012 Museums for America Guidelines available at:

[http://www.ims.gov/applicants/museums\\_for\\_america\\_guidelines.aspx](http://www.ims.gov/applicants/museums_for_america_guidelines.aspx)

Even if you have reviewed for other IMLS programs, including MFA, in the past, you should read through this booklet since we have made some significant changes to MFA this year.

Museums for America (MFA) is an annual, federal grant program that awards applicants up to \$150,000 to help support projects and ongoing activities that build museums' capacity to serve their communities. .

IMLS has awarded over 1,200 MFA grants since the program's inception in 2004.

## **Purpose and Scope of the Museums for America Program**

Museums for America provides opportunities for institutions to build their effectiveness in meeting their missions and furthering their strategic (i.e., institutional, long range, master) plans. Institutions will be able to use MFA funds to serve a wider and more diverse public through education, partnership, and behind-the-scenes activities. MFA grants are designed to be flexible. They can be used for new or ongoing projects, programs, or activities; improvement of infrastructure; planning; purchase of equipment or services; or other activities that further the institution's strategic goals.

IMLS defines projects, programs, and activities in the widest terms possible. IMLS accepts applications in three (3) categories to support the institution's strategic goals:

### **Engaging Communities (Education, Exhibition, and Interpretation)**

This category encompasses the broadest range possible of educational activities by which museums share collections, content, and knowledge to support learning.

Projects may include, but are not limited to, the following:

- Classes and presentations
- Creation of digital content for programmatic purposes
- Curricula development
- Exhibition design/fabrication
- Exhibition development/implementation
- Integration of technology
- Interpretive strategies
- Programming and education for
  - Adults
  - Families
  - Underserved communities
  - Youth (pre-K through grade 12)
- Public programs
- Publications
- Research for program/exhibit development
- Web site content and design

### **Building Institutional Capacity (Management, Policy, and Training)**

This category supports projects and activities that serve to enhance the capacity of museums to better serve their communities.

Projects may include, but are not limited to, the following:

- Financial management
- Personnel administration
- Planning (institutional, maintenance, emergency/disaster)
- Policy development

- Staff training and development
- Technology enhancements

**Collections Stewardship (Management of Collections)**

This category supports all activities that museums undertake to maintain and improve the management of museum collections in order to fulfill the museum's public service mission.

Projects may include, but are not limited to, the following:

- Collections planning
- Collections security and safety
- Database development/enhancements
- Digitization of collections
- Registration/cataloguing
- Research/documentation
- Risk assessment

**Use of Funds**  
Eligible Activities

**Allowable expenses for MFA grants may include:**

- Project personnel, contract, or in-house staff time necessary for the proper and efficient execution of the project
- Project consultants and their travel
- Costs related to planning and maintenance of project partnerships
- Purchase of equipment, materials, supplies, or services
- Staff training
- Program development and implementation
- Exhibition design and fabrication
- Integration of technology into exhibition or educational programs
- Costs associated with evaluation of grant programs or activities
- Research
- Planning and policy development
- Publications
- Indirect or overhead costs
- Activities aimed at achieving intellectual control over the collection, including: inventory, daily maintenance, registration, planning, and cataloguing

All proposed expenses must be justified in the application budget.

**Ineligible Activities**

**Unallowable expenses for MFA grants may include:**

- Collection conservation activities including the purchase of storage equipment (shelving, cabinets), installation of HVAC systems, treatment of objects/specimens, or collections surveys
- General museum fundraising costs, such as development office staff or other staff time devoted to general fundraising
- General advertising or public relations costs designed solely to promote the organization and not a specific project
- Construction and renovation of museum facilities. (Generally any activity involving contract labor in the construction trades is not an allowable cost.)
- Creation of large-scale permanent structures for animals or objects that would involve contract labor of the construction trades.
- Acquisition of collections
- Contributions to endowments
- Social activities, ceremonies, receptions, or entertainment
- Pre-grant costs

