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CAMBRIDGE UNIVERSITY PRESS PUBLIC HUMANITIES

How to Do PUBLIC HUMANITIES

By Jeffrey R. Wilson



A RECOGNITION OF THIS *NEED TO UPSKILL* HAS EMERGED FROM A RECENT SURGE OF RESEARCH ON **PUBLIC HUMANITIES IN PRACTICE**.[1]

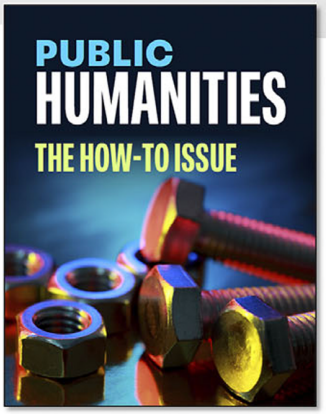


[1] Krebs 2019; Smulyan 2020; Fischer-Livne and May-Curry 2024; Risam, Yothers, and Hernández-Laroche 2025; Wilson and Bulaitis 2025; and Ortiz 2025.

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Introducing



INSTRUCTION MANUALS

FOR

DOING PUBLIC HUMANITIES

Meeting people where they are

VIA

MEDIA FORMATS and PROFESSIONS

that require

CONCEPTUAL UNDERSTANDING OF WHAT THESE NEW PLATFORMS OFFER

and

TECHNICAL TRAINING IN THE NUTS-AND-BOLTS OF THESE SPACES

THE HOW-TO ISSUE OF *PUBLIC HUMANITIES* FEATURES AUTHORS WHO HAVE HAD SUCCESS IN VARIOUS FORMS OF PUBLIC HUMANITIES OFFERING **GUIDANCE TO THE NEXT GENERATION** WHO ARE INTERESTED IN THOSE PATHWAYS BUT AREN'T SURE WHERE TO START OR HOW TO DO IT.

- ✓ museums
- ✓ activism
- ✓ empirical research
- ✓ policy work
- ✓ public writing
- ✓ community engagement

- ✓ social media
- ✓ administration
- ✓ podcasts
- ✓ fundraising
- ✓ publishing
- ✓ elected office

THE ISSUE PROVIDES CONCRETE EXAMPLES OF **SUCCESSES, FAILURES, LESSONS LEARNED THE HARD WAY,** AND **TIME-TESTED STRATEGIES** FOR TURNING IDEAS FOR PUBLIC HUMANITIES INTO REALITIES.

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IN ITS MOST BASIC FORM, **PUBLIC HUMANITIES IS EASY** AND DOESN'T REQUIRE ANY TECHNICAL KNOW-HOW: JUST HAVE AN INFORMED CONVERSATION WITH SOMEONE ABOUT HUMAN CREATIVITY AND CULTURE—

THAT'S PUBLIC HUMANITIES.[2]



THOSE CONVERSATIONS HAPPEN **ORGANICALLY AND INTUITIVELY** ALL THE TIME.

THE CHALLENGE COMES WHEN WE NEED TO **CURATE THOSE MOMENTS INTENTIONALLY**, ALLOWING PEOPLE TO FIND THE IDEAS AND DEBATES THAT THEY ARE MOST INTERESTED IN—



—AS OPPOSED TO THOSE THAT **JUST HAPPEN TO ARISE** IN THE ROUTINE OF THEIR DAILY LIVES.

THE BIGGEST SHIFT THAT HAPPENS WHEN ACADEMICS MOVE FROM **HUMANITIES SCHOLARSHIP** TO **PUBLIC HUMANITIES**

is the shift from



CREATING KNOWLEDGE FOR SUBJECT MATTER EXPERTS

to



CREATING PRODUCTS AND SERVICES FOR A FICKLE AND DEMANDING AUDIENCE.

THAT LANGUAGE OF **PRODUCTS AND SERVICES** SCARES SCHOLARS.

