



CHARLOTTE W. NEWCOMBE DOCTORAL DISSERTATION FELLOWSHIP APPLICANT GUIDEBOOK

How to prepare a strong application



JULY 6, 2026

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Welcome

The Charlotte W. Newcombe Doctoral Dissertation Fellowship supports doctoral dissertations in the humanities and social sciences that engage questions of religion, ethics, values, or morals.

The first section in this guide is intended to help prospective applicants understand the Fellowship's mission and determine whether their project is a strong fit. The second section, *Preparing the Application* follows the structure of the application. As you move through each section of the online application, you will find corresponding guidance explaining the purpose of the section, what reviewers are trying to learn, and how to approach your response.

The application process is designed to help reviewers answer a small number of important questions: What is the dissertation about? How central are questions of religion, ethics, values, or morals to the project? What substantive intellectual work remains to be completed during the fellowship year? Is the applicant well-positioned to carry that work forward?

The sections that follow explain not only what information the application requests, but why those questions are being asked. Throughout the guidebook, I will discuss common sources of confusion, explain how particular application materials are used in the review process, and offer suggestions for presenting your work clearly to an interdisciplinary audience.

My goal is not to help applicants tailor their projects to fit the Fellowship. Rather, it is to help applicants understand what the Fellowship seeks to support so they can determine whether Newcombe is the right fit for their work and present that work as clearly as possible.

Is my project a fit? What is Newcombe looking for? How should I present my work? This guidebook seeks to answer these questions clearly enough to help you confidently prepare your application.

Wishing you all the best in your application process,

Susan Billmaier, PhD

Program Officer, the Newcombe Fellowship

The Newcombe Fellowship

The Charlotte W. Newcombe Doctoral Dissertation Fellowship supports doctoral students in the humanities and social sciences whose dissertations engage questions of religion, ethics, values, or morals. The Fellowship is not organized around a particular discipline, methodology, ideological perspective, or set of conclusions. Rather, it is organized around a particular kind of question.

Questions of religion, ethics, values, and morals arise in many forms. They may concern justice, obligation, responsibility, human flourishing, religious belief and practice, political life, professional ethics, moral conflict, social institutions, or the values that shape individual and collective decision-making. Newcombe-supported projects approach these and related questions through the methods and standards of scholarly inquiry.

The Fellowship does not seek to identify the "best" dissertations in a general sense. Many outstanding dissertations fall outside its scope. Instead, Newcombe seeks to support excellent projects for which questions of religion, ethics, values, or morals are among the central organizing concerns of the work.

Understanding this distinction is one of the most important steps in determining whether Newcombe is the right fit for your project.

Before You Begin

Before beginning an application, it may be helpful to consider three questions.

First, are questions of religion, ethics, values, or morals among the central organizing concerns of your dissertation? Newcombe supports a particular kind of scholarly inquiry. The Fellowship welcomes a wide range of disciplinary approaches and does not require applicants to advance normative arguments or advocate particular moral positions. Rather, the central questions of the dissertation should meaningfully engage issues of religion, ethics, values, or morals. Fit should not be confused with quality. A project may be outstanding and still not align closely with the Fellowship's mission or stage-of-dissertation expectations.

Second, will you be engaged in substantial dissertation writing during the fellowship year? The Fellowship is intended to support meaningful intellectual production rather than a dissertation that is already substantially complete.

Applicants who can answer "yes" to these questions will likely find the sections that follow helpful in preparing a strong application.

What Is the Fellowship Year Intended to Support?

The Newcombe Fellowship is intended to support a year of substantive dissertation writing. The Fellowship year begins the September following the selection of Fellows.

Applicants often think about dissertation progress in terms of completion dates, graduation deadlines, or administrative milestones. While those considerations matter, they are

not the primary focus of the Fellowship. Newcombe is fundamentally interested in supporting intellectual work.

For this reason, reviewers are less concerned with when a dissertation will be finished than with what remains to be done. A project scheduled for completion in August of the Fellowship year may be a stronger fit than a project scheduled for completion in May, if the later project involves substantially more writing during the fellowship year.

The Fellowship is designed to support projects that still require meaningful intellectual production. This may include drafting dissertation chapters, developing major portions of the argument, integrating research into written form, or completing other substantial writing necessary to bring the project to completion.

A strong application demonstrates a clear relationship between the work remaining and the year of support being requested. Reviewers are not looking for perfectly predictable schedules. They are trying to understand how the Fellowship year will be used and whether it will support significant progress toward completion.

Understanding the Two-Phase Application Process

The Newcombe Fellowship application process is designed to answer different questions at different stages of review. As a result, the application is divided into two phases.

Phase 1 is intended to identify projects that merit deeper consideration. Reviewers focus on the dissertation's central question, its engagement with religion, ethics, values, or morals, the applicant's preparation for the work, and the amount of substantive writing that remains to be completed during the fellowship year. The goal at this stage is not to make final funding decisions, but to identify the strongest candidates for further review.

Applicants selected as finalists advance to Phase 2. At that stage, reviewers examine projects in greater depth through additional materials and a more detailed assessment process. Finalist review allows the Fellowship to move beyond initial questions of fit and feasibility and engage more fully with the project's scholarly contribution.

Understanding this structure may help applicants approach Phase 1 more effectively. The purpose of the initial application is not to provide every possible detail about the dissertation. Rather, it is to present a clear picture of the project, its relationship to the Fellowship's mission, and the substantive work that remains to be completed.

What Kind of Work Does Newcombe Support?

One of the most common questions prospective applicants ask is whether their project is a "Newcombe project." The answer depends less on discipline, methodology, or topic than on the role questions of religion, ethics, values, or morals play within the dissertation itself.

The Fellowship supports a wide range of scholarly approaches. Some applicants engage explicitly normative questions about justice, obligation, responsibility, or human flourishing. Others examine religious communities, moral traditions, ethical conflicts, value formation,

institutional norms, or the ways individuals and societies navigate questions of meaning and purpose. The project may be descriptive, interpretive, historical, ethnographic, or analytical without itself being a normative intervention. What unites these projects is not a shared method or conclusion, but a sustained engagement with questions of religion, ethics, values, or morals.

