
Successful Proposal Writing

Caucasus Research Resource Centers

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Outline



Understanding your grant source

- Interests of funding source
- Review process
- Budget considerations
- Administrative procedures

Writing a good proposal

- Methodology
- Approach
- Results
- Personnel
- Past performance
- Budget

Main reasons for rejection

Understanding your grant source

Interests of funding source



Funders have preferences across several factors

- Science --- policy
- Neutral --- agenda
- Specific --- general
- Research --- other goals

Ultimately, funders want the projects they fund to make them look good.

Review process



There are a variety of models for the choice of proposal reviewers

- Internal --- external
- Specialists --- generalists
- Referees --- no referees

All combinations are possible.

You should tailor your proposal for those who are going to evaluate it.

Budget considerations



What are the constraints of the funding source?

- Limited total money, limited total grants
- Per round limit or long-term limit
- Eligible and ineligible costs
- Pricing restrictions

What are the objectives of the funding source?

- Equipment vs. materials vs. labor
- National vs. international

How important is cost sharing?

- Everyone likes a good signal, and cost sharing is an excellent signal!

Is there any possibility for modification during selection process?

- Might revisions be requested?
- Is the selection process ongoing or on a fixed schedule?

Does the program offer follow-on grants or allow for cost or no-cost extensions?

- Beginning of a program vs. a well-defined project

How important are “deliverables”?

- E.g. grant tranches paid based on periodic milestones

Understanding your funding source should help you both define your project and describe your project.

- Define does not mean you create a project specifically for the grant program, although that may be the case as well. Define can simply mean that if you have a large research agenda, you select *a set of activities and results* from that agenda to propose for a particular grant program.
- Describe does not mean you make something up just to please the reviewers. It means that you *emphasize the appropriate information and use the right language* to best communicate with your audience.
- It is not their job to figure out why your project meets their objectives. **It is your job to show them how your project will meet their objectives.** You need to understand their objectives in order to do this.

Writing a good proposal

Writing a good proposal: Outline



Proposal elements

- Methodology
- Approach
- Personnel
- Past performance
- Budget

Compliance

**You don't get a second chance to
make a first impression**

Writing a good proposal: Methodology



Methodology vs. approach

- Methodology is how you are going to do the *research*
 - Thesis
 - Literature
 - Theory
 - Model
 - Data
 - Empirical techniques
- Approach is how you are going to do the *project*
 - Who
 - When
 - How
 - With what

Both are important! Which is more important depends on the project and the funding source.

For a research proposal, the methodology is KEY

If the blow the methodology, you are unlikely to win the grant

Proposing methodology is just like any analytical writing

- Writing is a reflection of thought. If you don't write clearly and effectively, no one will know whether your thoughts, ideas, arguments, and conclusions are any good.
- At the same time, if you are not thinking clearly, you will not be able to write effectively.

Use the same five stages of writing

- Determination of the thesis
- Research
- Planning
- Writing
- Revision

Components of methodology

- Thesis
- Literature review
- Theory
- Model
- Data
- Empirical analysis
- Results/Conclusions

But how can we write all that *before* we have done the research?

Your research should be started BEFORE you apply for funding

**How else can you prove to the reviewers
that the research will be good?**

Methodology: Thesis



You need to show that you know where you are going.

The thesis is what you use to answer the question:

“is this piece of information relevant or not?”

More is not better. Better is better.

Methodology: Literature review



The literature review provides

- Context
 - Why the research is interesting and relevant
- Credibility
 - Well-grounded and accepted techniques will be used; question is valid
- Comparison
 - How the research will contribute to overall understanding (value added) and that the research does not repeat someone else's work

The literature review is not to show that you can read, but that you understand and can apply what you have read.

The literature review alone is not the methodology.

There should always be some theory

- A point of reference for the analysis
- A way of thinking that is not just opinions
 - Once you have won the Nobel prize, you can start making stuff up!

Theory does not mean there has to be a mathematical model.

Analysis of social issues usually relies on a few basic theories

- Human capital theory
- Labor supply
- Labor demand
- Etc.

Paying attention to theory can help prevent big mistakes. How else do you know what should be exogenous (outcomes) and what should be endogenous (effects)?

Methodology: Model



If you are going to produce a model as part of the research project, you should present the beginnings of it in the proposal to show

- You know what you are doing
- The model is useful

Don't solve a bunch of equations, just get it set up and show how it will work.

If you are doing an empirical study, you need to discuss your data. You need to show

- Access
 - For you and others
- Quality
 - No data are perfect; no data can be taken at face value. The question is whether the weaknesses can be accounted for in the analysis, or whether the data are simply not good enough to perform the analysis.
- Complete (sufficient or adequate)

The quality of the empirical analysis is almost always higher when researchers use an existing (tested) database than when they implement a new survey.