## Application and Review Process

1. Applicants submit their applications using Grants.gov—the single point of entry for IMLS grant applications.
2. IMLS receives the applications and checks them for organizational eligibility and application completeness.
3. IMLS identifies a pool of available Tier 1 reviewers with appropriate expertise and assigns three reviewers to evaluate each application.
4. Tier 1 reviewers receive access to the applications, evaluate them, and complete their reviews online.
5. IMLS uses Tier 1 reviewers' comments and scores to rank the applications. This ranking is used to determine which applications are sent for Tier 2 panel review.
6. MFA Tier 2 review panels meet in Washington, DC, after the Tier 1 review period to provide a second level of review and make final funding recommendations. Tier 2 panelists represent a cross-section of museum disciplines, budget sizes, geographic regions, and governing authorities. Tier 2 panelists are not asked to do detailed technical reviews. Rather, they and IMLS staff are relying on Tier 1 reviewers to point out specific technical strengths and weaknesses of each proposal. Tier 2 panelists review applications from a broad perspective, identifying applications that best meet IMLS program goals. They also provide insight into issues pertinent to this year's competition as well as provide recommendations on improving the grant program, its application, and its process.
7. IMLS staff members review the financial/accounting information and the budget sheets of each potential grantee.
8. IMLS staff members provide a list of applications recommended for funding to the IMLS Director for approval.
9. IMLS awards Museums for America grants in late July. IMLS notifies all applicants whether or not they have received an award. With their notification, all applicants receive anonymous copies of the Tier 1 and Tier 2 reviews. IMLS also sends notification of the awards to each participating reviewer.

Your Tier 1 scores determine the ranking of applications and are the basis upon which IMLS decides which go to Tier 2 panel review for further consideration and which do not.

## **How Your Reviews Are Used**

For those applications that go to Tier 2 panel review, your reviews will help focus attention on the strengths and weaknesses of each application. If a Tier 2 panel-reviewed application is not funded, your comments may be used to assist the applicant in revising the application for future submission.

Applicants whose proposals are not ranked highly enough for Tier 2 panel review receive only your Tier 1 review comments.

Successful applicants point to good scores and positive comments as a stamp of approval for their project proposals. Museum administrators report that receiving IMLS awards enhances fundraising success with private foundations as well as state and local sources. Unsuccessful applicants often use reviewer comments to improve or revise their applications for resubmission.

After we announce awards for the MFA program in July, we invite you to call the IMLS Office of Museum Services to schedule an appointment to discuss your reviews and provide feedback to us about your experience as a Tier 1 reviewer.

## **Follow Up**

We greatly appreciate the tremendous amount of time and effort you commit to being a reviewer. By participating in the peer review process, you make a significant contribution to the Museums for America grant program and provide an invaluable service to the entire museum community. Thank you!

## Application Review Instructions

- First Steps** This section of the handbook contains detailed information on how to review a Museums for America program application. If you encounter any problems while undertaking your Tier 1 reviews, please contact the Museums for America team:
- Museums for America: [MFA-FY12@imls.gov](mailto:MFA-FY12@imls.gov) or 202/653-4789
- Verify Access to Applications Online** You will need to use **two** online systems—one to download applications and another to upload and submit your review comments and scores. Detailed instructions for downloading applications are included as **Appendix I** of this handbook for easy reference.
- Conflict of Interest** Read through your list of applications to see if there are any potential conflicts of interest. Please see the Reviewer Conflict of Interest Statement included as **Appendix II** of this handbook. A conflict of interest would arise if you have a financial interest in whether or not the proposal is funded, or if for some reason, you feel that you cannot review it objectively. Contact the Museums for America team ([MFA-FY12@imls.gov](mailto:MFA-FY12@imls.gov) or 202/653-4789) immediately if you have a conflict, or what may appear to be a conflict.
- Confidentiality** The information contained in grant applications is strictly confidential. Do not discuss or reveal names, institutions' project activities, or any other information contained in the applications. Contact us if you have any questions concerning an application. Do not contact an applicant directly.
- Read Applications** Read your applications to develop a feel for the range of responses. In advance of doing so, reread the MFA guidelines at [http://www.imls.gov/applicants/museums\\_for\\_america\\_guidelines.aspx](http://www.imls.gov/applicants/museums_for_america_guidelines.aspx). On the next page is a quick reference sheet that you may wish to print and place in your workspace where you can easily refer to it throughout the review process. It lists the types of information you should look for in each applicant's responses and should serve as guideposts for your review.