Importantly, Newcombe does not require applicants to make normative arguments or advocate particular moral positions. Historical, interpretive, ethnographic, sociological, literary, and other forms of scholarship may be highly competitive. The question is not whether a dissertation is normative in method. The question is whether questions of religion, ethics, values, or morals are among the central organizing concerns of the inquiry. The most successful Newcombe applications are not necessarily those that describe the most ambitious or influential projects. They are the applications that clearly demonstrate why the dissertation belongs within the particular conversation that the Fellowship was created to support.

Centrality Versus Presence

Applicants sometimes assume that any dissertation containing an ethical, religious, or values-related dimension is a strong fit for the Fellowship. In practice, the more important question is how those concerns function within the project as a whole. They may appear as one theme among several, emerge in a single chapter, or arise as an implication of the research. Newcombe reviewers are not simply looking for the presence of such questions. They are trying to understand whether those questions are among the central organizing concerns of the dissertation.

One way to think about this distinction is to ask whether the project would remain fundamentally the same if questions of religion, ethics, values, or morals were removed from the analysis. If the answer is yes, the project may engage such questions without being organized around them. If the answer is no, the project may be a strong fit for Newcombe.

This distinction matters because Newcombe supports inquiry into questions of religion, ethics, values, and morals wherever those questions arise and however they are studied. It is designed to support inquiry into a particular set of enduring human questions. Those questions often exceed the boundaries of any single field and frequently shape conversations within public life, institutions, professions, communities, and religious traditions. Newcombe-supported scholarship contributes to those conversations by helping people and scholars better understand the values, beliefs, commitments, and moral questions that shape human experience.

For this reason, applicants should focus not only on where questions of religion, ethics, values, or morals appear in their dissertation, but on the role those questions play in the project's central aims, arguments, and contributions.

Why Interdisciplinary Readability Matters

Newcombe Fellows come from a wide range of disciplines across the humanities and qualitative social sciences. Most Newcombe Fellows operate within established disciplinary

traditions fields. While interdisciplinary projects are welcome and have become increasingly common in recent years, applicants should not assume that interdisciplinarity is expected or preferred.

At the same time, applicants should be able to explain their work clearly to thoughtful readers outside their immediate area of specialization. This expectation reflects the nature of the Fellowship itself. Newcombe reviewers come from different disciplines, intellectual traditions, and areas of expertise. A strong application helps those readers understand not only what the dissertation studies, but why the questions it raises matter.

This is particularly important because the questions that animate Newcombe-supported scholarship often extend beyond the boundaries of a single field. Questions of religion, ethics, values, and morals arise in many different contexts and frequently intersect with broader conversations about institutions, communities, professional practice, public life, and human experience. They are not static or exhaustive questions, nor are they confined to any one discipline.

Applicants should not assume that accessibility requires simplification. Rather, the goal is clarity. A strong application enables an educated reader outside the field to understand the project's central question, its significance, and its contribution without requiring specialized disciplinary knowledge.

Eligible Degrees and Fields

The Fellowship is designed to support scholarly research leading to the Ph.D. and equivalent research doctorates. This focus reflects the Fellowship's purpose rather than a judgment about the value of other forms of doctoral education.

Degrees such as the J.D., Ed.D., Psy.D., D.Min., and similar professional doctorates are typically designed to prepare practitioners, educators, clinicians, ministers, and other professionals for leadership within their fields. While these degrees often involve substantial intellectual work, they generally serve different educational and professional goals than research-oriented doctoral programs. For this reason, the Fellowship is limited to applicants pursuing research doctorates.

Most Newcombe Fellows come from the humanities and qualitative social sciences, including fields such as Religious Studies, Philosophy, History, Anthropology, Political Science, Sociology, Literature, and related disciplines. However, eligibility is determined by the dissertation rather than the department. Applicants from interdisciplinary programs and, in rare cases, STEM fields are welcome to apply when questions of religion, ethics, values, or morals are among the central organizing concerns of the project.

Similarly, the Fellowship does not prescribe a particular research methodology. Historical, philosophical, ethnographic, interpretive, theoretical, qualitative, and other humanistic approaches are all appropriate. Although many successful projects employ qualitative methods, the Fellowship does not distinguish between qualitative and quantitative research as a matter of

policy. Rather, reviewers consider whether the dissertation engages deeply with questions of religion, ethics, values, or morals in ways that contribute meaningfully to humanistic scholarship.

Applicants whose fields fall near the boundaries of eligibility should pay particular attention to how they describe their projects. The most important question is usually What questions is this dissertation asking? Projects that merely mention ethics, values, or religion, or treat them as secondary applications of another research question, are generally not competitive. By contrast, projects from a wide range of disciplines may be excellent fits when these questions are among the dissertation's central organizing concerns.

Projects that fall outside the Fellowship's scope often do so not because of their discipline, but because of the questions they seek to answer. For example, a study evaluating the effectiveness of AI tools in the classroom, developing STEM curricula, modeling public health outcomes, or measuring patterns of religious affiliation may be excellent scholarship, yet its primary contribution is likely methodological, technical, or descriptive rather than an inquiry into questions of religion, ethics, values, or morals. Likewise, clinical studies evaluating treatment outcomes typically fall outside the Fellowship's mission because they are designed to assess therapeutic effectiveness rather than to investigate the humanistic or normative questions surrounding those subjects. The Fellowship is intended to support dissertations in which questions of religion, ethics, values, or morals are not simply present, but constitute a central focus of the scholarly inquiry.

Normative Questions and Non-Normative Methods

Questions of religion, ethics, values, and morals can be investigated in many different ways. A philosopher may develop a normative argument about justice or obligation. A historian may examine how moral ideas shaped a particular period. An anthropologist may study how communities negotiate ethical commitments in everyday life. A sociologist may investigate the formation of values within institutions. A scholar of religion may explore how beliefs and practices influence individual and collective action.

What unites these projects is not a shared method. It is a shared engagement with questions that concern religion, ethics, values, or morals.

- What is the ethical problem?
- Why does it matter?
- What tensions are present?
- What values are in conflict?
- What is at stake for individuals, communities, institutions, or society?
- What understanding, intervention, or possibility emerges from the work?

