



Museums for America

2010

Field Reviewer Handbook

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The Museums for America Review Process

Thank you for offering to serve as a Museums for America (MFA) field reviewer. We have selected you to review this year's applications because of your expertise in museum operations, programs, and activities. The staff at IMLS has prepared this handbook specifically for field reviewers. It will provide you with the technical information you need. Please use it in tandem with this year's *Museums for America Grant Application and Guidelines*. Even if you have reviewed for other IMLS programs, you should review this booklet since MFA differs from other programs in various ways.

What is the Museums for America Grant 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, Exhibitions, and Interpretation)
- Building Institutional Capacity (Management, Policy, and Training)
- Collections Stewardship (Management of Collections)

MFA Project Categories

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

Eligible Activities

IMLS sees Museums for America as investment grants, and expects for institutions that receive them to use funding to provide:

- Investment in capacity
- Support for institutional strategic planning
- Support to measure outcomes

Eligible expenses include, but are not limited to:

- 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

Ineligible Activities

Grant funds may not be used to support:

- 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

Program Process

1. Applicants register with Grants.gov and download the grant application guidelines; they complete the application forms and upload forms and attachments to the Grants.gov portal.
2. IMLS receives the applications and checks them for eligibility and completeness.
3. IMLS identifies a pool of available field reviewers. IMLS assigns three museum professionals to evaluate each application.

4. IMLS matches grant applications to field reviewers with appropriate expertise. For MFA, applications were first sorted into groups by categories (engaging communities, building institutional capacity, and collections stewardship), and then divisions were created within these groups by request amount (requests between \$5,000-\$24,999; \$25,000-\$74,999; and \$75,000-\$150,000). Finally, budget categories were created in each division based on the institutional budget sizes of applications received.

The number of budget categories for each project type and request amount will depend on the number of applications received and the range of their budgets. We may ask you to review a museum with a budget size that is either smaller or larger than those with which you are most experienced; in all cases, you should pay close attention to the museum's resources. Each review group may contain applications representing many disciplines. We ask you to review them based on the proposed project, its ties to the applicant's strategic plan, and their answers to the narrative questions.

5. Field reviewers receive the applications, evaluate them, and complete their online reviews.

6. IMLS processes comments and scores, and ranks the applications. The ranking will be used to determine which applications are sent to the review panel. The panel will make final recommendations based on the field review comments as well as their own experience.

7. MFA review panels meet to provide a second level of review and make final funding recommendations. There will be five panels assembled in Washington, DC, in late March and April to evaluate applications. Panelists represent a cross-section of museum disciplines, budget sizes, geographic regions, and governing authorities. We will ask panelists to look across the budget categories and make recommendations on the strongest applications, including those that best serve the museum's strategic plan, show long-term investments in capacity, and have measurable outcomes. Panelists review applications from a broad perspective and are not asked to do detailed technical reviews. IMLS staff and the MFA panelists are relying on you to point out specific strengths and weaknesses of each proposal you evaluate.

8. IMLS staff reviews the financial/accounting information and the budget sheets of each potential grantee.

9. IMLS staff members provide a list of applications recommended for funding to the IMLS Director for his or her approval.

10. IMLS awards MFA grants in late July. At that time, IMLS notifies all applicants by mail whether or not they have received an award. With their notification, all applicants receive the reviews that their field reviewers and panelists completed. We also send notification of the awards to all participating reviewers.

**How Your Reviews
Are Used**

Your scores determine the ranking of applications upon which IMLS determines those going to the sitting panel, and which will not.

For those applications that go to panel review, your reviews will provide the basis for the panel review, directing panelists to the strengths and weaknesses of an application. If a panel-reviewed application is not funded, your review comments and panel comments assist the applicant in revising their application for future submission.

Applicants whose proposals are not ranked highly enough for panel review will only receive your field 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 enhance fundraising success with private foundations or state and local sources. Unsuccessful applicants use reviewer comments to improve or revise their applications for resubmission.

**How You Can Get
Feedback On Your
Performance**

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.

We greatly appreciate the tremendous amount of time and effort you committed to being a reviewer. By participating in the peer review process, you make a significant contribution to the Museums for America grant program and are providing 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 pre-panel reviews, please contact an IMLS staff person:

Sandra Narva
phone: (202) 653-4634
email: snarva@imls.gov

Steve Shwartzman
phone: (202) 653-4641
email: sshwartzman@imls.gov

Reagan Moore
phone: (202) 653-4637
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Check Shipping Envelope and CD

If you have not already done so, refer to the contents on the Reviewer Checklist. Open the enclosed CD to check that all applications are there and can be opened. Contact IMLS immediately if any of the items are missing, or if any applications are missing or cannot be opened.

