

QUICK REFERENCE: WRITING SUCCESSFUL GRANTS

Read RFP/FOA 3 times:

1st for suitability, 2nd for structure, and 3rd for content/criteria.

Make a component checklist: cover page, table of contents, summary, research plan, CVs, budget & justification, letters of support or collaboration, evaluation plan, dissemination, mentoring plan, and facilities.

Create timeline with due dates: determine which personnel will do specific tasks, including internal or external reviewers and synchronize with institutional deadline requirements.

Reserve adequate time: make calendar appointments for writing and for collecting documents.

Technical considerations: base headings on RFP, left justify, paginate, 1" margins, hyphenate, 1 space after periods, leave room for images or graphs (mark with FPO), use bold/italics judiciously, no sentence with more than 30 words, limit jargon, and *adhere to the guidelines*.

Due diligence: seek out similar, successful proposals and investigate sponsor's website for abstracts of awarded projects. Consult with your Chair, mentor, or colleagues on strategy.

Writing perspective: speak to an intelligent lay audience and do not presume that you will be inherently understood by all reviewers.

Revision perspective: draft a complete project description first and THEN edit it to length, and expect to lose some of your favorite bits.

Resubmission perspective: expect rejection for reasons large and small, but remain persistent and treat sponsor-review comments as a to-do list.

Long-term perspective: it's never fun, but gets easier with experience.

Managing document versions: if you give someone a draft for review, stop revising until they return it. If you are simultaneously drafting and requesting reviews, clearly delineate the boundaries, as in "Give me your thoughts on Section A *only*."

Barometer language: making a compelling case and crafting a competitive proposal requires a degree of sophistication. Experiment with the following: as well as, not to mention, insofar as, albeit, wherewithal, therein, notwithstanding, and vis á vis.

Common Reasons Proposals Fail

The top 3 reasons for rejection precede writing and are about choosing the right funding source:

1. **The application is outside the purview of the granting agency.** The applicant either failed to learn about or misunderstood the agency's restrictions and guidelines.
2. **The chosen agency is not the most appropriate source of funds.** If reviewers believe another agency is a more appropriate source of funding, they may decline a proposal regardless of its merits. In such cases, they *may* refer the grant seeker to the more appropriate source.
3. **The project is not relevant to the priorities of the agency.** Proposals will fail if the project does not seek to answer a particular, well-defined question or does not seek to solve an as yet unsolved problem. If your proposal is not relevant to the agency, your chance of funding is slim no matter how well written.

The next reasons: sound science, good scholarship, careful organization, and good writing:

4. **The application does not demonstrate that the investigator understands the project.** A poorly organized or vague proposal will not fly. The proposal should demonstrate the investigator's expertise in the project area. This requires a clearly written introduction to the problem or question, a well written statement of significance, relevant literature references, a reasonable timeline, and some information about expected results or products.
5. **The proposal does not address the significance of carrying out the project/solving the problem.** The proposal must explain how the work fits into a larger context. What is the big picture? How will the project results move the investigator's discipline forward?
6. **The methodology is flawed.** A proposal may address a problem of significance, but is rejected because it inadequately tests its own assumptions or fails to ask the right questions. A common error is to fail to state the methodology to be used.
7. **The applicant has not included measurable outcome indicators in the proposal.** Without some means of measuring success of the project, funding agencies will not invest their resources. This is the reason agencies insist on clear objectives and a way of determining whether the objectives are met. They look for both formative and summative evaluation plans that are explicit. Funding agencies seek to advance knowledge and understanding in the areas the fund AND they want to take credit for having done so.
8. **The proposed project budget does not allow for the highest and best use of the agency's funds.** Budgets should not be inflated in anticipation of being cut by the sponsor. They should be reasonable so as to accomplish the stated objectives. An inadequate budget worries reviewers that the PI does not understand the methodology and resources required by the project and is not qualified to undertake the work.

Why Doesn't the Agency Like Me Enough to Fund My Research?

If any man wishes to write in a clear style, let him be first clear in his thoughts . . .

—Johann Wolfgang von Goethe (1749-1832)

For the most part, if one seeks tenure at a research university then acquiring external funding is not only important, but essential. Consider it (along with teaching, scholarship, and service) the fourth leg of the tenure table. The acquisition of external funding does not require magic. Nor does it require arcane knowledge on par with one's specialized field of inquiry. It requires a modicum of patience and practice. Please notice the conspicuous absence of the word "pride."

For a handful of months, one needs to embrace the return to a student perspective, of presuming one does not know the answers in advance, and of enjoying the discovery of basic information as if it was not yet widely known. A handy little phrase: as if. One need not admit to the pain or the shame of an impenetrable writing style by virtue of those two words. "I will approach the vaunted process of grant proposals *as if* I am uncertain of what is required, heeding trustworthy critiques of my writing *as if* I do not associate the clarity of my prose with my value as a person."

There's nothing to writing. All you do is sit down at a typewriter and open a vein.

—Red Smith (1905-1982)

What is it about writing that binds our self-image to the acceptance of the words we have put down? Why is feedback taken with such suspicion and reluctance prior to submission and with such bitterness and resentment upon a proposal's rejection? What exactly is the problem?

The problem is excessive pride of authorship. In soliloquy form it goes something like this:

If you can't understand that which I have writ, then you cannot understand me. And if you cannot understand me, then I have failed. And if I have failed, then perhaps I am a failure. (Pause.) How dare you insinuate my position as a failure! I have a terminal degree. I have shimmied through hoops of logic and bounded over hurdles of degree criteria, slogged through political swamps and felled forests of opposition in order to reside here on this very paper (the one I don't like very much because it pained me so to write it). And now, because you do not absolutely love it at first and only glance, you have set me adrift in a small boat surrounded by the yachts of the well-funded, each splash of their wakes a reminder that I am an impostor. I don't know who I hate more, you or me.