For this reason, applicants should not assume that a dissertation must advocate a particular position, resolve a moral debate, or offer a normative prescription in order to be

competitive. The project may be descriptive, interpretive, historical, ethnographic, analytical, or theoretical without itself being a normative intervention.

The more important question is whether the dissertation illuminates questions of religion, ethics, values, or morals in a way that helps us better understand what is at stake. The strongest projects do more than identify the presence of values or moral commitments. They help clarify their significance, complexity, consequences, tensions, possibilities, or implications.

Phase One Application Preparation

Dissertation Overview

Before discussing the individual components of the Dissertation Overview section, it may be helpful to understand the role each one plays in the application. Although these materials describe the same dissertation, they serve different purposes.

The Abstract helps orient the reader to the project. The Research Question identifies the central intellectual problem the dissertation seeks to address. The Project Summary explains the project as a whole, including its question, contribution, methods, and significance. The Bibliography situates the project within the scholarly conversations most relevant to the work.

Each component helps reviewers understand a different aspect of the dissertation. Approaching them as distinct tasks will often result in a stronger application.

Abstract

Up to 200 words

The abstract is often the first description of the project that reviewers and administrators encounter. Its purpose is straightforward: to provide a concise and accurate overview of the dissertation.

A strong abstract allows a reader to quickly understand what the project studies, what question it investigates, and why that question matters. It should provide enough information to orient someone unfamiliar with the dissertation without attempting to reproduce the detail or nuance of the Project Summary.

Applicants sometimes treat the abstract as a shortened version of the Project Summary or fill it with specialized language that assumes extensive disciplinary knowledge. In practice, the most effective abstracts are often the clearest and most direct. A reader should be able to identify the topic, central question, and general approach of the dissertation after a single reading.

Remember that the abstract serves multiple purposes within the review process. It helps orient reviewers, but it also helps the Foundation understand the nature of the project, identify common themes across applications, and assess how the dissertation relates to the Fellowship's

mission. Clarity is therefore more valuable than sophistication. The goal is not to impress the reader. The goal is to help the reader understand the project quickly and accurately.

Research Question

Up to 250 words

This section asks a deceptively simple question: What is the central question your dissertation seeks to answer?

Applicants often respond by describing a topic, field of study, historical period, population, or body of literature. While this information may be important, it is not the same thing as identifying the question that organizes the project.

A strong response helps the reader understand what problem, puzzle, tension, or uncertainty motivates the dissertation. What are you trying to understand? What is not yet adequately explained? What question drives the research forward?

For reviewers, this section provides an early indication of the project's intellectual coherence. Clear questions often lead to clear projects. If the central question is difficult to identify, reviewers may struggle to understand how the various parts of the dissertation fit together.

This section also creates an opportunity to clarify the relationship between the dissertation and the Fellowship's mission. Applicants need not force the language of religion, ethics, values, or morals into their answer. However, if those concerns are central to the project, they should be visible in the way the question itself is framed.

The strongest responses are usually concise, focused, and specific. A reader should finish this section with a clear understanding of the question that makes the dissertation necessary.

Project Summary

Up to 1,000 words

The Project Summary is the centerpiece of the Phase 1 application. While the abstract provides orientation and the Research Question identifies the central inquiry, the Project Summary allows applicants to explain the dissertation as a whole.

Reviewers are not looking for a chapter-by-chapter description of the dissertation. They are trying to understand the intellectual shape of the project. What question is being asked? Why does it matter? How does the dissertation approach that question? What contribution does it make?

The section asks applicants to address four elements: the central problem or question, the project's primary argument or contribution, the methods or sources employed, and the significance of the work within the field. These elements should not be treated as separate boxes

to be checked. The strongest summaries weave them together into a coherent explanation of the project.

Because Newcombe is an interdisciplinary competition, clarity is particularly important. Reviewers should not need specialized knowledge of a subfield to understand what is at stake. This does not mean simplifying the scholarship. It means explaining it clearly enough that an educated reader outside the field can understand the project's purpose, approach, and significance.

Applicants sometimes assume that the goal of the Project Summary is to demonstrate the complexity of the dissertation. In practice, the goal is understanding. A strong summary helps readers quickly grasp what the project is about, why it matters, and why the dissertation is worth supporting.

Perhaps most importantly, this section should help reviewers see the dissertation as a complete intellectual project rather than a collection of research activities, case studies, or chapters. By the end of the Project Summary, a reviewer should understand not only what the applicant is studying, but what the dissertation contributes to the scholarly conversation and why that contribution matters.

Applicants selected as finalists and invited into the Phase 2 application will have an opportunity to present the project in greater depth through a longer proposal. The purpose of the Project Summary is not to provide a comprehensive account of the dissertation or engage every relevant scholarly debate. Rather, it is to provide a clear explanation of the project's central question, contribution, methods, and significance.

Some applicants worry that a 1,000-word summary cannot adequately capture the full complexity of a dissertation project. That is true—and it is by design. The purpose of Phase 1 is not to conduct a comprehensive scholarly evaluation of every application. Rather, it is to help reviewers understand the project clearly enough to determine whether it merits further consideration. In this sense, the Project Summary explains the project. It answers questions such as: What are you studying? What question motivates the dissertation? Why does it matter? Those applicants selected as finalists will later have an opportunity to submit a longer proposal. That proposal serves a different purpose. It allows reviewers to engage the scholarship in greater depth, assess the project's originality and intellectual contribution, and evaluate how persuasively the dissertation advances its claims.

Put simply, the Project Summary explains the project; the Proposal in Phase 2 demonstrates the scholarship.

Selected Bibliography

Up to 25 sources

The purpose of the Selected Bibliography is to help reviewers understand the intellectual foundations of the dissertation.

Applicants are not expected to provide a comprehensive dissertation bibliography. Nor are reviewers using this section to count citations, assess completeness, or determine whether every relevant source has been included. Instead, the bibliography should provide a concise picture of the scholarly conversations most central to the project.

As you select sources, ask yourself: Which works are most important for understanding the intellectual foundations of this dissertation? Which authors, debates, theories, methods, or historical conversations have most directly shaped the project?

The strongest bibliographies are representative rather than exhaustive. They help reviewers understand where the dissertation is situated intellectually and how it relates to existing scholarship. A carefully chosen list of foundational sources is often more useful than a longer list that attempts to demonstrate comprehensiveness.