BUT PUBLIC HUMANITIES IMPLICATE THE **SKILLS OF BUSINESS ADMINISTRATION**, SHIFTING FROM THE OLD MODEL OF A PUBLIC INTELLECTUAL DEIGNING TO GIVE KNOWLEDGE TO THE MASSES TO NEW FORMS OF CIVIC ENGAGEMENT THAT NEED **GRIT**, **PLANNING**, AND **COLLABORATION** WITH TECHNICAL EXPERTISE SEPARATE FROM THE SUBJECT MATTER.

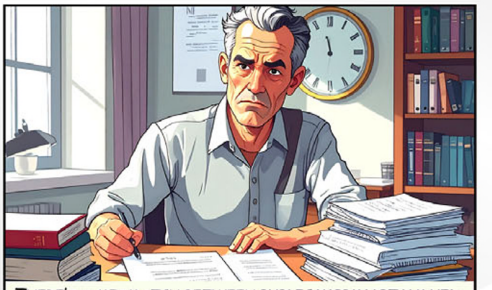
[2] For this understanding of public humanities, see Wilson and Bulaitis 2024.

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Sustainability in Public Humanities



Public humanities is often the **work scholars feel called to**: what we'll suffer through other professional responsibilities to do.



There's a mismatch between **public work not valued** by academic employers and **professional work that must be done** to keep our jobs.

Thus public humanities encounter **sustainability challenges.**

How can this vital work that is done in addition to standard job responsibilities maintain momentum as the world wears us down?

Sustainability simply means that hours of work will be required to turn an idea into a reality, and people need a compelling reason to do it.

There are three **routes to sustainability** in public humanities.

Passion

Public humanities projects often grow from the **ambition of a single person or small group**. Sometimes their energy is enough: they put in the hours. But passion is a problem when people have **limited capacity**, especially if they need to spend time in other places that provide financial compensation.

Money

Financial compensation for labor done on behalf of public humanities projects is the **ideal**. Getting paid provides people with a motive to do the work, even if they don't believe in the vision, though they usually do. But money is a sustainability problem when there's **not much to go around**: securing funding for public humanities projects is difficult.[3]

Inspiration

People will labor for public humanities—even without financial compensation—when they **believe in the social value** of the project. This free labor is the basis of volunteer work and philanthropy, but public humanities must be mindful that **hope labor** shifts the register from altruism to exploitation.[4]

The most sustainable public humanities have all three.
At least one factor must be present for a project to survive long-term.

[3] On humanities funding, see Newfield 2024.
[4] On hope labor, see Paris 2025.

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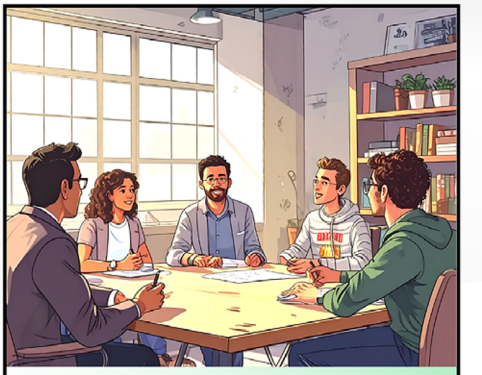
The Pillars of Public Humanities

Four skill sets are so crucial that they uphold nearly every public humanities project.



Upskilling

Public humanities projects often involve **learning new skills on the fly**. Practitioners need both an eagerness to learn new skills and mechanisms for acquiring new knowledge.[5]



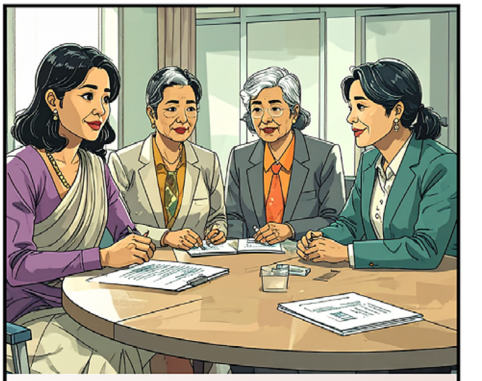
Teaming

Unlike the isolation of scholarly research, public humanities is intensely collaborative. "Teaming" is being able to do **good teamwork with specialists who aren't on a stable team**—who enter and exit a project as needed.[6]