Conflict of Interest

Read through your list of applications to see if there are any potential conflicts of interest. Please see the Conflict of Interest Statement included in your packet. A conflict of interest would include having a financial interest in whether or not a proposal is funded, or if, for some reason, you feel that you cannot provide an objective review. Contact IMLS 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 IMLS 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. Before reading your applications, reread the narrative questions and guidelines on pages 32-33 of the *2010 Museum for America Grant Application and Guidelines*. Additionally, a MFA evaluation criteria list is included in your review package. Place this sheet in your workspace where you can easily refer to it throughout the review process. The listed items represent the types of information you should look for in the applicant's responses and should serve as guideposts for your review.

Evaluate Applications

Read your applications again and take notes as you read. Draft comments for each of the four narrative responses. Utilize the evaluation criteria on the Review Evaluation Criteria sheet. We strongly recommend that you draft your comments using Microsoft Word, and then cut and paste them

onto the online review form (see page 10 for more details).

- 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.
- Acknowledge and compliment strengths.
- Consider a project's strengths *and* weaknesses; acknowledge and compliment strengths; offer practical suggestions for improving weaknesses.
- Consider whether the applicant has the resources to successfully complete the project.
- Comments should *analyze* the narrative section of the application; summarizing or paraphrasing the applicant's own words will not help the applicant.
- Comments should be specific to the individual applicant; vague, general statements are not helpful.
- Comments should be easy to read and understand.
- Comments should address both positive aspects as well as areas for improvement.
- Do not seek additional information about an applicant by going to their website. However, if an applicant provides a link to a webpage within their narrative, then feel free to link to that site.

Remember that IMLS staff uses your comments to help applicants improve their future applications.

Qualities of a Good Proposal

A 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 preliminary scores to each narrative section. Use a scale of 1 to 7. 1 = Lowest; 7 = Highest

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

The definitions of the numerical scores are:

- 1 Applicant's response provides insufficient information for evaluation.

- 2 Applicant's response provides inadequate support for the proposed project activities.
- 3 Applicant's response provides minimal support for the proposed project.
- 4 Applicant's response provides adequate support for the proposed project activities.
- 5 Applicant's response provides good support for the proposed project activities.
- 6 Applicant's response provides superior support for the proposed project activities.
- 7 Applicant's response provides exceptional support for the proposed project activities.

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

Eligibility

We determine an institution's eligibility for MFA funds by reading the responses on the Program Information Sheet (see page 31 of the *2010 Museums for America Grant Application and Guidelines*). You may read about eligibility requirements on pages 9-10 of the *2010 Museums for America Application and Guidelines*. If you feel that a particular project does not meet MFA's eligibility requirements, please contact the Office of Museum Services immediately at (202) 653-4789. **DO NOT** under any circumstances contact an applicant directly.

Type Size and Format

The application does not include a form for the application narrative. Applicants can divide the space for narrative responses as they wish, as long as all questions are addressed in numerical order, as indicated in the application guidelines, and the narrative response does not exceed seven pages. A minimum one-quarter inch margin should be left on the sides and bottom of the page.

If you see a problem, however,

- Call (202) 653-4789 and ask to speak with a MFA team member.
- Review the application. **DO NOT** lower an applicant's score because of reduced type or reformatting.
- **DO NOT** note the problem in your review, but rather in a separate e-mail to IMLS staff.

We will assign penalties as needed.

Review Your Work

Review your draft comments and preliminary scores. When you are finished, proofread your reviews. Adjust your scores, if necessary, to

more accurately reflect your written evaluation. Scores must support comments and comments should justify scores.

**Write Specific
Comments and
Assign Scores**

Type your final comments and scores on your online review sheets (for narrative sections 1-4 plus general comments if applicable). For each application, you must complete an online review including:

- Written comments about the applicant’s narrative responses.
- A corresponding score for each response.
- Application overview (general comments), optional but encouraged.

Note: Make use of all the space provided on the online review sheets.

**Selecting Final
Scores**

After you write your comments, select an appropriate score from 1 to 7 (1 = lowest; 7 = highest) for each of the four narrative responses using the IMLS scoring definitions (see Assign Scores on page 7). Enter the scores on your online review sheets. Your typed comments and corresponding scores should always support each other.

The Online Review Process

All reviewers must use the online review process. Follow these steps:

Access this link:

<https://e-services.imls.gov/grantapps/reviewers.aspx>

Your login is the e-mail address that is on file with IMLS.
Your password is “password”, unless you already established a password in previous years.