Because reviewers come from a variety of disciplines, clarity is more valuable than volume. The goal is not to prove that you have read everything. The goal is to help reviewers understand the scholarly conversation into which your dissertation enters.

Religion, Ethics, Morals and Values

Purpose of This Section

To help reviewers understand how questions of religion, ethics, morals, and values function within the dissertation and whether they are among the project's central organizing concerns. This section also provides applicants with an opportunity to articulate the normative dimensions of their work and explain why the questions at the heart of the project matter.

What Reviewers Are Trying to Learn

Whether questions of religion, ethics, morals, or values are central to the dissertation rather than merely present; how those questions shape the project's aims, arguments, questions, or contributions; and whether the applicant has identified a significant question that aligns with the Fellowship's mission.

Applicants should think of this section as an opportunity to explain why the dissertation belongs in a Newcombe competition. The strongest responses do not simply identify the presence of ethical, religious, or value-related themes. They help reviewers understand why those themes matter to the project and how they contribute to its central intellectual purpose.

Centrality to Mission

Up to 300 words

If the previous section asks applicants to explain how questions of religion, ethics, values, or morals function within the dissertation, this section asks applicants to explain their own understanding of the importance of these questions. Reviewers are not simply looking for the

presence of such questions. They are trying to understand the emphasis the applicant places on the role those questions play within the project as a whole.

A strong response typically addresses three related questions. What does the applicant understand to be the ethical, religious, moral, or value-related dimension of the project? Why does the applicant believe those questions are central to the dissertation? How does the applicant understand those questions to shape the project's aims, arguments, contributions, or significance? The goal is not simply to identify the presence of these themes, but to explain the role they play in the intellectual life of the dissertation.

Applicants sometimes focus on where questions of religion, ethics, values, or morals appear within the dissertation. While this may provide useful context, it does not fully answer the question. Reviewers are less interested in where these themes appear than in understanding how the applicant understands their function within the project. How do these questions organize the inquiry? How do they shape the questions being asked? Why does the applicant believe they are essential to the dissertation's contribution?

The strongest responses help reviewers understand not only that questions of religion, ethics, values, or morals are present, but why the applicant considers them essential to the dissertation's intellectual purpose.

Normative Question

Unlike the Research Question, which asks what the dissertation seeks to understand or explain, the Normative Question asks applicants to identify the deeper moral, ethical, religious, or value-related question that gives the project its broader significance. What larger human concern motivates the inquiry? Why does this question deserve sustained scholarly attention?

The research question and the normative question are related, but they are not the same. For example:

Research question: How did Islamic legal scholars in the Ottoman Empire reason about environmental stewardship?

Normative question: What responsibilities do religious traditions have in shaping human relationships with the natural world?

Or:

Research question: How do disability advocates understand autonomy in clinical decision-making?

Normative question: What does respect for human dignity require when autonomy and care come into tension?

The research question is disciplinary. The normative question is the deeper human question that gives the research its significance.

Applicants should not feel compelled to frame their work as solving a social problem, advancing a particular moral position, or offering a definitive answer to a contested question. Many successful Newcombe projects investigate questions that remain open, complex, and

unresolved. The goal is not to demonstrate certainty, but to articulate the deeper question that makes the research intellectually and humanly significant.

For some projects, the normative question may involve competing values, ethical dilemmas, religious commitments, questions of justice, responsibility, authority, meaning, or human flourishing. For others, it may involve understanding how individuals, institutions, communities, or traditions navigate such concerns. In some cases, the normative question will closely resemble the research question. In others, it will operate at a different level, illuminating the broader ethical, religious, or value-related significance of the inquiry. What matters is not the category of question, but the applicant's understanding of why that question lies at the heart of the dissertation. The strongest responses help reviewers understand not only what the dissertation investigates, but why the applicant believes that investigation matters.

Please see the Categories of Normative Complexity at the end of this document for ways in which many Newcombe Fellows have approached this question.

Technology Assistance

The purpose of this question is transparency.

The Newcombe Fellowship recognizes that AI and large language model (LLM) tools are becoming increasingly common in academic research and writing. Applicants may use a variety of tools in a variety of ways. Rather than attempting to prohibit or police those uses, the Fellowship asks applicants to disclose them openly.

This disclosure does not advantage or disadvantage an application. Reviewers are not evaluating whether AI tools were used. They are evaluating the applicant's scholarly work. The purpose of the question is simply to provide an accurate account of how application materials were prepared.

Applicants should answer honestly and briefly. If AI tools were used, describe the nature and extent of that use. Examples might include brainstorming, outlining, editing, proofreading, or other forms of assistance. Regardless of the tools employed, applicants remain responsible for the intellectual content, accuracy, judgment, and scholarly integrity of all submitted materials.

Dissertation Progress and Fellowship Year Work Plan

Purpose of This Section:

To help reviewers understand the current status of the dissertation, the work that remains to be completed, and the role the Fellowship year will play in supporting that work.

What Reviewers Are Trying to Learn

Where the dissertation stands at the time of application, what work remains to be completed, what writing the Fellowship year will support, and whether there is a realistic

relationship between the work remaining and the timeline proposed. Reviewers are ultimately trying to determine whether the project is at a stage where Newcombe support can make a meaningful contribution to successful completion.

The timeline section is designed to help reviewers understand three things: Where is the dissertation now? What work remains? What portion of that work will the Fellowship support?

The first set of questions asks about the current status of the dissertation at the time of application. Applicants identify the number of substantive chapters in the completed dissertation and indicate the status of each chapter, the introduction, and the conclusion. This information provides a snapshot of the project as it exists on the application deadline.

Because the Fellowship year does not begin until the September following the application deadline, the application also asks applicants to describe the research and writing that remain to be completed. These questions are intended to capture the work that lies between the dissertation's current state and its successful completion.

Reviewers use this information to understand the relationship between the dissertation and the Fellowship year. How much substantive work remains? What research activities still need to occur? What writing has already been completed? What writing will take place during the Fellowship year itself?

The strongest responses provide a clear and realistic account of the project's current status, the work that remains, and the role the Fellowship will play in supporting its completion. Reviewers are not looking for certainty or perfect prediction. They are looking for evidence that the applicant understands the scope of the remaining work and has a credible plan for carrying it forward.