Universal Design

When you take the time to ensure that people with disabilities can **fully access your project**, you create higher quality public humanities for everyone.[7]



Authority Sharing

Because public humanities projects often involve many stakeholders—both in content (what the project is about) and form (how the project is created)—they need to adopt an approach to **joint decision-making**.[8]

[5] On upskilling, see Cappelli 2025.
[6] On teaming, see Edmondson 2012.
[7] On universal design, see Hamraie 2017.
[8] On authority sharing, see Adair, Filene, and Koloski 2011.

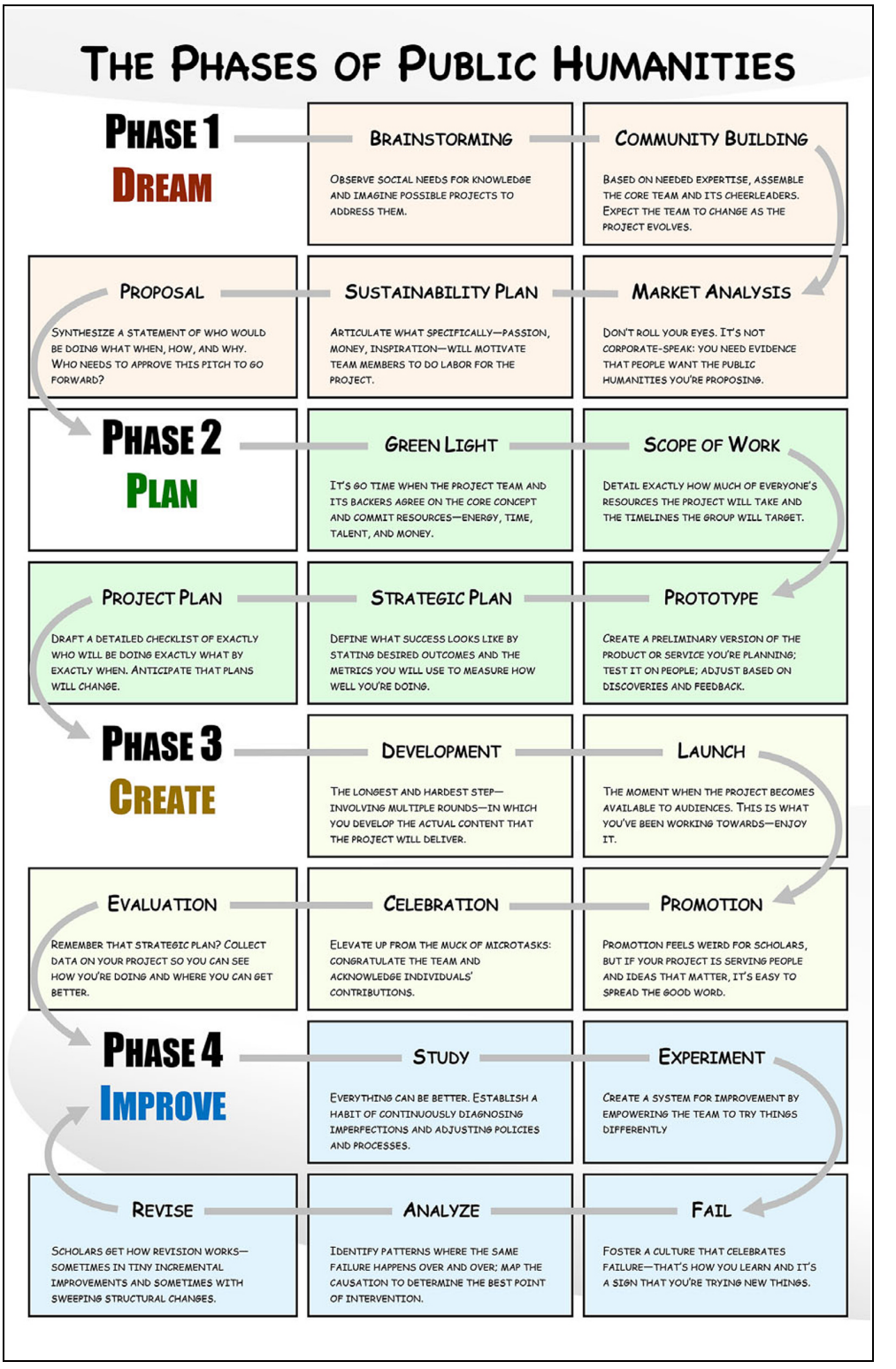
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Public Humanities on the Ground

