Writing a PhD Application

By Dr James Palmer

Applications for PhD positions are starting to come in thick and fast at the moment. Deadlines for AHRC funding is now so early that masters students have to start thinking about PhDs almost before they've settled into their first postgraduate degree. It is tough enough to imagine a book-length project, let alone to do so before you've done the research. Here, then, are some thoughts on what makes a good proposal.

1) An opening that immediately announces a clear topic. Don't spend a paragraph sketching woolly context: get to the point in the first sentence. And preferably tell the reader why it matters.

2) Have clear research questions. Why not even bullet point them? It gives the impression that you are organised.

3) Be as specific as possible about the sources and what you can feasibly do with them. You don't have to know all the sources in advance, of course, and it will vary from project to project. But an analysis of x-hundred charters preserved in place A/ documents pertaining to y in archive B/ these specific saints' Lives/ these manuscripts in Munich/ etc is so much more compelling than vague promises that you will search for evidence for something.

4) Don't be cagey about what has been written on the subject already, if anything has been. Again, vague statements about how no one has really worked on the subject don't often sound true. Giving a decent historiographical context is an opportunity to show off that you know what you're talking about and to demonstrate that there is a gap. Precision wins. Being clear about your methodology will help here too.

5) It does not hurt to have thought about the potential wider audience for the research and what you could do with it. Is there potential for collaboration with a museum, archive or library involved in your project? Are there public events you could be involved in to disseminate your work? The whole sector is starting to think in these terms, so it is good to get in the habit. It also helps to give perspective on the age-old question which destroys many medieval history research projects: so what?

6) Have a work plan! Some people like to break things down into speculative chapters and then divide the three years between them. A cagier but no less effective strategy might be to identify some case studies for a few months at a time, and to specify when you intend to undertake that big research trip to your favourite archive, library or whatever. This is again where you can sell your project as something that is feasible within the time frame.

7) Ask yourself again: do you really want to do this? Are you interested enough in the project to live and breath it for three years? Always having had a passion for history will only get you so far. It does somehow show if you are going through the motions. Also asking yourself this will help you to determine whether the project is really for you. Don't really fancy six

months in Paris where the research material is? Choose something else. (And as a side note: do be serious about debt. If you are 'chasing the dream' unfunded, you might want to do some research into work conditions and the employment market…).

8) If you've passed (7) then spend some time writing out why you are the person to undertake the project, what skills you bring to the game, and – and most people forget this – why your chosen supervisor or supervision team is perfect for you and the project.

Most of the advice boils down to this: be clear and be precise! Particularly where funding is concerned. If money is involved, someone will be asking "why should I fund this project over any other?" Sounding a bit clever will not win the day. Make the case that there is real and (relatively) necessary work to be done… and that you are the person to do it.
Other people will give different advice. And you could follow what I suggest and get nowhere. There are no sure things and there's always more than one way to approach something. But learning to make the case will never hurt.