Dissertation Chapters and Chapter Status

The first questions in this section ask applicants to identify the number of substantive chapters in the completed dissertation and indicate the current status of each chapter at the time of application.

These questions are intended to provide a snapshot of the dissertation as it exists at the application deadline. Reviewers are not using this information to evaluate whether a dissertation contains the "right" number of chapters or follows a particular disciplinary structure. Different fields organize dissertations in different ways. What matters is helping reviewers understand the project's current stage of development.

Applicants should report the status of each chapter honestly and consistently. The goal is not to present the most advanced version of the dissertation possible. The goal is to provide an accurate picture of where the project stands at the time of application.

Together, the chapter-count and chapter-status questions help reviewers understand how much substantive work has already been completed and how much remains. They also provide important context for the Fellowship-Year Writing Plan that follows later in the application.

Because nearly a year will pass between the application deadline and the start of the Fellowship year, applicants should think of these questions as describing the dissertation's present state. Questions about future work belong in the sections that follow.

Introduction and Conclusion

The application asks applicants to report the status of the introduction and conclusion separately from the dissertation's substantive chapters. This distinction is intentional.

Introductions and conclusions are important components of a dissertation. They often contain significant intellectual work, including framing the project, articulating its contributions, and drawing together its central themes and findings. At the same time, they serve a different function than the substantive chapters that form the core of the dissertation's analysis and argument.

For this reason, reviewers consider introductions, conclusions, and substantive chapters separately when assessing the amount and nature of the work that remains. Reporting their status independently provides a more accurate picture of the dissertation's current stage and the writing that remains to be completed.

Applicants should not assume that introductions and conclusions are less important than substantive chapters. Nor should they assume that they are equivalent. The purpose of these questions is simply to help reviewers understand what kinds of writing remain and how that work relates to the Fellowship year.

As with the chapter-status questions, applicants should report the status of the introduction and conclusion as they exist at the time of application. Future plans for drafting or revising these sections can be discussed in the Fellowship-Year Writing Plan.

Remaining Research

This section asks applicants to describe any major research activities that must still be completed before the dissertation can be finished. Examples might include archival research, fieldwork, interviews, data collection, document analysis, language study, or other forms of evidence gathering.

The purpose of this question is not to account for every task that remains between the application date and completion of the dissertation. Rather, it is intended to help reviewers understand whether significant research activities remain and how those activities relate to the Fellowship year.

Applicants should focus on substantive research rather than writing, revision, editing, committee review, or administrative milestones. Those activities may be important to the completion of the dissertation, but they are addressed elsewhere in the application.

The Newcombe Fellowship is designed primarily to support students who are entering the final writing stage of the dissertation. As a result, most research should already be complete at the time of application. While some remaining research is entirely appropriate—and in some

cases necessary for successful completion—applicants should be able to demonstrate that the Fellowship year will be devoted primarily to writing rather than evidence gathering.

Reviewers are not looking for a particular amount of remaining research. They are trying to understand the current stage of the project and how the remaining research relates to the work that will be completed during the Fellowship year.

Fellowship-Year Writing Plan

This section asks applicants to describe the substantive writing that will be completed during the Fellowship year. It is the culminating question of the Dissertation Progress and Fellowship-Year Work Plan section.

The purpose of this question is not to produce a month-by-month schedule. Rather, it is to help reviewers understand how the Fellowship year will be used and what intellectual work remains to be completed. Reviewers are trying to understand the relationship between the dissertation's current status and the year of support being requested.

As you prepare your response, it may be helpful to think about three questions: Where is the dissertation now? What work remains? What portion of that work will be completed during the Fellowship year?

Strong responses distinguish clearly between different kinds of work. Applicants should identify which substantive chapters remain to be drafted, whether the introduction or conclusion will be written during the Fellowship year, and what revision work will remain on existing chapters. Reviewers are not simply interested in whether writing remains. They are trying to understand the nature of that writing and its relationship to the Fellowship year.

Applicants sometimes assume that the strongest timelines are the most ambitious. In practice, the strongest responses are often the clearest and most realistic. A persuasive plan demonstrates a credible relationship between the work remaining and the year of support being requested.

It is also important to remember the purpose of the Fellowship itself. Newcombe is designed to support a year of substantive dissertation writing. The strongest applications demonstrate that meaningful intellectual work will take place during the Fellowship year. Applicants are expected to have moved beyond the research stage and into the writing stage of the dissertation. It is entirely appropriate—and often expected—that some chapters will not have been fully written and will be completed during the Fellowship year. At the same time, the Fellowship is generally not intended for projects that are already substantially complete and require only minor revisions, formatting, or defense preparation. The goal is to demonstrate a clear and credible relationship between the work remaining and the year of support being requested.

Many applicants focus heavily on projected completion dates. While completion remains important, reviewers are often more interested in the writing itself. A dissertation defended in August of the Fellowship year may be a stronger fit than one completed in April for a May

graduation if the later project involves more substantial writing during the Fellowship year. The central question is not simply when the dissertation will be finished. The central question is what intellectual work remains and how the Fellowship year will support its completion.

Expected Completion

The final questions in this section ask applicants to estimate when they expect to complete a full dissertation draft, submit the dissertation to their committee, and defend the dissertation.

These dates help reviewers understand how the Fellowship year relates to the applicant's overall completion plan. They are not intended to measure ambition, efficiency, or certainty. Dissertation projects evolve, research findings change, committee feedback can alter timelines, and unexpected delays are common. Reviewers understand this.

Applicants should provide their best good-faith estimates based on their current understanding of the project. The goal is not to predict the future perfectly. The goal is to demonstrate a realistic understanding of the work that remains.

Applicants sometimes assume that the strongest applications are those with the earliest completion dates. For Newcombe, that is not necessarily the case. The Fellowship is intended to support a year of substantive dissertation writing. As a result, reviewers are often more interested in the relationship between the Fellowship year and the remaining intellectual work than in the speed of completion itself.

While many Fellows complete and defend before spring or summer graduation deadlines, applicants should remember that the Fellowship year extends through August. In some cases, a defense scheduled for late summer or early fall may be entirely appropriate if it reflects a meaningful amount of writing taking place during the Fellowship year.

