

## Tips on writing grant/fellowship proposals (and other research proposals)

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1. **Start early.** Proposal writing is extremely time-consuming, especially when you're first starting out. Know exactly what you need to supply, and line things up well in advance. For an external granting agency such as NSF or the SSRC, allow three months or more to develop and revise your proposal. For shorter applications (e.g., UCSB funding) allow at least a month.
2. **Know your granting agency.** Read guidelines carefully and follow them. Use the appropriate specialist terminology (i.e., jargon) for the agency, which may be different from the jargon of your discipline. You need to be able to speak the language reviewers understand—never force them to adapt to your worldview. Most granting agencies for the social sciences have a strong science orientation, so you're usually safe in framing your proposal scientifically, with discussion of hypotheses, methodology, data, and analysis. This style is more challenging for interpretive and qualitative projects, but not impossible; just make clear that your methods are sound, appropriate, and illuminating for your research question. Be aware that some granting agencies (e.g., Wenner-Gren) may reject science-style proposals, so read the guidelines carefully to ensure you're framing your project appropriately.
3. **Be original, but not too original.** Granting agencies are almost always a bit conservative by nature; they want to be sure that their money will be well spent. Your work should either use new theories/methods to investigate a familiar issue or should use familiar theories/methods to investigate a new issue, but if your proposal is either too new or too familiar, it won't be a good candidate for funding. Advisors can help you frame the project early on so you can develop an effective proposal.
4. **Tell a good story.** Design your proposal so that it's clear that your project is the crucial next step in advancing knowledge: start broadly, foregrounding why the issue is important, highlight gaps or weaknesses in the existing literature (but do so cautiously; see item 10 below), and explain what new approach is needed and why. This approach, of course, should be the one you're taking. But avoid building suspense: within the first sentence or paragraph you should explicitly and briefly state the goals of the proposed study. This will help the reviewers to follow the discussion.
5. **Put your project at the center of your proposal.** This is your opportunity to offer your perspective on the field. Don't let other researchers' agendas drive your discussion: focus on what matters for your study. In particular, one common mistake in grant proposals is to survey previous literature without clearly stating its relevance to the proposed study. Every detail you include should be explicitly tied to your project one way or another. And don't forget to cite your own previous research (e.g., a master's thesis) if appropriate.
6. **Sound more confident than you (probably) are.** You should aim for an authoritative scholarly voice, not the voice of a tentative beginner (even if you feel like one). State your research plans with as much certainty as you reasonably can without hedging or qualifying, but never misrepresent the facts. Don't worry that you're promising to do a study that may turn out quite differently from your description. Reviewers know that proposals are just that, not guarantees of what will emerge from the research once you

actually undertake it. It's expected that things may turn out a bit differently, and often such surprises lead to the most important new ideas. Finally, don't undermine your proposal by confessing what you see as weaknesses in your plan; present the details in the most positive light possible and let the reviewers decide for themselves.