When you login to create your user account you will need to assign a new password.

The instructions for creating and submitting your reviews will be at your fingertips. **For all questions about reviewing, either technical or programmatic, contact a MFA team member at (202) 653-4789. Please do not use the hotlink provided on the online review page, as your questions may not receive an immediate response.**

Once you have completed assigning scores and providing comments for each application assigned to you, submit the entire review to IMLS. Make sure to print a copy of each completed review to keep for your files.

Reminders

The online review process is a wonderful tool; however, there are a few points regarding the use of the online review process of which you should be aware:

- When accessing this system you can only use the e-mail address we have on file for you.
- Once you submit your reviews, you cannot go back in and make revisions. To do so, you must contact IMLS and we will authorize your re-entry into the system so you can make changes. However, prior to submitting your reviews, you can repeatedly enter and exit the system without losing your information.
- The online review system seems to work best with these browsers—Netscape, Internet Explorer, Firefox and Safari.
- Complete your online reviews by **February 5, 2010**.

Constructive and Effective Comments

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

- They are presented in a constructive manner
- Concise, specific, easy to read and understand
- Specific to the individual applicant
- Correlate with the score that is given
- Acknowledge the resources of the institution
- Reflect the application’s strengths and identified areas for improvement
- Directed to applicants for their use

Questions about the field review process?

Contact Sandra Narva at (202) 653-4634, snarva@imls.gov, or Steve Shwartzman at (202) 653-4641, sshwartzman@imls.gov.

Remember, both successful and unsuccessful applicants use your comments to improve their institutions and future applications. Each of the sample comments listed below is followed by an explanation of its good characteristics.

Statement of Need:

“The proposal presents a clear and precise narrative of the need for the preservation of their important document collection and the dissemination of information relative to their cooperative documentary. The project participants are uniquely familiar with the collection, its needs, and how best to utilize the material.” (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 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 either panelists or 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 doesn’t need the money. Any eligible institution may receive funds, regardless of need.
- Penalize an applicant because of missing materials. If you are missing required materials, please contact IMLS 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 raise 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 sample poor comments listed below is followed by an explanation of why it is a poor comment.

Statement of Need:

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

“Not necessarily a highly polished application, which in this case is a strength. It adds to the expressed need.” Insensitive and irrelevant?

Project Design:

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

Project Resources: Time, Personnel, and Budget:

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

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

“Having clear job description of museum fellow. Are there plans to sustain job position?” (Vague, not evaluative)

Impact:

“Evaluation is both financial compliance and administrative review.” (Vague, not evaluative)

Reviewer Material

Deadline	The Deadline to submit IMLS panel reviews via the online review interface is February 5, 2010 .
Keep Copies Until	Keep your applications and a copy of your review sheets until August 1, 2010 (in case of questions from IMLS staff). <ul style="list-style-type: none">▪ Maintain confidentiality of all applications that you review.▪ After August 1, 2010, destroy the CD of applications.

Thank you for serving as a MFA Field Reviewer!

Frequently Asked Questions

1. How should I assign scores?

Scores should be assigned for all of the 4 narrative questions, based on the scale of 1–7, discussed on pages 7 and 8 of this booklet.

2. Should new projects be considered more competitive than existing ones?

No, a museum does not have to create a new project in order to meet its strategic goals. But often, in order to meet those goals, an ongoing project will have an aspect of expansion or other components.

3. 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 infrastructure project that ultimately helps museum staff serve their public better.

4. 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 IMLS at (202) 653-4689 immediately! IMLS may be able to send you the missing materials, or will contact the applicant for you. DO NOT contact the applicant.

5. Should the size or age of the institution be considered when evaluating their 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.

6. To whom should the review comments be addressed?

Please address all comments to the applicant. While IMLS staff and panelists do read the comments, it is important to address the comments to the applicant so that they may use them most constructively for their project.

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

Call IMLS immediately and discuss the possibility of a conflict of interest. Not all cases are conflicts, but please call to discuss your situation.

8. 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 an applicant improve all aspects of their project.

9. 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.

10. What are indirect costs rates, and why do some institutions have such a high rate?

Indirect cost rates are negotiated rates for institutions to charge overhead costs when completing a project. Some institutions, such as universities, have very 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.

11. 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.

12. 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.

13. How was I selected to review these applications?

You were selected to review your particular group of applications based on the museum professional skills you indicated on your IMLS reviewer update and also based on your choice of institutional budget size.

14. Is there any part of the application that carries more weight than another?

No, all sections of the application have equal weight. Each score is important in determining the overall strengths and weaknesses of a proposal.