

Writing a Grant? A Basic Guide

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Basic Tenets:

- 1) Know the rules; Respect the rules.
- 2) Know your audience; Respect your audience
- 3) Know your project; Respect your project.
- 4) Write it like you mean it.

Overview:

Any grant proposal should exercise good grammatical style, syntactical simplicity, and definitional clarity. The result should be something that is easy to read, logically organized, and engender interest in your work. Grant proposals are a distinct genre of writing. They are a peculiar form of institutional writing in the sense that they satisfy the expectations of many individuals, committees, and impersonal guidelines/rules. When writing them, you should consider both the personal and impersonal systems involved. Nonetheless, the best grant proposals often possess similar qualities. *They are ideally: expository, pedagogical, and persuasive.* They balance the certainty of the known with the excitement of what's next. They offer concrete products (what will you **do** and what will it **yield**) but also the intangible tingle of emergent knowledge. The best grant applications are the product of hard work, which includes careful planning, consultation, and more editing than you can imagine (and then some more!)

Grants 101: The Basics

Know the rules; Respect the rules

If you cannot follow the granting agency's basic guidelines, chances are good that this will send a strong message to the committee that you might be similarly ill-equipped to carry out a funded research project.

- Use the stipulated type size, font, spacing, and margins.
- Double and triple check that you have followed the granting agency's guidelines.
 - Do not go over the maximum number of pages allowed (many agencies will not accept applications that have one page too many).
 - Send the instructed number of copies.
 - If attachments and/or appendices are not allowed, do not submit them. They will not be distributed to reviewers. Similarly, if reprints are not invited, do not send them (they will be discarded or worse; they will annoy readers).
 - Do not submit additional information after the deadline (unless explicitly allowed).
- Make sure that the version the committee receives is free of mechanical errors (spelling, typos, grammar, etc.)
- Do not rely on your computer's spell checker. Use a dictionary. If you can't spell, it opens up the imagination to other things you cannot do. This is bad.

- Avoid abbreviations, acronyms and jargon (that the non-expert may not understand). If you use abbreviations, then define them when used for the first time.
 - Observe the deadlines.
 - Following from the above, set yourself an appropriate timeline. This includes giving any willing editor, supervisor, committee member or colleague enough time to do a thorough job or providing feedback.
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Grants 201: Intermediate

Know your audience; Respect your audience.

Important: Ideally, reviewers and assessors do their job because they want to, and they hope to positively direct future research. And, everybody likes giving somebody else's money away. As grant writers, we need to assume this. Of course, we must also respect that reviewers are working above and beyond their daily mandated activities, and are often unpaid. They may be overwhelmed with applications or other work. To be clear: your proposals are often read under very particular circumstances which are less-than-ideal (evenings, weekends, holidays, at meetings, or even on the way to adjudication committee meetings). Most grant proposals are read quickly. Reviewers are unlikely to re-read an awkward sentence, to locate an unclear antecedent, or to search for the subject-object relation in a long sentence.

You should presume that your audience is a willing and intelligent one, eager to be convinced that your work should be funded. You want to persuade the reviewer to become your enthusiastic champion and advocate. You thus need to provide them with good reasons *to argue for you*, with a clear eye to the conditions under which they work.

More thoughts on audience:

- Assume that you are writing for a reviewer in a related or nearby field, rather than for an expert directly in your area.
- Remember that many agencies, even national ones, will send applications for review abroad. Use language that will be easily understood by those for whom the language or its idiomatic elements may seem foreign.
- Write with the authority of an expert who is speaking to a generalist. [I use *Harper's* magazine as my guide to clarity.]

Some practical things to do:

Check to make sure you understand the review process itself; sometimes there are multiple phases that begin with generalists and end with specialists, or vice versa. Sometimes there is just one phase and one panel. Just make sure you know as this **should** shape your writing. In other words, find out as much as possible about precisely who will be reading your grant. Is it a mix of faculty members? Community Members? Business Leaders? Administrators? Humanists? Scientists? Other? What academic disciplines might they hail from? Once you know this, you must polish your application extensively in order to strike the right kind of address.

Grants 301: Advanced

Know your Project; Respect your Project

To know your project is to have researched received knowledge and to have framed your work in such a way as to clearly express what you intend to do and why it's important. It's even better if you can explain why it's important to your field as well as to a wider audience. You should be clear about what traditions and scholarship you are building on, and how you are contributing to that? What is at stake in your area and what is your contribution to it?

To respect your project is to spend the time required to properly present it to a granting committee.

- ◆ There is no such thing as thinking too far in advance (at least 6 months in advance)
- ◆ There is no such thing as talking to too many people.
- ◆ Adopt exercises that help your to tame your interests into the basic building blocks of a project.

Scale: pay attention to the scope and scale of your project. Identify its parameters and then ensure they are doable. If not, scale down. Eliminate chapters. Reduce the case studies. Narrow the historical period.