The central question is not simply when the dissertation will be completed. The central question is whether the Fellowship year provides meaningful support for the work required to complete it.

Intellectual and professional profile

Purpose of This Section:

To help reviewers understand the applicant's scholarly development and preparation for the dissertation project.

What Reviewers Are Trying to Learn:

What experiences, accomplishments, and forms of intellectual engagement have prepared the applicant to undertake the proposed dissertation successfully.

The dissertation materials help reviewers understand the project. This section shifts attention to the scholar who is carrying it out.

The Scholarly Profile provides an opportunity to highlight the experiences, accomplishments, and intellectual engagements that have been most important in preparing you for this work. Rather than repeating information contained in the CV, applicants should focus on the aspects of their scholarly development that are most relevant to understanding the dissertation and their readiness to complete it successfully.

Scholarly Profile

The Scholarly Profile provides context for your development as a scholar and helps reviewers understand the preparation that supports the proposed dissertation project.

Because a curriculum vitae is also included in the application, this section should not be approached as a comprehensive inventory of publications, presentations, awards, fellowships, teaching experiences, or professional accomplishments. Reviewers can find that information in the CV. Instead, the Scholarly Profile provides an opportunity to highlight the experiences that have been most important in preparing you to undertake and complete this work. These may include publications, conference presentations, teaching, fellowships, public scholarship, professional experience related to the dissertation, or other forms of intellectual engagement. The goal is not to demonstrate breadth for its own sake. Rather, it is to help reviewers understand the preparation that supports the proposed project.

Strong responses are selective and interpretive. They do not simply list accomplishments. They explain why particular experiences mattered and how they contributed to the development of the skills, knowledge, expertise, or perspectives necessary to undertake the dissertation successfully.

By the end of this section, reviewers should have a clearer understanding of the preparation that supports the project and the experiences that have helped equip the applicant to carry it out.

Recommendations

Purpose of This Section:

To provide reviewers with a brief external assessment of the applicant's scholarly readiness, project fit, and likelihood of successful completion.

What Reviewers Are Trying to Learn:

Whether a faculty member familiar with the applicant's work believes the student is prepared to undertake advanced doctoral research, whether the project aligns with the Fellowship's mission, and whether the applicant appears well-positioned to complete the dissertation successfully.

Unlike many fellowship competitions, the Newcombe Fellowship does not require full recommendation letters during Phase 1 of the application process. Instead, recommenders complete a brief evaluative rubric and may provide a short optional statement. One recommender

must be the dissertation advisor. Applicants should choose a second recommender who knows their scholarly work and dissertation project well, since both recommenders will be asked to provide detailed letters of recommendation should the applicant advance to Phase 2 as a finalist.

This approach serves two purposes. It allows reviewers to obtain a limited external perspective on the applicant and project, and it also reduces the burden placed on faculty by reserving full recommendation letters for the smaller group of applicants who advance to Phase 2.

Applicants should not think of this recommendation form as a substitute for a traditional letter. The goal is not to provide a detailed evaluation of every aspect of the applicant's academic career. Rather, the form helps reviewers confirm several key considerations, including scholarly preparedness, alignment with the Fellowship's mission, intellectual promise, and likelihood of timely completion.

Because the recommendation form is intentionally brief, applicants should ensure that their recommenders are familiar with both the dissertation project and the goals of the Fellowship. A thoughtful response from someone who understands the project well is often more helpful than a longer response from someone with limited familiarity.

If an applicant advances to Phase 2, recommenders will later be asked to provide full letters of recommendation. Those letters allow reviewers to evaluate the scholarship and the scholar in greater depth. The Phase 1 recommendation form serves a different purpose: it provides a concise external perspective that helps reviewers determine which projects warrant further consideration.

Optional Guidance for Communicating with Recommenders

Applicants should contact recommenders and complete the recommender section of the application as early as possible. When making the request, be sure to communicate the recommendation deadline clearly and provide any supporting materials that may be helpful. Even though the Phase 1 recommendation takes the form of a brief evaluation rubric rather than a traditional letter, it still requires faculty members to set aside time to review materials and provide thoughtful responses. Waiting until the application deadline approaches places unnecessary pressure on both applicants and recommenders.

Many applicants find it helpful to provide recommenders with a brief explanation of the Fellowship and the recommendation process. Doing so can help ensure that recommenders understand the purpose of the Fellowship, the nature of the Phase 1 recommendation rubric, and the timeline for submission.

The goal is not to tell recommenders what to write, but rather to provide sufficient context for them to complete the rubric effectively. Applicants may also wish to share a current CV, dissertation abstract, Project Summary, or other materials that help explain the project and its relationship to the Fellowship.

Below you will find sample language that may be adapted into your own words when contacting a recommender.

Suggested Email Language

Thank you for agreeing to serve as a recommender for my application to the Charlotte W. Newcombe Doctoral Dissertation Fellowship. The deadline for submitting the recommendation is November 1.

The Newcombe Fellowship supports doctoral dissertation projects that engage significant questions related to religion, ethics, morals, or values. The Fellowship is intended for students in the final writing stage of the dissertation and supports a year of substantive dissertation writing.

For the initial stage of review, recommenders are asked to complete a brief evaluation rubric rather than a traditional recommendation letter. The rubric asks for your assessment of my scholarly preparation, the project's relationship to the Fellowship's mission, and my likelihood of successfully completing the dissertation. There is also an opportunity to provide a brief optional comment.

I have attached materials that may be helpful as you complete the recommendation, including my dissertation abstract, Project Summary, and CV. I would also be happy to discuss the project or the Fellowship if additional context would be useful.

Thank you again for your time and support.

Phase 2 Application Preparation

Applicants selected as finalists will be invited to participate in a second stage of review. While Phase 1 focuses primarily on identifying promising Newcombe projects, Phase 2 allows reviewers to examine those projects in greater depth and to compare them with other outstanding finalists.

The purpose of Phase 2 is not to revisit the same questions asked during the initial review. Rather, it provides an opportunity for a more detailed assessment of both the scholarship and the scholar. Finalists are asked to submit additional materials that help reviewers evaluate the originality of the project, the strength of its scholarly foundations, the applicant's preparation to complete the work successfully, and the potential contributions the project may make to ongoing scholarly and public conversations.

