

## GRANTWRITING GUIDELINES IN THE SOCIAL AND BEHAVIORAL SCIENCES

*Timothy M. Smeeding  
The Maxwell School  
Syracuse University*

**1. Writing the Proposal**

- 1A. Above all, good writing is the key to a good proposal. For those who can afford to do so, do not be afraid to seek editorial assistance to sharpen up your proposal.
- 1B. Follow instructions: quality not quantity impresses; be clear and succinct.
- 1C. Coherence is key. Evident lack of coherent direction in complex proposals, parts “thrown together”, poorly coordinated, or not clearly related to a central focus, are problems to be avoided.

**2. Proposal Content**

- 2A. Insure that your project goals are appropriate and clearly stated:
  - a. Make sure that you establish the worthiness of your research and its originality up front.
  - b. Make sure that the purposes of the study are clear and that the hypotheses to be tested are explicit.
  - c. Make sure that the specific products (deliverables) or endpoints are included in the research goals; e.g., “This study will result in a monograph or in several papers”, etc.
- 2B. Be sure that your methodology is sufficiently detailed. Questions such as the following should be answered: (a) What are the major dependent and independent variables? (b) How will data be obtained? (c) How will results be analyzed? (d) Do the data contain sufficient information to support the proposed analysis?
- 2C. A strong bibliography is usually a sign of a strong research proposal. Pay sufficient attention to related research by others; reviewers are usually top people in the field who are familiar with what’s going on. References to related research previously funded by the agency to which you are applying is generally useful.

### 3. Budget

- 3A. Ask your organization's sponsored research office in advance for help on budgeting. Look at budget sheets for funded proposals to get the hang of how they are put together. Above all, you want to be realistic in the amount of time and resources needed, including travel, consulting, etc.
- 3B. Stress the implicit or explicit contribution of the university (or sponsor). Most granting agencies like to see cost sharing (e.g., secretarial, research assistance, "release time") on top of their contribution.
- 3C. Avoid budget pitfalls. The following budget inadequacies may keep your proposal from being funded:
- a. Specific tasks not clearly related to personnel, time, and/or budget.
  - b. The person designated as "principal investigator" is committed for an unduly small proportion of time. This "halo" effect does not fool good reviewers.
  - c. Several small allocations of time among large numbers of investigators. Usually this means an uncoordinated product unless the chain of command, work plan, and team interrelationships are clearly spelled out. Make sure to allocate time for someone (usually the Principal Investigator, or PI) to hold the project together.
- 3D. Above all justify how much money you need and how it will be spent. Attach one or several pages of explanatory notes which indicate a detailed breakdown of large but vaguely targeted dollar amounts. For instance, a budget line that says "\$2,000 Travel" should be complemented by notes on who will go where and for how long, with plane fares, per diems, etc. all estimated.

### 4. Overall Presentation

Once you have written up the proposal let it sit for a day or so. Then go back and go over it again. Look for the following pitfalls:

- 4A. Does the proposal ask reviewers to trust in the track record or reputation of the applicant rather than detail a specific plan of research?
- 4B. Does the proposal assume that reviewers will have read past research done by the applicant? If possible, include reprints of earlier relevant papers with the application if such attachments are permitted by the grant agency.

4C. Is the proposal unbalanced in presentation? For instance, does it focus too much on a particular data set or a technique of analysis and not enough on the overall research goal?

4D. Above all, is the proposal coherent? (See 1C above).

## 5. Choosing a Funder

5A. Make sure that your topic is appropriate for support by the chosen agency or that it is specifically responsive to the RFP to which it is directed.

5B. Know to whom you are writing, e.g., who is on their review board (if they have one); what type of projects they do and do not fund, etc. Most granting agencies with review boards will tell you who the members are if you ask.

5C. Spend some time finding the correct agency or foundation, e.g., ask a senior colleague or friend at another university, or ask a university research officer, or check the foundations website and even call proposed agencies directly for information before you begin.

5D. Unlike journal articles, once a proposal is written, there is no ethical dilemma in sending the same proposal to several different potential funders simultaneously (with or without small changes) as long as a second agency is also interested in the same line of work. However, you may be required to list alternative agencies to which you have submitted the same proposal. Be up front about this at all times.

5E. There is every advantage to stopping by to discuss a proposal with potential sponsors if you are in the area. A two page (or less) brief synopsis of your proposal (or a short letter) is a useful thing to bring along to such meetings or to follow-up your initial inquiry (see 5C above).

## 6. Internal Review

6A. Last but not least, prepare your proposal at least two weeks before the deadline. Ask a trusted colleague or close friend to critically review it. Encourage frank opinions. If you don't think that you can find anyone to give your proposal a careful read for free, pay someone to do it for you.

**Good Luck!! \***

\* As you might gather, these guidelines have been around for about 15 years, and I am always updating them. Hence, comments and feedback is always appreciated.