Writing a Grant Proposal

Knowing how to put together a grant proposal can be key to getting the funds you need for a project. The general guidelines below can get you started in the right direction. It is always a good idea to speak to your advisor about specific grant procedures and policies for your field.

Abstract or Goal Summary: The abstract is a paragraph that sums up what your proposal is all about. It should touch clearly and briefly upon the major concepts the granting organization will need to know as they consider your project for funding.

Generally, the abstract is about 250 to 300 words long—but don't write it until the rest of the proposal is done. That way, you won't have to rewrite it if elements of your project change or if you leave something out. When it is time to write the abstract, take a good look at your proposal and summarize it concisely.

Devote at least one sentence each to the problem, preliminary findings, methods, and the other subheadings found within your proposal. Keep it simple and clear. The abstract is the first thing a reviewer looks at and is the heart of the grant proposal.

Preliminary Findings and Expected Contribution: Your goal here is to pitch your idea as convincingly as you can. Use reasoning and clear language to do so. In this section you must make a case for the funding of your project by taking a good look at all previous research that's been done on the subject, and then showing how your project will contribute to that body of knowledge. All proposals include such a bibliography—reviewers want to know that you're familiar with your subject and are not going to be duplicating research that has already been done.

Methodology: Now that you've presented your idea, it's time to describe how you're going to implement it. The methodology section should tell exactly how the experiment or research will be carried out, how the data you expect to gather will relate to your goals, and how much time the entire operation will require.

If you're doing lab experiments, describe how they'll be set up and what data you hope to uncover. If field research is the goal of your project, where will you go, how will you gather the data, and to whom will you speak?

Personal Qualifications: In this section you should try to show what makes you qualified to perform your research. For instance, are you familiar with the particular area of Nova Scotia in which you'll be conducting field research? Might your fluency in Spanish help you interview the olive farmers of Madrid? Do you already have your own backyard super-collider? As in all proposal sections, try to avoid jargon. Field-specific language is a loose block in the cobblestone street of quick comprehension.

Costs: If your methodology section is fully developed, it won't be a major undertaking to devise a budget for your research. Just go through your plans and make projections for personnel salaries and any travel, supply, or equipment expenses.

Take everything into account—don't miss a cent. Think hard about "hidden charges." Then consider what portion of your budget is appropriate to ask of the granter. Itemize and justify the budget. Don't be greedy. Projects are seldom funded by just one source anyway.

General Tips

- Watch out for sentences that sound nice but do no actual work. The people from whom you are requesting money are glad that you are a creative individual, but the only thing you need to prove is that you have a good idea and the need for funds to execute it.

- Grantmakers will be happy to answer your questions—they want you to write a good proposal. But do your research and don't ask questions that the agency has already answered somewhere in their literature.

- Never cheat on a granting agency's guidelines. Stay true to the margin, page, and other requirements. Cheating sends a bad message to the people who may be giving you large sums of money.

- Write persuasively. A grant proposal is a piece of salesmanship, so keep your readers foremost in your mind as you prepare the document.

- Write a separate grant proposal for each granting agency. Each granter is an individual entity with its own values and mission, and applicants have a better chance at success when they keep this fact in mind.