7. **Be specific.** The best way to convince reviewers of your competence is to incorporate as many specific details as you can about all aspects of the project. Your aim should be to offer support or evidence for everything you say. Since space is limited, each sentence should carry a great deal of information. Your proposal should be extremely information-rich; inevitably, this means it will be very dense reading, but that's the nature of the genre. To save space and keep the focus on your own research, introduce others' work mainly through parenthetical references (or footnotes for humanities funding); strings of multiple citations help show the depth of your familiarity with the field. You should also cite several bodies of relevant literature, not just one. When describing your research context and design, include as many specific facts as possible: dates, numbers, locations, a detailed and realistic timeline for your plan of work, and a clear justification for each of your budget items (the latter is often a separate document, but if not, part of the proposal narrative should mention the resources needed for the study). These details help reviewers to see that you know your research situation very well and have anticipated what you need to do to carry out the project successfully.
8. **Tell the reviewers who you are.** The proposal should demonstrate—not assert—that you're the best person to carry out this research. You should describe your qualifications for doing the proposed work in depth, but do so objectively and leave evaluation to the reviewers. Don't be modest about your accomplishments, even if you don't feel that they amount to much (see item 6 above). Mention any special skills or experience you have that help prepare you to carry out the research (e.g., language skills, technical training). Selectively cite and briefly describe your own previous research and make clear how the proposed project contributes to a coherent research agenda.
9. **Be clear, explicit, and redundant.** Reviewers often read quickly and cursorily; make sure they see the key information repeatedly and that it's clearly explained and defined. Write in a simple, clear style (although your prose can be a bit more complex in the more humanistic fields), and don't aim for a more elevated style than you're comfortable with; it will ring false. Don't assume that your proposal will be read by a specialist in exactly your field, so briefly define key terms. Don't assume that readers will find key information buried in one paragraph of the proposal, but don't just repeat yourself mechanically, or it will look as though you don't have much to say about your ideas. The best way to lay out key information is to introduce it briefly early in the proposal, develop it at length in the body of the proposal, and then refer back to it in a later section. Come up with a few varied ways to refer to your core idea or issue, but with similar enough wording that readers will easily recognize it as the same concept.
10. **Be gentle in your critiques.** You never know who will read your proposal, so don't say anything in the proposal that you wouldn't want the target of your critique to see. In general, avoid any explicit negative evaluation and describe any gaps or weaknesses in a way that you think the author would view as a fair reading of their work. If anything, you should understate your criticism. Academics are adept at reading between the lines; they'll understand when you consider a particular study to be problematic.

11. **Connect up to big issues and current trends.** Granting agencies understand the value of basic research (i.e., scholarship with no immediate applications to pressing problems), but they still want the research they fund to have some connection to current issues, not only in your field, but in academia broadly. Some agencies (e.g., NSF) also ask you to specify the broader impacts that your work will have on society in general. You should state some plausible ways that your research contributes to both knowledge and the betterment of humanity, even if the benefits are somewhat tenuous or speculative. And if you can adjust your research plan to achieve such benefits more directly, this will often enhance the project's fundability.
12. **Look at some examples.** The best way to learn to write a proposal is to look closely at a few successful ones for the funding source to which you're applying. A number of funding sources make sample proposals available to applicants and some books on grant writing offer examples. The ideal source is peers or advisors who may be willing to share their own recent, successful proposals to similar agencies.
13. **Get feedback from experienced grant writers/reviewers.** This is not the time to call on your peers; faculty will be most helpful, especially those who have recently received funding or who have experience with reviewing proposals. Give them plenty of lead time (at least a month for a major proposal) in order to get detailed and high-quality feedback. Ask them to read it as a reviewer and to be as critical as possible. Then incorporate their suggestions.
14. **Submit to as many sources as you can, but adapt your proposal accordingly.** Once you've done one grant proposal, it's much easier to write the next one for the same project (as well as for other projects). Since grant funding is very competitive, it's well worth applying to several funding agencies, but you should always adapt your proposal to the specific guidelines and concerns of each agency. This may mean reframing your project a bit, including different references, highlighting different angles, but the heart of the proposal—the actual research plan—should not change.

*More resources for grant writing*

Przeworski, Adam, & Frank Salomon (1995). "The Art of Writing Proposals: Some Candid Suggestions for Applicants to Social Science Research Council Competitions."

<[http://fellowships.ssrc.org/art\\_of\\_writing\\_proposals/](http://fellowships.ssrc.org/art_of_writing_proposals/)>

The title says it all. Also relevant for grant writing generally.

Chapin, Paul G. (2004). *Research projects and research proposals: A guide for scientists seeking funding*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.

Despite the title, the book is aimed at researchers in the social sciences as well as the sciences. The author is a former program director for the National Science Foundation.

Locke, Lawrence F., Waneen Wyrick Spirduso, & Stephen J. Silverman (2007). *Proposals that work: A guide for planning dissertations and grant proposals*. 5th ed. Newbury Park, CA: Sage. Specifically aimed at graduate students and scholars beginning their career. Gives special attention to qualitative and more humanistic research.