Phase 2 materials build upon the work already completed in the initial application. The project itself does not change. Instead, finalists are given an opportunity to explain, develop, and contextualize that work in greater depth.

The sections that follow describe the additional materials requested from finalists and explain the purpose each serves within the final review process.

Full Proposal

Purpose of This Section:

To allow reviewers to evaluate the scholarly foundations, originality, argument, and significance of the dissertation in greater depth than is possible through the Project Summary.

What Reviewers Are Trying to Learn:

Whether the dissertation demonstrates strong scholarship, a compelling intellectual contribution, a persuasive framework, and the potential to make a meaningful contribution to its field.

The Full Proposal serves a different purpose than the Project Summary submitted during Phase 1. While the Project Summary is designed to help reviewers understand the project, the Proposal allows reviewers to evaluate the scholarship that supports it.

Applicants sometimes assume that the Proposal is simply a longer version of the Project Summary. In practice, the two documents perform different functions. The Project Summary answers a relatively straightforward question: What is this dissertation about? The Proposal addresses a more demanding set of questions: Why does this project matter? How does it engage existing scholarship? What contribution does it seek to make? Why should reviewers find its arguments persuasive and worthy of support?

A strong proposal situates the dissertation within the relevant scholarly literature, explains the project's intervention, demonstrates command of the field, and provides a clear account of the project's methods, evidence, and argument. While reviewers are not expecting a completed book manuscript, they are looking for evidence of rigorous thinking, scholarly maturity, and intellectual originality.

One useful way to think about the distinction is this: the Project Summary explains the project; the Proposal demonstrates the scholarship. By the time reviewers read the Proposal, they already understand what the dissertation is about. The Proposal provides an opportunity to show how the project works as a piece of scholarship and why it deserves serious consideration among an exceptionally strong group of finalists.

Intellectual Commitments

By the time reviewers reach this section, they already understand the dissertation project and have determined that it warrants serious consideration. This section provides an opportunity to reflect on the intellectual life from which the project emerged.

This section invites applicants to reflect on the relationship between themselves and their work. Reviewers already understand what the dissertation studies. Here, they are trying to understand why the questions at the center of the dissertation have become important to the applicant.

The application asks about the commitments, experiences, questions, and concerns that have shaped your intellectual life and drawn you to this work. These influences may emerge from many sources. They may arise from previous research, teaching, professional experiences, intellectual traditions, personal encounters with particular questions, or longstanding concerns that have shaped the direction of your inquiry. The goal is to illuminate the relationship between the scholar and the scholarship. Why have these questions become worthy of sustained attention? What concerns, commitments, curiosities, or experiences have made them intellectually compelling?

Strong responses are reflective, focused, and intellectually honest rather than exhaustive. They help reviewers understand how a particular line of inquiry emerged and why it has remained significant without attempting to recount an entire personal or academic history.

The strongest statements often reveal not certainty, but sustained engagement. They help reviewers understand not only what questions an applicant studies, but why those questions continue to matter.

By the end of this section, reviewers should have a clearer understanding of why the applicant has chosen to devote years of study to these particular questions and how those questions have shaped the intellectual work that followed.

Future Contributions

This section invites applicants to reflect on the future implications of their work. Reviewers are not asking applicants to predict the impact of their scholarship or to make ambitious claims about how the dissertation will transform a field, profession, community, or society. Rather, they are interested in understanding the contributions applicants hope their work might make over time.

Contributions can take many forms. For some applicants, the most immediate contribution may be to a scholarly conversation within a particular discipline. For others, the work may inform professional practice, public understanding, institutional decision-making, community life, or broader conversations about religion, ethics, values, and public life. There is no single model of contribution that is preferred.

Applicants should focus on thoughtful possibilities rather than confident predictions. The strongest responses demonstrate an awareness of how the dissertation fits within larger intellectual, professional, or public conversations while remaining realistic about the limits of any single project.

This section is not asking applicants to defend the significance of the dissertation once again. Rather, it is asking them to reflect on where the work may lead and what kinds of contributions they hope it will make. The emphasis is on aspiration, direction, and possibility rather than certainty.

By the end of this section, reviewers should have a clearer sense of how the applicant imagines carrying the questions explored in the dissertation into future scholarly, professional, or public work.

Full Recommendation Letters

Unlike the brief recommendation rubric used during Phase 1, the recommendation letters requested during Phase 2 provide reviewers with a more comprehensive perspective on both the scholar and the scholarship.

Strong recommendation letters do more than praise an applicant's intelligence, diligence, or professionalism. They help reviewers understand the significance of the dissertation, the originality of the applicant's contribution, the applicant's strengths as a researcher and writer, and the applicant's readiness to complete the proposed work successfully.

Detailed, specific letters from individuals familiar with the project are generally more useful than letters from prominent scholars who have had only limited engagement with the applicant's work.

Reviewers understand that recommendation letters reflect the perspectives of individual scholars and disciplinary contexts. They are not looking for particular phrases, rankings, or formulas. Rather, they are interested in thoughtful evaluations that help illuminate the strengths of the project and the scholar behind it.

By the time reviewers read these letters, they have already determined that the dissertation warrants serious consideration. The recommendation letters help provide the additional context needed to distinguish among an exceptionally strong group of finalists.

Optional Guidance for Communicating with Recommenders, Phase 2

Applicants may find it helpful to discuss the possibility of a Phase 2 recommendation letter with their recommenders well before finalist notifications are announced. While there is no expectation that recommenders begin drafting letters in advance, providing early notice can help ensure that they are familiar with the process and prepared should the applicant advance to the finalist stage.

Below you will find sample language that may be adapted into your own words when contacting a recommender.

Suggested Email Language

I wanted to let you know that if I am selected as a finalist for the Charlotte W. Newcombe Doctoral Dissertation Fellowship, finalists are required to submit full letters of recommendation as part of the Phase 2 review process, and the deadline would be February 14.

At this stage, no action is required. However, because the finalist review period occurs on a relatively short timeline, I wanted to provide advance notice and ask whether you would be willing to support my application should I advance to the finalist stage.