In a more analytical frame, it is the space between the literal and the figurative. One side of the abyss is the literal, *writing* as in being literate; I am able to communicate through the written word just as I am able to read. The other side is the figurative, *writing* as in writing well; I maintain complete mastery over the written word forever changing those who read my work. Typically, academics have spent the lion's share of their time learning their fields and the prerequisites without actually learning how to refine their expertise into language for a lay audience. (And at the mention of a lay audience, the assembled crowd begins the gnashing of teeth and the pulling

of hair.) “I bent over backwards to write in a style that will get me published in peer-reviewed journals. Why do you compound my stress with the mention of a lay audience?”

Why? Because the people who award grant money are not within your sub-specialty. Do not confuse the peer-review component of external funding with the actual awarding of research funds. They are different groups independent of each other. As a function of logic, if one must submit a single paper to both expert and lay audiences, then one must write for the lay audience in order to maximize the probability of being fully understood by all the readers.

On the outskirts of every agony sits some observant fellow who points.

—Virginia Woolf (1882-1941)

Excessive pride of authorship is a severe liability. Burdened as such, a writer is apt to exert their energy on defending their particular choices rather than improving their proposal. Preconceptions concerning the extent to which one’s proposal needs revision may also lead one to resist critique on principle, as in “I’ve already re-written it twice. It can’t be *that* far off.” The truth can be brutal and even after hours of work, any proposal remains entirely capable of being “that far off.” Chances are good that the present company’s proposal efforts hang somewhere in the middle, over the abyss.

External funding begins and ends with clarity, and clarity is like being pregnant: Either you are or you ain’t. Everything else is merely the chatter of anxiety, self-doubt, or worry. It behooves one to take a deep breath and remand the ego elsewhere. Here is the point at which one must decide which is more important: to be funded or to be “right.” Excessive pride of authorship is narcissistic. It is a self-indulgence one can ill afford. Whether or not creating a submission was excruciating is irrelevant to everyone except the author and possibly the author’s family. Due to the nature of the research enterprise, funders cannot demand simplicity, but they stand firm on clarity. If one’s project cannot be readily understood, its chances of receiving an award are slim.

I would write a book or a short story at least three times—once to understand it, the second time to improve the prose, and a third to compel it to say what it still must say.

—Bernard Malamud (1914-1986)

The greatest misnomer about writing is that it is a monolithic craft. Either one has “it” or one does not. The serendipitous bounty of the former leaves no recourse for those who suffer the latter. Nothing could be more inaccurate as that. Virtually everyone can write better than they currently do, even those at the threshold of brilliance. This is not a discussion of talent, but of a particular skillset that (similar to the style of writing required for graduate school) *can be learned*. If one made it through a dissertation and its defense, one can unquestionably adopt a series of writing conventions for the specific purpose of acquiring external funding.

Should graduate school have included the basics of fundraising as well as the conventions and strategies required for external-funding success? Absolutely. Is this deficiency systemic within academe? Yes. Is it fair to have such a significant career element sprung as a surprise? No. Do one’s feelings in this regard matter? No. Is passage through this morass possible without the forfeiture of one’s mental health? Yes.

Writing is 1 percent inspiration, and 99 percent elimination.

—*Louise Brooks (1906-1985)*

All writing needs revision. Good writing is never found *in situ*. It alternates between evolution and discovery. If one embraces the possibility of discovery in one's writing, then rewriting a proposal becomes a continuance of a desire rather than an onerous chore. Draft a proposal as if nothing is riding upon its outcome; focus on conveying the vision. Approach the revision process with an open mind. What an author wishes or expects to be on the page is not necessarily what is actually on the page. That may be the most bitter pill of all. Revision is not proofreading. Proofreading is checking for typos. Revision is the allowance for changes in heart, mind, or tactic. Revision includes everything from moving a sentence or two to the wholesale carnage of premise or structure. If instinct or analysis (or both) dictate starting over, then start over.

Commit yourself to the process, not the project. Don't be afraid to write badly, everyone does. Invest yourself in the lifestyle, not in the particular piece of work.

—*Frank Conroy (1936-2005)*

In review herein, to wit:

- A) The first law of fundraising: Needing money is never a reason for receiving money.
- B) Their money, their rules; do not argue or complain.
- C) If proposal writing is so loathsome that its very existence clouds one's quality of life, then consider other avenues. Perhaps consider teaching at a small, liberal arts college.
- D) Start crafting proposals for submission and never stop. Always be working on one. Always. At least one. Rejection is common. Take it in stride and consider re-submission.

Four prescriptions for crafting clearer grant proposals:

- 1) Read great writing for 45 minutes per day. Fiction or non-, anything exciting, interesting, impressive, and smooth. Revel in that which is clear and crisp.
- 2) Before beginning the first draft of a proposal, consider talking one's way through the project with an interested listener. Allow interruptions, making note of where interruptions occur. Afterwards, without coaching, have the main points repeated back.
- 3) Anthropomorphize the agency. The traits with which one characterizes the sponsor partially determine and direct the writing. Envision and assimilate characterizations that infuse the writing with vigor, the writer with enthusiasm. Write to be understood.
- 4) Break overly long sentences in shorter ones. Sentences that are too long may indicate that one's thoughts are not as clear as one believes.

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