## Museums for America FY2012 Tier 1 Review Criteria Quick Reference

<b>1. STATEMENT OF NEED</b>
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Evidence that the project or activities fit into and further the institution’s strategic plan and mission and evidence that the museum’s strategic (institutional, long-range, master) plan had community, board, and staff involvement and supports the goals and needs of both the museum and its community</li> <li>• Extent to which the project is of sufficient scope to enhance or expand institutional capacity in order to carry out the above strategic goals</li> <li>• Degree to which the project addresses MFA’s program goal</li> <li>• Evidence the project team has identified an audience, performed a formal or informal assessment of their needs, and designed this project as the best solution to answer those needs</li> </ul>
<b>2. IMPACT</b>
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Evidence that the museum’s audience(s) will be better served by the successful completion of this project</li> <li>• Evidence of the beneficial impact the project activities will have on the institution, its staff, and its audience(s)</li> </ul>
<b>3. PROJECT DESIGN</b>
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Evidence the project proposes efficient, effective, and reasonable approaches to accomplish clear goals and objectives</li> <li>• If partnerships are supported by the grant, evidence that all partners are active contributors to the partnership activities, and that the partnership strengthens the project design and outcomes</li> <li>• Extent to which the project allows for mid-course correction of project activities</li> <li>• Evidence this project will be promoted to the intended audience</li> <li>• If the project involves collections, the quantity and type of materials involved should be described</li> <li>• If the project includes digitization, evidence that appropriate procedures will be followed</li> <li>• If the project includes an exhibition, evidence that the content, objects, and other applicable elements and resources have been identified</li> </ul>
<b>4. PROJECT RESOURCES: PERSONNEL, TIME, BUDGET</b>
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Evidence that the applicant will complete the project activities in the time allocated through the effective deployment and management of resources, including money, personnel, facilities, equipment, and supplies</li> <li>• Evidence of sound financial management, coupled with an appropriate and cost-efficient budget</li> <li>• Evidence that the applicant has the ability to meet the cost share requirement</li> <li>• Evidence that the project personnel demonstrate appropriate experience and expertise and will commit adequate time to accomplish project goals and activities</li> <li>• If technology purchase is requested, extent to which it will support the project or activity goals and further the institution’s strategic plan</li> </ul>

## Evaluate Applications

Read your applications again and take notes as you read. Draft comments for each of the four narrative responses. We strongly recommend that you draft your comments using Microsoft Word, and then cut and paste them into the Online Reviewer System form.

- Use your professional knowledge and experience to assess the information objectively.
- Judge the application on its own merits. DO NOT base your evaluation on any prior knowledge of an institution.
- If you question the accuracy of any information, call IMLS to discuss it. DO NOT question the applicant's honesty or integrity in your written comments.
- DO NOT contact the museum.
- Consider whether the applicant has the resources to successfully complete the project.
- Consider a project's strengths *and* weaknesses. Acknowledge and compliment strengths, and offer practical suggestions for improving weaknesses.
- Analyze the narrative section of the application in your comments. Summarizing or paraphrasing the applicant's own words will not help the applicant.
- Make your comments specific to the individual applicant. Vague, general statements are not helpful.
- Make your comments easy to read and understand.

