

Advice on Writing Grant Proposals

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Understand the time constraints of the reviewer. Traditionally, prior to all electronic reviewing, proposals were read “on the plane/train ride to D.C.”. A panelist (reviewer) will receive about ten proposals to review, which means your proposal is going to receive about thirty minutes of this persons time. The reviewer will not be able to read everything in detail, and thus will skim portions of the proposal. You should take this into account when you write it, and so the better structured you can make the document, the more easily the reviewers can skip over components they are already familiar with. Clear labeling of sections, even paragraphs is helpful so that the reviewers can zero in on things they do not currently know about, or are otherwise dubious of. This goes for all aspects of the proposal, including introducing your new idea and reviewing related work. The easier you can make it to skip sections the better.

Proof-read the proposal carefully. About a third of proposals are so poorly written that the spelling and grammatical errors make it clear the PI does not care about the grant. At the very least, ensure your first sentence isn’t a garbled mess; I can’t tell you how many proposals contain run on and have otherwise bizarre grammatical errors in the very first sentence.

Don’t be repetitive. There is no need to fill the entire 15 pages with 9 point font. If you don’t have anything to say, don’t waste the reviewers time by repeating yourself. Nothing annoys a reviewer more than reading the same bland content three or four times in a proposal.

Don’t be vacuous. Usually repetition and vacuousness go hand in hand. It seems that the strategy taken most often by proposals with no real ideas behind them is to continue repeating high-level and vacuous spin about how wonderful the idea is. The reviewers are not going to buy this, so you better have some real content.

Curb your enthusiasm. Not every idea is going to rescue the environment, bring world peace, and put a human on MARS. I know you may be infatuated by your idea, but the reviewer just isn’t going to have the same gusto. Don’t get too caught up in your own Quixote spin, it is just going to make the reviewers skeptical.

Cover a subject well. Don’t spend a paragraph on a subject and then say the remainder is beyond the scope of the proposal. Remember, the reviewers are skimming through your proposal, and this may be the paragraph they read closely. Too many “this is beyond the scope of this proposal”, and you start to sound like you haven’t thought this through. In

a similar vain, don't provide a very high level description of one subject, and then a very detailed description of a completely unrelated one. There should be some logical consistency to the depth of your presentation.

Know the expertise of your reviewers. You may have a keen idea to integrate some new theory developed in another discipline to solve something. That's great, but, don't try and impress the reviewer by sticking strange equations in the middle of your project description. There will be two types of reviewers: First, those who don't really know, and more importantly care, what the equations are saying. They will just skip over them and read the text to see what you are trying to talk about. The second will be those who do know something about this other area, and they are going to make sure you don't make a typo in them. Either way, no one is going to be impressed that you can copy some equations and theorems from elsewhere and retype them precisely. You are better off providing some high level insight to the average reviewer about this new theory than trying to explain it to them in depth (remember the reviewer is reading your proposal at faster than 2 minutes a page).

Know your related work. It is appropriate that your idea builds on prior work. The worst thing you can do is propose something that has been done before. Remember, you could be forgetting to understand and cite the work of one of the reviewers. At the very least, reviewers like to see that you have done your homework and know how your ideas fit into the larger context.

Don't forget the program you are apply for. It is not just about having an interesting idea. Sometimes a less developed idea but a more well rounded proposal is more easily justified as fundable.