Clarity: Find a mechanism to map all of your interests and ideas and then begin to order them into something resembling a doable project. Use a design or drawing app. Sticky notes. A chalkboard. Move them around. Stare at them. Let them stare at you. Exercises like this help to identify primary, secondary and tertiary concerns. They can also help you to identify other ways of breaking down broad areas of interest into grounded, workable sections and subsections, most commonly known as chapters. This is a kind of culling process. Not all of the ideas you have will necessarily be central to your argument but might more properly belong as contextual backdrop, for instance. Some might become part of another later project or a side project.

This process is in pursuit of the gold standard for dissertations and grant proposals alike: A clear thesis statement. These help with designing clear work plans as well. **A good plan will always identify several things: 1) the research question (topic and thesis) 2) importance and relevance of the question, this includes the scholarly context for your work 3) what you will add that is distinct (outcomes) 4) How you will do it (body of evidence and method.)** Supervisors and committee members should be helping you with this. If they are not, ask them to.

Above all you must understand for yourself why your project matters. If you can't articulate that to yourself then you cannot articulate it to others, which is your ultimate goal.

Action: Humanists are not always very good at describing what they do. They might be very good as saying what they think. But, that is different. Think hard about what will you **do** as a researcher and scholar? Grant proposals must also highlight the **what and how** (in addition to the **why**) of a research project.

Synthesis: is a key tool for distilling your project and expressing it plainly, to yourself and to others. It is difficult to do well but it is also a skill that can be learned.

Exercises: Try describing your project in a page, then a paragraph. Then whittle it down to 3 sentences. Then one sentence. Evaluate. Start again.

Try writing an “elevator pitch.” Imagine you bump into a “donor” in the elevator. You’ve got 45 seconds. What would you say? Write one for a specialist. Then a non-specialist.

Grants 401: Mega-Advanced

Write it Like You Mean it.

All previous three phases lead to this one. Now you must express in writing what your project is and why it matters. The writing must respect the rules, your readership, and your project. Writing grant proposals is an iterative process. The best proposals invite the reader into a project. They are simultaneously expository, pedagogical, and persuasive. They avoid jargon and are written to be read comfortably by specialist and generalist alike. Lastly, good writing is a path to clear thinking; clear thinking yields good writing. And, this wins grants. Moreover, the writing phase will help you to think better and vice versa. Making friends with writing and its labors is an investment that will keep giving back year after year.

Practical Things to Do:

- ◆ Locate and study written examples of successful projects and/or proposals. Distill their parts. Notice their structure, tone and style. Observe their strengths and weakness. Learn from their mistakes.
- ◆ There is no such thing as showing your grant application to too many people.

Show your application (several times, and at early and late stages) to:

- a) someone in your immediate area to check for relevance, accuracy, and quality
- b) a generalist to check for clarity of expression.
- c) someone who is *not* in the field but is a good writer/editor

Note: Do not choose readers who are nice, polite, and affirmative. You want serious, direct, and honest feedback. Always choose at least one grumpy, fastidious, tweedy, language curmudgeon as a reader. It might not feel nice, but you will increase your chances of winning your grant. And, you might even learn something about writing or even better -- about your own research. Provide your readers with direction. Tell them to be tough. Ask readers to be honest and to watch for bad habits, writing ticks, to mark anything that was not clear or that they stumbled on.

All of these things will help you to clarify your ideas and understand how to communicate them and your project clearly. Good writing is hard work but when done well signals clear thinking. This wins grants.

Practical Writing Advice (Style):

- Favor simple sentences over long and complicated ones.
- Make subject and verb agreements easy to identify.
- Avoid passive voice.

- Use strong action verbs (argue, conclude, assess, complete, investigate, analyze, demonstrate, prove)
- Avoid vague or uncertain verbs (reflect, explore, meditate, ponder, ruminate, think about, think through, or rethink, read or re-read, look at)
- Avoid weak phrases such as “I will *attempt* to assess,” “I *hope* to investigate.” “I *intend* to complete,” Rather, you will assess, investigate and complete.
- Use words properly and in as precise a fashion as possible. (Example: a debate is not *centered around* a set of issues.)
- Beware of disciplinary specific terms that do not translate across disciplines and fields.
- Avoid overly aggressive, brazen, or uncollegial verbs and phrases (e.g. “I will interrogate the concept of peace...”; “I will explode conventional understandings of art.” ...”No one is talking about culture.” “I want to rethink Freud, Marx and Nietzsche.”)
- Be cautious about the metaphoric nature of language. (Example: Are you investigating a moment or era? A theory or concept? A spectator or a person or a subject?)
- Do not mis-use quotation marks. Use them only when you are actually quoting somebody, or when you are introducing a particular or specialized term.

Personal Bugaboo : *Do not use quotation marks around individual words to indicate a second or third meaning, ambiguity, or even simply a knowing wink-and-nod. Quotation marks have the verbal effect of planting a tongue in your cheek or winking your eye. They are a lazy writer’s tool. In a room full of immediate colleagues, the intended irony or call to ambiguity or attempt to nuance a complex concept like “reality” or “language” may be grasped. But, none of this translates well on paper and with people from across disciplines or fields that you will never meet. In short, quotation marks do not communicate effectively. At worst, they will fail to communicate and also suggest a certain arrogance.*