

Some Thoughts on Grant Writing

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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.

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 encourage reader interest in your work. Grant proposals are a distinct genre of writing. 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 but also the intangible tingle of emergent knowledge. The best grant applications are the product of hard work and careful planning. They are best thought of as a particular form of institutional writing. As such, it is best to think institutionally when preparing them. Consider both the personal and impersonal systems involved.

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.

- Make the display pleasant and attractive.
 - Use appropriate 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 required, do not send them (they will be discarded and even possibly 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.)
 - Observe the deadlines. This includes giving any available pre-screener and reviewers enough time to do a thorough job.
 - 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.
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Grants 201: Intermediate

Know your audience; Respect your audience.

Important: Ideally, reviewers do their job because they want to, and they hope to positively direct future research. As grant writers, we need to respect this. Of course, reviewers are working above and beyond their daily mandated activities, and are often unpaid. They may be overwhelmed with applications. They often carry out the reviews under less-than-ideal conditions (evenings, weekends, holidays, at meetings, or even on the way to review committee meetings). They may wait until the last minute to begin their review.

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 somewhat related field, rather than for an expert directly in your area.
- Remember that many agencies, even national ones, send applications for review abroad. Use language that will be easily understood by those for whom the language is foreign.
- Aim the application at both the expert in the field and at the generalist.

How to do this:

First, you should also 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? Once you know this, you must polish your application extensively with an eye to understanding the specific reading audience. Make the application focused, clear, organized, and accurate. It should also outline a program of work that is feasible. Because a reader may not be expert in your precise area of specialization, you need to let them in on the secret. Invite them into your ideas by referring both to the general areas of debate your project speaks to, and to the specific knowledge you seek to gain through your study.

Example: This research addresses questions about the relationship between new technologies and cultural value. [General] It does so by examining IPODS and the ways in which these devices have been culturally constructed as handheld musical databases, linking individuals to a seemingly interminable assemblage of musical styles, genres and artists. [More specific] I will achieve this by examining industry literature and popular media commentary..." [Even more specific]

Doing this alerts a reader to your knowledge of the field, and to your facility with ideas (yours and those of others). It's also a way of demonstrating that you **can play nice with others in the sandbox**. It does this by respecting your reader and your colleagues. Your prose should aim to the non-expert intelligent reader. [I use *Harper's* magazine as my guide to quality and clarity.]

Grants 301: 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. What's at stake?

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

Guidelines:

- ◆ 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.

(Try pitching your project verbally in as few words as possible: "It's Walter Benjamin meets Henry Jenkins in Japan" or "It's Godard meets Lady GaGa." Note, if the pitch doesn't work, go back to zero and try again. The exercise is devoted to distilling key ideas in as few words as possible. It does not end up in your grant application but helps you to understand better its basic concepts and appeal.)

- ◆ 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, ambiguity and quality
- b) a generalist to check for clarity of expression.
- c) someone who is *not* in the field but is a good 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 language or even better -- about your own research.*

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.

General Principles of Writing and Editing Grants

Overall you need to express clearly why your project matters. Just because something has never been done, doesn't mean it should be done. Explain what is to be gained. This might include both specific and general outcomes/ideas. You also want to include what is novel and interesting about your project. Be sure that you are not simply re-inventing the wheel. This entails identifying what is already known about your area (a lit. review). Most importantly, you must write all of this clearly, in a style that is easy for a non-expert colleague (working late into the night) to understand.

Writing your grant is only the first stage. Most of your time will be spent editing your grant. You should edit for clarity of expression and power of persuasion. This helps to shape a confident professional voice.

Tips:

- 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)
- 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.
- 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?)
- Use terms in as precise a fashion as possible. (Example: a debate is not *centered around* a set of issues.)
- 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.*

Collected Tidbits from other Sources:

(FROM NIH-US WEBSITE)

Make it easy for the reviewers - they'll appreciate it! All the basic concepts you learned in English (or other language) writing classes apply to writing a grant. These basic techniques will help keep your writing streamlined and well organized so reviewers can readily glean the information. If you could use a writing refresher, we've recapped the basic principles below.

- **Start with an outline.** Follow the organization you carefully thought out in the previous section.
- **Write a topic sentence for each main topic.** Then write a topic sentence for each sub topic in the outline.
- **Make one point in each paragraph.** This is key to creating text that's easy to read. State the point in the topic sentence, usually the first sentence, and support it with additional information in the subsequent sentences. Paragraphs have two functions: they aggregate information point by point and they break up the page, creating much-needed white space. Keep them short.
- **Divide the document into sections and subsections.** This organizes your text and, together with paragraph headers, creates white space. Reviewers are human. If it looks too hard to read, they're much less likely to read it. Huge blocks of uninterrupted text are depressing to look at.
- **Include bullets and lists.** They draw attention to key facts and create a visual break.
- **Use short sentences with a basic structure:** subject, verb, object. Breakup long, involved sentences and paragraphs. Keep sentence average to 20 words or less. Keep subject, verb, and object together at the beginning of the sentence.
- **Include transitions.** At the end of the paragraph or concept, make a transition to the next point. Use words such as: furthermore, additionally, in other words, in another area, in contrast, following the same path, moving to the next stage.
- **Keep related ideas and information together,** e.g., put clauses and phrases as close as possible to-preferably right after the words they modify.
- **Use strong, active verbs** -- they are the workhorses of effective sentences. For example, write "We will develop a cell line," not "A cell line will be developed."
- **Use verbals instead of abstract nouns.** Turn abstract nouns ending in 'ion' and 'ment' into verbs. For example, say 'creating the assay leads to...' rather than 'the creation of the assay leads to...'
- **If writing is not your forte, get help**