		In Action	How To
Public Intellect	Public Writing	Donna Zuckerberg, "As *Eidolon* Lay Dying"	Jeffrey R. Wilson, "How to Do Public Writing"
	Public Events	Sarah Churchwell, "Ten Years of Being Human"	Joshua Calhoun and Sarah Marty, "How to Design Public Events"
	Podcasts	Lisa Yun and Shruti Jain, "Community-Engaged Podcasting with *Hidden Heroes in a Small Town*"	Anita Chikkatur, David T. Lawrence, and Crystal Moten, "How to Podcast"
	Interviews	Stuart Green, "The Perils and Pleasures of Talking to Reporters"	Alice Marwick, "How to Talk to Journalists: Best Practices for Academics"
	Social Media	Emma Pettit, "How Kevin Kruse Became History's Attack Dog"	Mark Carrigan, "How to Use Social Media for Public Engagement"
	Websites	Cathy N. Davidson, "How to Lead an Academic Social Network"	Jennifer van Alstyne, "How To Make A Personal Academic Website"
Politics	Activism	Manuela Picq, "Scholar Activism: When Our Bodies Stand by Our Ideas"	Caroline Levine, "Three Weeks to Political Action: A Workbook" in *The Activist Humanist*
	Policy	Horacio Sierra, "An Interview with National Leaders in the Arts and Humanities"	Louie Fooks, "Humanities and Policy Engagement: An Introduction for Researchers"
	Consulting	John A. Lawrence, "A Historian on the Hill"	David Lowe and Carolyn Holbrook, "How to Write Policy Briefs"
	Elected Office	Stephanie Saul, "The Education of Elizabeth Warren"	Lynn Mills Eckert, "How to Run for Office"
Education	Classroom Pedagogy	Jocelyn S. Martin, "Stories, Art, and an Orphanage: Writing against Duterte's Extrajudicial Killings in the Philippines"	Dicky Yangzom, "Teaching an Introduction to Public Humanities: A Pedagogical Reflection"
	Curriculum Development	Jonathan Bate, "Teaching the Humanities for the Future Public"	Michelle May-Curry and Younger Oliver, "Approaches to Training in the Public Humanities"
	Internships	Juhie Bhatia, "Meet Three Gen-Z Interns Doing What They Love—and Getting Paid for It"	Lillian Wilson, "How to Do Humanities Internships"
	Program Management	Christopher Daley and Matthew Smith, "Building Engaged Humanities Infrastructure: An Experiment in Intra-Institution Collaboration"	CE Mackenzie, "How to Run a Humanities Center"
	Online Learning	Gillian Osborne, "A Schoolroom Poetry for the 21st Century"	Elizabeth Harris, "10 Steps To Creating A Wildly Successful Online Course"