***Remember that IMLS staff members use your comments to help applicants improve their future applications.***

## Qualities of a Good Proposal

Every good MFA proposal should:

- Strengthen the capacity for education and public service
- Advance the institution's strategic plan
- Be an investment for the future; even if one-time activities are included, they must have long term institutional impact

## Assign Scores

Assign a preliminary score to each narrative section. Use a scale of 1 to 5, with 1 = lowest and 5 = highest.

- Use only whole numbers.
- Do not use fractions, decimals, zeroes, or more than one number.

### SCORE DEFINITIONS

- 5 – Excellent: The applicant’s response is outstanding and provides exceptional support for the proposed project.
- 4 – Very Good: The applicant’s response provides solid support for the proposed project.
- 3 – Good: The applicant’s response is adequate but could be strengthened in its support for the proposed project.
- 2 – Some Merit: The applicant’s response is flawed and does not adequately support the proposed project.
- 1 – Inadequate/Insufficient: The applicant’s response is inadequate or provides insufficient information to allow for a confident evaluation.

*IMPORTANT:* To help applicants understand and benefit from your reviews, make sure that your scores accurately reflect your written comments.

## Type Size and Format

The application does not provide a form for the narrative part of the application. Applicants may divide the space for narrative responses as they wish, as long as they address all questions in number order as indicated in the application guidelines and the narrative response does not exceed seven pages.

If you see a problem ...

- Contact the Museums for America team ([MFA-FY12@imls.gov](mailto:MFA-FY12@imls.gov) or 202/653-4789). Review the application, and DO NOT lower an applicant’s score because of reduced type or reformatting.
- DO NOT note the problem on your review sheet itself, but rather as a separate note for IMLS only.

We will assign penalties as necessary.

## Review Your Work

Review your draft comments and preliminary scores. When you are finished, proofread your reviews. A review with even one missing score or comment cannot be accepted by the Online Reviewer System. Adjust your scores, if necessary, to more accurately reflect your written evaluation. Scores should support comments, and comments should justify scores.

For each application, you must complete an online review that includes:

- written comments about each of the four narrative sections;
- a corresponding score from 1-5 for each of the four narrative sections; and
- additional comments, if desired. (This section is optional and is not scored.)

### Creating Constructive and Effective Comments

As you formulate your comments, keep in mind the following characteristics of good and helpful remarks:

- They are presented in a constructive manner.
- They are concise, specific, and easy to read and understand.
- They acknowledge the resources of the institution.
- They are specific to the individual applicant.
- They correlate with the score given.
- They reflect the application's strengths and identify areas for improvement.
- They are directed to applicants for their use.

Remember, both successful and unsuccessful applicants use your comments to improve their institutions and future applications. Each of the following examples is annotated with an explanation of why it is a good comment.

#### **Statement of Need:**

*“The Museum has done a superior job of developing a strategic plan with input from many stakeholders- college faculty, students, administrators, staff, alumni, and the community. The focus group summary was a good example of the outreach included in the planning process. With respect to digitization, the statement of need is spelled out with clarity. The ability to use more of the Museum's collections yearly by making it possible for the potential users to view digital images as an aid in the selection of artwork is compelling. The desire to integrate the Museum's collections in courses across the curriculum is impressive, and the application clearly explains why faculty outside the arts, in particular, need digital images to choose items from the collection.”* (Provides clear, specific information)

*“It is particularly compelling that the Museum sees the completion of its digital database as the catalyst for allowing more students and other audiences to experience the original objects, rather than as a substitute for that experience.”*(Provides specific information)

*“This project goes hand-in-hand with the museum's strategic plan and mission statement. This project will directly go to improving the membership base and provide a better access to the community.”*  
(Provides a good explanation of how this project fits into the strategic plan)

**Project Design:**

*“The Museum has an excellent grasp of the requirements of this project. The fact that it has already added digital images for 37% of its collection gives the institution needed experience in assessing the requirements for the completion of the project. The Museum has apparently taken advantage of the experience of peer institution and other advisors in designing the project. The project design has built in quality control checks at various levels to anticipate and correct problems. It makes sense to use this project to achieve the stated secondary goals - of correcting cataloging data, as necessary, and to flag condition concerns.”* (Provides specific information.)