The Newcombe Fellowship supports dissertations that engage significant questions related to religion, ethics, morals, and values. If selected as a finalist, I would provide the proposal, application materials, and any additional information that might be helpful.

Thank you for your consideration and for your continued support of my work.

Appendix: Questions in Newcombe-Supported Scholarship

The Newcombe Fellowship is not organized around a fixed list of approved topics or questions. Rather, it is organized around an ongoing inquiry into questions that remain open, contested, evolving, and consequential.

Applicants often assume that Newcombe-supported work must take the form of an explicitly normative argument. While many projects do take that form, others approach questions of religion, ethics, morals, and values through historical, descriptive, interpretive, ethnographic, or analytical inquiry. Some projects ask what ought to be done. Others seek to understand how people, institutions, traditions, or communities have understood and navigated such questions.

The frameworks that follow emerged from observing recurring patterns across decades of Newcombe-supported scholarship. They are not intended as eligibility criteria, nor are they exhaustive. Rather, they are offered as intellectual tools that may help applicants think more clearly about the questions at the center of their own work.

Some applicants will recognize their projects within one of the categories that follow. Others may find that their work spans multiple categories or suggests entirely new ones. All of these outcomes are entirely appropriate. The purpose of these frameworks is not classification. The purpose is clarification. Applicants who believe their project is best understood through a different form of normative complexity are encouraged to say so. Newcombe-supported scholarship continues to evolve, and the categories presented here are intended to remain open to revision, expansion, and refinement as new questions emerge.

Categories of Normative Complexity

1. Embodiment as Epistemology

Definition: Values and ethical tensions are revealed through the body—how bodies carry pain, bear identity, and enact belief. The body is not just studied, but experienced as a site of knowledge and morality.

Illustration: A dissertation tracing how dietary practices in diasporic communities link bodily health to liberation, showing how eating becomes a spiritual, ethical, and political act.

2. Power in the Margins

Definition: Projects that center those historically excluded or silenced, showing how the “edges” of society generate new insights into justice, ethics, and value. Marginality is not deficit—it is revelation.

Illustration: A study of citizens navigating racialized and religious identities in diaspora, revealing how they negotiate belonging while confronting nationalist and exclusionary politics.

3. Religion as Contested Ground

Definition: Religion as a dynamic terrain where meaning, authority, and morality are debated. Traditions appear both as refuge and weapon, subject to contestation from within and without.

Illustration: A project examining how local religious practices, dismissed as exploitative, in fact serve as ethical projects of self-fashioning and community building.

4. Time as Terrain

Definition: Ethics understood not as fixed but layered across past, present, and future. Projects reveal how injustices echo forward or how imagined futures shape action today.

Illustration: A dissertation studying communities confronting environmental collapse, guided by obligations to ancestors and to future generations yet unborn.

5. Ethics of Memory and Witness

Definition: How societies remember injustice and suffering, and what responsibilities emerge from those memories. These projects ask: who remembers, how, and to what end?

Illustration: Research on how categories of “human” or “inhuman” might be created, showing how the haunting of past violence unsettles present claims to order.

6. Normativity in Everyday Practice

Definition: Ethical reasoning embedded in daily routines, rituals, and habits. Moral worlds are made not only in theory but in kitchens, marketplaces, streets, and temples.

Illustration: A dissertation reframing pilgrimage exchanges between priests and laypeople as ethical practices of memory and meaning, rather than mere transactions.

7. Complexity without Cynicism

Definition: Projects that resist easy answers or relativism. They dwell in nuance without collapsing into despair, modeling intellectual rigor with ethical humility.

Illustration: A study of emerging bioethical debates that carefully traces competing claims without dismissing or celebrating any side, showing that ethical stakes demand patience and seriousness.

8. Institutions and Normative Order

Definition: How laws, bureaucracies, or states embody and enforce moral orders. Institutions, often invisible, become sites where ethics and power entwine.

Illustration: A project on how nation-states define “monsters” at their borders, exposing how the classification of citizens and outsiders encodes moral violence.

9. Aesthetics as Moral Inquiry

Definition: Artistic expression as a way of asking ethical questions and reimagining values. Art is not decoration but a field where moral imagination takes form.

Illustration: A dissertation on ecological artworks using living organisms, exploring how art challenges human-centered perspectives and invites reciprocity with nonhuman life.

Non-Normative Approaches that Still Show Normative Complexity

1. Genealogies of Value

Definition: Projects that trace how concepts of morality, ethics, or religion have been constructed and reconstructed over time, without prescribing a particular outcome.

Illustration: A dissertation examining how ideas of purity and pollution evolved across colonial legal codes, showing how categories of “moral order” were historically produced.

2. Descriptive Ethnographies of Value in Practice

Definition: Research that does not argue what values *should* be, but carefully documents how people enact, negotiate, or resist values in everyday life.

Illustration: An ethnographic study of rural communities’ pilgrimage practices, not to endorse or critique them, but to show how rituals carry moral meaning for participants.

3. Critical Analyses of Institutions

Definition: Projects that expose how institutions encode assumptions about value, morality, or religion—even when those assumptions are implicit or unacknowledged.

Illustration: A study of how bureaucratic categories of citizenship embed hidden moral judgments about belonging and exclusion.

4. Interpretations of Texts or Aesthetics

Definition: Analyses that show how literature, art, or cultural production grapples with moral or religious themes, without the author imposing a normative judgment.

Illustration: A literary study tracing how mid-century novels engaged with the problem of moral responsibility after war, analyzing themes rather than prescribing ethics.

5. Mapping Moral Worlds

Definition: Projects that act as cartographies of value systems, laying out the complexity of religious or ethical thought as it is lived or imagined, rather than advocating for one view.

Illustration: A project charting how diasporic youth understand Hindu nationalism—as supporters, resisters, or ambivalent participants—showing the moral diversity within a single community.

Closing Remarks

By now, you should understand not only what the application asks, but why it asks it. The strongest applications are rarely the most complicated. They are the clearest. They help reviewers understand the project, the questions that animate it, and the work that remains to be done. The goal is not to present a perfect dissertation or a perfect scholar. The goal is to provide an honest and thoughtful account of a project in progress and the intellectual journey that has brought you to it. We look forward to reading your work.

Susan Billmaier, PhD

Program Officer, the Newcombe Fellowship