- Higher quality data
- Past research benefits future research
- Database, and understanding of it, improves with repeated use

Methodology: Empirical analysis



Data analysis should be more than a poll—there needs to be some empirical methodology

- Needs to be more than uni-dimensional

Empirical methodology does not need to be econometrics or other highly sophisticated techniques.

- Do not propose techniques that you do not really understand
- There are many simple statistical techniques that can be used

Explain not just how you will use different techniques but also how you will use different variables

- What is exogenous, or being explained
- What is endogenous, or considered causal

If you have some results already, present them.

- Results means statements of outcomes of analysis—not conclusions or opinions.

If not, restate the types of results you plan to achieve.

- Why “restate”? Because you should have already talked about what kinds of results the research will yield in your introduction.

BE CAREFUL!

Research should not be designed just to back up opinions. If you plan what your conclusion will be, you are not going to engage in scientific research.

Writing a good proposal: Approach



Methodology vs. approach

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Approach



Who

- Staffing plan

When

- Work plan

How

With what

How will results be measured?

Approach: Surveys



Survey data are always suspect. They are subject to

- Biases
 - Researcher bias
 - Interviewer bias
 - Response bias
 - Sample selection bias
- Mistakes
 - Coding mistakes
 - Keying mistakes
 - Translation mistakes
 - Interpretation

As much as possible, you need to demonstrate in the proposal how these problems will be addressed.

Approach: Results



Here we could also say outputs, but reviewers are more interested in *results*.

Outputs include

- Journal articles
 - Be realistic
- Books
 - Think about how useful
- Presentations, policy briefs, workshops, roundtables, etc.
- EPP!
- Data
 - Survey data should always be made public, necessary for journal publication

Result include

- Informed citizens/voters
- Informed government/policy makers
- Etc.

Writing a good proposal: Outline



Proposal elements

- Methodology
- Approach
- Personnel
- Past performance
- Budget

Compliance

Personnel



Don't

- Assume the reviewers know who you are or how great you are
- Expect reviewers to look elsewhere for more information
- Assume more commitments are better
- Make it too long
- Include completely extraneous information

Do

- Edit your resume/CV for each proposal
- Highlight the most relevant information
- Consider adding some text—"key qualifications"
- Include all relevant information
- Organize most recent to least recent

Past Performance



The reviewers are looking for evidence that you can successfully carry out the project you are proposing. The best evidence is that you have successfully carried out other, similar, projects in the past.

Don't

- Assume the reviewers know what work you and your organization have done
- Expect reviewers to look elsewhere for more information
- Make these too long
- Write these as one long text statement, unless you have no choice

Do

- Include successful projects on different topics
- Include projects by individuals if organization does not have many examples
- Include dates and funding amounts
- Include information on outputs and results
- Organize most recent to least recent, with consideration for relevance

Among other things, the budget is a check on the realism of the methodology and approach.

Don't

- Propose for the maximum amount, unless it is clear that this funding will only be a part of the total funding
- Be greedy
- Assume that a bad budget won't hurt your chances of getting a grant
- Propose salaries greater than pre-existing salaries

Do

- Provide detail on prices (labor and materials)
- Make clear what the calculations are
- Include cost sharing whenever possible
- Write budget notes
- Pay VERY careful attention to eligible and ineligible costs

Writing a good proposal: Compliance



Don't

- Assume some proposal requirement from the Request For Applications does not apply to you
- Make unsubstantiated claims
- Assume anything is obvious

Do

- Reread the RFA on a regular basis, once a week
- Ask questions, if possible
- Make a checklist or compliance matrix
- Organize your proposal according to the requirements in the RFA
- Show, demonstrate, or prove. That is, provide evidence for what you say.

Main reasons for application rejection

Rejection



We can think of four categories of reasons for rejection

- Mechanical
- Methodological
- Personnel
- Cost-benefit

Rejection: Mechanical



- Compliance
 - Deadline not met
 - Format not followed
 - Components missing
- Presentation
 - Discussion not clear
 - Discussion not complete
 - Discussion revealed political agenda or preconceived conclusions
 - Poor writing
 - Sloppy formatting

Rejection: Methodological



This category really includes what I called methodology and what I called approach

- Proposal lacks originality
- Methodology missing
- Methodology inappropriate
- Unclear that required data available
- Unclear that required cooperation available

The question the reviewer asks is, what is the expected value added?

Rejection: Personnel



This category really includes personnel and past performance

- Researchers do not show mastery of the literature
- Researchers lack relevant technical background
- Researchers lack project experience
- Researchers are overcommitted
- Researchers appear to have a conflict of interest
- Organization has no record, appears to be created just for the grant

Rejection: Cost-benefit



- Relevance to funder's priorities not clear
- Budget excessive relative to results
 - Or to what results are actually feasible
- Budget reveals padding
- Probability of failure seems high

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