**Project Resources: Time, Personnel, and Budget:**

*“The budget is realistic for the numbers of participants, and for the compensation of consultants and the number of hours for the assistance for this project.”* (Provides specific information)

**Impact:**

*“The evaluation plan includes both on-going evaluation of project implementation and of project outcomes for the participants. It would have been good to have a bit more information about the criteria that will be used to pre- and post-test workshop participants in order to evaluate the effectiveness of project activities.”* (Provides specific information and a constructive comment)

**Avoiding Poor Comments**

Vague, derogatory, or extraneous remarks are not helpful to Tier 2 panelists or to applicants. These comments actually hinder the evaluation process rather than help it.

To avoid making poor comments, DO NOT:

- Make derogatory remarks. (Offer suggestions for improvement rather than harsh criticism.)
- Penalize an applicant because you feel the institution does not need the money. (Any eligible institution may receive funds, regardless of need.)
- Penalize an applicant because of missing materials. (If you believe an application is missing required materials, please contact a MFA staff member immediately.)
- Question an applicant’s honesty or integrity. (You may question the accuracy of information provided by the applicant, but if you are unsure how to frame your question, contact IMLS.)
- Offer or ask for irrelevant or extraneous information. (Your comments should concern only the information IMLS requests of applicants.)

Each of the following examples is annotated with an explanation of why it is a poor comment.

**Statement of Need:**

*“This project fits into the overall ‘big picture’ for the art museum and the university as a whole.”* (Vague, not evaluative)

**Impact:** *“The benefits stated are better can and monitoring of the collection, which is adequate.”* (Vague, insensitive, difficult to understand)

**Project Design:**

*“Efficient breakdown of categories for the individual parts of the project.”* (Vague, irrelevant, not evaluative)

**Project Resources: Time, Personnel, Budget:**

*“I might question some parts of the budget, but they probably know what they are doing.”* (Vague, not evaluative, and irrelevant)

*“The project budget is reasonable for this kind of project.”* (Vague, not evaluative)

*“The personnel are clearly experienced and qualified.”* (Vague, not evaluative)

**Overview (optional)**

*“This is worthy of funding; however, I would ask the project contact person for some additional details if appropriate.”* (Vague, wrong audience)

## Frequently Asked Questions

**1. How should I assign scores?**

Assign scores for each of the four narrative questions, using a scale of 1–5 discussed under “Score Definitions”).

**2. Should I consider new projects more competitive than resubmissions?**

No. All projects, whether new or resubmissions, should be considered on the basis of the current proposal. An institution’s application history should not be a factor in your evaluation.

**3. What should I do if I discover something missing in the application or if the applicant did not complete all parts of the application?**

Call the MFA team immediately at 202/653-4789. We may be able to send you the missing materials if they were submitted as part of the original application. DO NOT contact the

applicant.

**4. Should I consider need when evaluating an application?**

No. Need is not a review criterion. The application should be evaluated based on, among other things, whether or not it makes a convincing case that the project is one of their institution's highest conservation priorities as documented in their narrative and supporting documentation.

**5. To whom should the review comments be addressed?**

Please address all comments to the applicant. While the IMLS Tier 2 panelists read the comments, it is important to write the comments to the applicant so they may use them constructively.

**6. What should I do if I find that I know someone mentioned in the application?**

Contact the Museums for America team ([MFA-FY12@imls.gov](mailto:MFA-FY12@imls.gov) or 202/653-4789) immediately and discuss the possibility of a conflict of interest. Not all cases are conflicts, but please call us to discuss your situation.