	Continuing Education	Jim Cocola, "A Crash Course in Directing the Clemente Course in the Humanities"	Susan M. Yelich Biniecki and Steven W. Schmidt, "Organization and Administration of Adult and Continuing Education Programs"
Organization	Program Development	Poul Holm and Steven Hartman, "What Can the Public Humanities Learn about Impact from the Environmental Humanities?"	Gaini Seitenova, "Why Should People Form Professional Groups and Associations?"
	Program Administration	Matthew Frye Jacobson, "The 'Doing' of *Doing Public Humanities*"	Elizabeth L. Angeli and Rachel McNealis, "How to Prepare Faculty and Graduate Students for Public Humanities Leadership"
	Community Partnerships	Jordan Landes, Katie L. Price, and Vivian Truong, "Beyond Interdisciplinarity: How Rosine 2.0 Created Social Structures of Community Care"	Helen H. Cho, Ruth Curry, and Ashley Cheyemi McNeil, "How to Sustain Public Humanities Partnerships"
	Museum Exhibits	Jude Piesse, "Mapping Susannah Darwin: Practice and Process"	Laura Holzman, "How to Create Exhibits"
	Entrepreneurship	Whitelaw Reid, "Entrepreneur Was an English Major Who Worked at the White House"	Cait Brumme and Brian Trelstad, "Should Your Start-up Be For-Profit or Nonprofit?"
	Fundraising	Briann Greenfield, "Making the Humanities Public: The Example of Connecticut's Humanities Council"	Raphael Brewster Folsom, *How to Get Grant Money in the Humanities and Social Sciences*
	Infrastructure	Peter Meineck, "The Politics of Public Humanities in America"	Ashley Beard-Fosnow, et al., "State Humanities Councils and the Public Humanities: A Forum"
Research	Co-Created Research	Thomas Cauvin, "Public Participation as Decentralization of the History-Making Process: The HistorEsch Project in Luxembourg"	Jasper Knight, "Methodologies for Research Co-creation in the Social Sciences: Insights and Recommendations From Community-Based Research in Africa"
	Theoretical Research	Judith Butler, "Ordinary, Incredulous"	Daniel Fisher-Livne and Michelle May-Curry, "Public Humanities Scholarship in Practice and Theory"
	Quantitative Empirical Research	Humanities Indicators of the American Academy of Arts and Sciences, *The Humanities in American Life*	Claire Lemercier and Claire Zalc, *Quantitative Methods in the Humanities: An Introduction*
	Qualitative Empirical Research	Erica Kohl-Arenas, "Supporting Public Humanities at the Critical Intersections: An Imagining America Manifesto"	John W. Creswell and Cheryl N. Poth, *Qualitative Inquiry and Research Design*

