

PROPOSAL WRITING HINTS

There are certain general rules which apply to the preparation of successful research proposals. Although details vary from discipline to discipline, attention to these rules should substantially enhance your ability to write a proposal which will ultimately be funded. These suggestions are not intended to replace consultation with the staff of the Office of Sponsored Research. They should, however, provide a set of guidelines for people new to proposal-writing.

1. Be prepared to spend a lot of time on your proposal. Writing a successful grant proposal requires almost as much time and thought as writing a publishable article. A final version which is a revision of a revision of a first draft is much more likely to convince reviewers of the worthiness of your project than a hastily-prepared submission.

2. Before writing, thoroughly read the guidelines for the program to which you're applying. Be sure the narrative addresses the issues stressed. If a specific format is outlined follow it.

3. Before you submit a proposal to a granting agency, have a draft "critiqued" by: (a) someone familiar with your topic, (b) a colleague outside your field, and, if possible, (c) someone with experience in judging proposals. These people may raise questions, the answers to which can be incorporated into a revised draft. Reviewers of proposals will never call to find out what you mean by a particular statement; they will simply set aside your proposal in favor of another which is more clearly presented.

4. All proposals must convince the reviewers of four things: (a) that your project is of sufficient importance and significance to merit research support, (b) that you've done a thorough review of literature in the field and have a well-designed plan of study, (c) that the project is of manageable size and can be carried out within the time frame of the proposal, and (d) that you are competent to complete the project successfully.

5. Introduction.mind that reviewers must read a very large number of proposals in a very short time. Don't keep them guessing; state in the first few sentences what you propose to work on. Then, particularly in the humanities and social sciences, describe the expected product of your work (e.g., a book; a monograph for specialists; a set of articles), how long you expect it to be, and for what audience it is intended. Scientists should describe goals or objectives of the research.

6. Background and significance. Next, explain why your project needs to be done. Sketch the background, including references to the literature, of your proposal. Estimate strengths and limits of previous research in the area. Emphasize your own contributions to the field. Describe the ways in which your approach is an improvement or how it will fill gaps in existing knowledge.

7. Outline of project or research plan. This section will be quite different for proposals in the sciences and those in other disciplines. If you are writing a book, give as complete an outline, including chapter titles and contents, as possible. If you need to complete research which will culminate in a monograph or a series of articles (or a book), describe exactly how you will approach the problem, where the necessary materials are located, how you have resolved potential difficulties in access to libraries or archives, etc. In the sciences, describe the experimental design in detail. Make it clear that your laboratory has the facilities necessary to do the work and include a comprehensive list of instrumentation available at Wellesley. In all cases, indicate how much work you've already completed and how much remains to be done.

8. Proposer's qualifications. Throughout the proposal and/or in a separate section, describe your qualifications for your project. Don't be modest! Refer to all relevant publications, unpublished data, aspects of your doctoral dissertation, and results of teaching, if appropriate. Be sure to include a comprehensive vita.

9. Use language comprehensible across disciplinary boundaries. The reviewers who read your proposal will not necessarily be experts in your specific field and, therefore, may not understand technical jargon and discipline-specific abbreviations and symbols. This piece of advice is not generally applicable to proposals in the sciences.

10. Strive for a balance between conciseness and detail. The more specific you are about what you plan and what you have already done, the more impressive your proposal will be. But if this leads to many pages of repetitious rambling, you'll put your readers to sleep. Adhere strictly to page limits specified in the guidelines.

11. When preparing the final draft for submission, be sure it is neat, clean and easy to read. Have someone check for grammar, spelling and typographical errors. Whether it should or not, physical appearance does make a difference.