**7. Must I make comments for every question?**

Yes, you must make a constructive and substantive comment for every question. This is the best way to help applicants improve all aspects of their applications.

**8. What are indirect cost rates, and why do some institutions have such a high rate?**

Indirect cost rates are negotiated rates at which institutions may charge overhead expenses when carrying out a project. Some institutions, such as universities, may seem to have high rates because of the infrastructure involved in carrying out a project within that institution. Also, an institution may have a high rate if they are in a very isolated geographic area, making it more expensive to carry on daily activities. Please do not allow these rates to bias your reviews.

**9. Is there any type of project that carries more weight than another?**

No. All types of projects have equal weight. Each score is important in determining the overall strengths and weaknesses of a proposal.

**10. What happens to my reviews once they are submitted?**

We take the average of all three Tier 1 reviewer scores and rank the applications from highest to lowest. We then forward the most highly ranked applications to Tier 2 panel review for further consideration.

**11. Can a proposed project use its staff as its target audience?**

Yes, the staff is a reasonable target audience, when a project is a behind-the-scenes or an infrastructure project that ultimately helps museum staff serve their public better.

**12. Should the size or age of the institution be considered when evaluating an application?**

No, these are not review criteria. The applicant should be evaluated using the stated evaluation criteria outlined on the Museums for America Evaluation Criteria Sheet.

**13. How do I consider a proposal from an institution that has a different discipline than my own?**

You are evaluating the proposals based on their merit in your area of museum operations, whether it is administration, education, community outreach, or curatorial. Please evaluate the application based on the soundness of the project ideas, and its ties to the IMLS evaluation criteria and the institution's strategic plan.

**14. What should I do if the institution does not have a formal strategic plan?**

Strategic plans come in many forms. Please put the plan provided by the applicant in context of their planning process and their community.

**15. Can a project be just for planning?**

Yes, planning projects are eligible. A museum must justify how this planning helps them reach their stated institutional goals.

**Note: Appendices I and III have been removed  
from this sample handbook.**

## Appendix II

### Reviewer Conflict of Interest Statement

As a reviewer or panelist for the Institute of Museum and Library Services (IMLS), you may receive for review a grant application that could present a conflict of interest. Such a conflict could arise if you are involved with the applicant institution, or in the project described in the application, as a paid consultant or through other financial involvement. The same restrictions apply if your spouse or minor child is involved with the applicant institution or if the application is presented on behalf of an institution with which you, your spouse, or minor child is negotiating for future employment.

A present financial interest is not the only basis for conflict of interest. Through prior association as an employee or officer, you may have gained knowledge of the applicant that would preclude objective review of its application. Past employment (generally more than five years) does not by itself disqualify a reviewer so long as the circumstances of your association permit you to perform an objective review of the application. If you believe you may have a conflict of interest with any application assigned to you for review, please notify us immediately.

You may still serve as a reviewer even if your institution is an applicant in this grant cycle or you were involved in an application submitted in this grant cycle, as long as you do not review any application submitted by your own institution or any application in which you were involved. However, if you believe that these or any other existing circumstances may compromise your objectivity as a reviewer, please notify us immediately.

If an application presents no conflict of interest at the time you review it, a conflict of interest may still develop later on. Once you have reviewed an application, you should never represent the applicant in dealings with IMLS or another Federal agency concerning the application, or any grant that may result from it.

It is not appropriate, for your purposes or for the purposes of the institutions or organizations you represent, for you to make specific use of confidential information derived from individual applications that you read while you were serving as an IMLS reviewer. In addition, pending applications are confidential. Accordingly, you must obtain approval from IMLS before sharing any proposal information with anyone, whether for the purpose of obtaining expert advice on technical aspects of an application or for any reason.

If you have any questions regarding conflict of interest, either in relation to a specific application or in general, please contact the Museums for America team at [MFA-FY12@imls.gov](mailto:MFA-FY12@imls.gov) or by calling 202/653-4789.