Examples are drawn from Wilson and Bulaitis 2025, Ortiz 2025, the *Public Humanities* Of the Moment section, and stand-alone books and articles.

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A Public Humanities Toolkit

The Public Sphere

A social space where people freely discuss matters of general interest, often facilitated by newspapers, television, and social media.[9]

Counter-Publics

Segments in the public sphere where marginalized groups circulate alternative opinions in opposition to dominant norms.[10]

The Non-Profit Industrial Complex

A web of state and elite interests linked with non-profit organizations to manage dissent and channel activism into depoliticized bureaucracy.[11]

Decolonization

Repatriation of Indigenous land and resources—not in symbolic gestures of solidarity but in tangible transfers of ownership.[12]

Strategic Legibility

Speak in the vernacular. Write in plain language that is easy for non-specialists to understand.[13]

Harm Reduction

A concept drawn from public health: approaching your work as an effort to decrease the negative effects of forces beyond one's control.[14]

Presentism

Interpretation of the past through the lens of present-day attitudes, concerns, or values, connecting current issues with historical analysis.[15]

Active Learning

Avoid the model where experts talk and the public listens. People acquire knowledge through conversational exchange and by doing things.[16]

Centering Mission

Start every meeting with your mission statement: it centers what we're doing and why.

Stating Values

Make a list of what you value and why—and refer to this list when setting goals and making decisions.

Storytelling

Stop defending the value of the humanities—it's nauseating. Show—don't tell—through narrative not argument.[17]

Affirmative Citation

Use citations to support scholars who face systematic bias, as in Christen A. Smith's #CiteBlackWomen campaign.[18]

Evidence Synthesis

Drawing together the best available knowledge from relevant fields to inform policy or decision-making.[19]

Power Mapping

Visualizing decision-making authority in collaborative projects to foster shifts toward citizen control.[20]

Institutionalizing

Use your organization's mission statement against it: make your project a priority for people who hold the levers of power and money.[21]

Accompaniment

Going along with people who are experiencing systematic injustice to aid navigation of complex social systems.[22]

Design Thinking

A user-centered approach to innovation with four key stages: empathize, ideate, develop, and implement.

Project Management

Collaborative public humanities projects involve interdependence. Learning the craft of project management pays off tenfold in time saved.

Career Development

Unlearn academia's weird professional priorities; master other industries' routine career conventions.[23]

Crisis Response

Don't let a good crisis go to waste. 2020 was a watershed moment for public humanities because limitations forced innovations.

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[9] See Habermas 1964.
[10] See Warner 2002.
[11] See INCITE! 2017.
[12] See Tuck and Yang 2012.
[13] See Barrios, Kornstein, McAllister, and Ruggill 2024.
[14] See Mackenzie 2025.
[15] See Wilson 2019.
[16] See Moffat 2024.
[17] See Smith 2025.
[18] See Smith 2018.
[19] See Tasker, Dillon, and Craig 2025; Stevenson, Balloo, and Piper 2025.
[20] See Smith 2025.
[21] See Powers 2025.
[22] See Fouts 2025.
[23] See Williams and Williams 2025.

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Evaluation in Public Humanities

Public humanities projects aim for maximum impact.[24]

Thus they often undergo



Internal Evaluation

by a project team

to assess and improve performance



External Evaluation

by project backers

to aid decisions about offering support

Is the project meeting its stated goals?

How big of a social impact is the project making?

Continuous Improvement

1. **State objectives:** what you're trying to accomplish and how you're going about it.
2. **Identify metrics**—things that can be measured—to show you are achieving objectives.
3. **Create goals** for the measurable metrics that you want to hit.
4. **Establish data collection** mechanisms for each metric so that you can measure success.
5. **Celebrate successes** and **tend to shortcomings.**[25]

Impact Measurement

External evaluations often come from funding agencies, but employers also conduct performance reviews and consider how public humanities work contributions to an organization's mission.

Academic performance reviews often triangulate **research**, **teaching**, and **service**. Public humanities is all three and can fall through the cracks.

Recent guidelines from professional organizations can help academic employers count public humanities work fairly and fully.[26]

Evaluation of humanities scholarship measures the efficacy, value, and impact of a **concrete product.** Public humanities evaluation also emphasizes the quality and ethics of an **intangible process.**[27] Public humanities success inheres not in **content delivered** but in **connections created.**[28]

[24] On the value of the humanities more broadly, see Bulaitis 2020.
[25] On continuous improvement in public humanities, see Oliver 2023.
[26] On impact measurement in public humanities, see the American Anthropological Association 2017, the Modern Language Association 2022, and the American Historical Association 2023.
[27] See Pedersen, Grønvad, and Hvidtfeldt 2020; Aiello et al. 2021; Ochsner and Bulaitis 2023; and Bulaitis 2024.
[28] On this idea beyond public humanities, see Anand 2016.

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I'm not a graphic designer. I had to pick up those skills on the fly—as best I could. That's how public humanities works.

I also had to balance the opportunity for interesting creative expression via AI art with ethical concerns:

Does AI art harm human artists trying to make a living?

See Schor 2025

Is the quirky charm of an illustrated article worth the environmental costs of AI?

See Bashir et al. 2024

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