

Grant Preparation Tips

Follow the Application Guidelines and Directions: Study the application directions carefully. This may seem obvious, but you would be surprised how many applications are rejected for not following guidelines (from fonts to page length, from deadlines to required structure). When agencies receive large numbers of applications, the easiest way to narrow the competitive field is to eliminate applicants who ignore or fudge application rules. Reviewers are often overloaded. Address all of the required issues in the order presented in the guidelines. If your arguments are not in the expected spots, reviewers will rarely search for them elsewhere.

Contacting Program Officers: Contacting program officers of foundations and corporations can clarify if a funding program is the right one for your project, or help you adapt your proposal to the priorities of an organization. Most program officers are happy to answer questions about proposal or research idea, although many foundations and corporations prefer the CFR office to act as a single-point-of-contact for the agency. We are more than happy to contact program officers on behalf of faculty members. Some discussions, however, require your direct participation. If you are unsure of contact policy or simply want advise about the best way to manage the program officer discussion and relationship, please touch base with the CFR office first.

Know the Review Criteria: Announcements and Guidelines often include explicit review criteria. Review criteria are not always the same as the prescribed structure of proposals, but panelists must them to rank your application—so take care to clearly address them in the document. Plan and prepare your applications as if you were a reviewer for the agency.

Know Your Audience: Writing a proposal to the appropriate audience can be critical. Many funding agencies will provide information about who reviews applications. It may be a panel of experts in your field; it may be a mixed group of experts from different fields; or it may be comprised of reviewers who care about the end results of your topic, but have no expertise in your field. Look through the agency's website or announcement materials to learn as much as possible about who reviews your application. (Consider contacting the program officer to learn more.) You also may be allowed to provide input as to which reviewers are appropriate or inappropriate for your particular proposal. If so, take advantage of this. If you cannot determine who will judge your application, consider writing to multiple audiences. The best way to do this is to use the abstract or initial summary to clearly explain the overall goals and value of your proposed work—albeit in lay person terms, but then provide increasing amounts of technical detail in the body for expert reviewers. Less expert reviewers will still look positively on your proposal if they understand the general goals and concept, and defer to experts who read the whole proposal for quality of your approach. However, if the generalist does not understand what you are trying to accomplish in the first place, he or she will be far less likely to support an expert's opinion.

Clarity of Writing and Organization: Say the most important things first: The first page of any application is the most important. Lead with a concise statement of your goals, the impact of your work, followed by outlining how you plan to achieve these goals. Your first page should convince reviewers that your proposal is worth reading in more detail. Likewise, use the first paragraph of a section or the first sentence of paragraph to state your main idea, and then provide evidence or details to back up your claims. Remember, reviewers often skim! Don't wait until the end of passages to tie various points together or state your most critical ideas. Reviewers may not ever see these points.

Keep your sentence and paragraph structure simple: Long sentences tend to be more confusing or ambiguous. While these passages may seem clear to you, to others, it may be less certain. In general, break down sentences that are more than two lines long or have multiple clauses into shorter sentences or bullets. On a similar note, focus each paragraph on definable concept, with subsequent arguments designed to drive home that point. Try to avoid jumping around with tangential discussions in the same paragraph. Save these arguments for later paragraphs.

The perils of poorly designed background sections: 1) Many applicants write overly long and tedious background sections, because they feel it is important to show that they are an expert in their field, but

often wait too long to tell the reader what this has to do with their specific proposal. Some background can provide context, but reviewers often become frustrated waiting for you to get to the point. Start such sections by explaining explicitly that your project goals fits into the wider context, and only provide the minimum amount of background necessary to make sense of your statements/goals. 2) Another typical mistake is confusing the function of *background* with that of *significance*. Instead of addressing the impact of their own work, many applicants write a review of their field and argue for the critical importance of that discipline. However, panelists do not fund you because you work in an important area. They fund your work because they believe you will make a difference.

Reiteration vs. redundancy: If you repeat a point or concept in your document, try to provide more nuance for such statements, as you move deeper into the document. If you simply say the same thing over and over, you will annoy the reviewer. In contrast, if you gradually provide more detail or evidence when you reiterate a point, you can effectively draw your audience into more complex discussions.

Avoid vague or empty claims: Avoid generalized claims without backing them up with facts or examples. If you say your project will expand participation in the arts, you should tell the reader how you will do these things or what specific impacts your work will have in this regard. For example, "We propose to double the number of underrepresented minority undergraduates taking art classes in the freshman year." Reviewers are convinced by explicit arguments about your goals and how you or your team will achieve them.

Visual Presentation Counts: If an application looks inconsistent or poorly devised, a panelist may assume your ideas are similarly sloppy or disorganized. Be consistent with fonts, spacing and section title formats. Provide some white space in the proposal: overcrowded and dense documents are harder to read and subconsciously antagonize reviewers.

Figures: Make sure your figures or graphics make sense on their own. Reviewers often look at figures before they read the text. Do not force them to find a passage in the body to clarify the meaning of a figure. Place the graphics as close as possible to the citation in the body for figure. Make sure your figures are big enough that they can be deciphered.

Have someone check your spelling, math, punctuation and the overall presentation (it is almost impossible to objectively proof your own work for mistakes or clarity).

Consider What Might Go Wrong with Your Project: Devise a plan for what you will do if something unanticipated occurs during your project. Reviewers are typically looking for holes to poke in a proposal, rather than focusing on what is right about it. You can disarm many criticisms by showing that you have considered potential roadblocks or problems that could halt or seriously endanger your project. Be confident in your approach, but outline a concrete plan for making the project work, if something unexpected occurs. Reviewers love this forward-looking problem solving.

Accurate Budgets: Incorrect budget numbers or requests provide an easy excuse for triage or downgrading of your score. First, determine ahead of time what kinds of costs the funder allows and does not allow. Second, it is very difficult to get a project funded when costs are not explicitly identified, whether for supplies, equipment, salaries or travel. If you cannot provide exact numbers in the budget, provide a solid rationale for how you arrived at an estimate. Finally, make sure that what you say in the body of the document, the budget justification narrative, and budget spreadsheet sections is consistent. Numbers often evolve during the writing of the grant and incorrect figures are easily transposed or left in the final draft. Triple-check your penultimate draft.

Issues Regarding Similar or Prior Funding: Support of an organization in the past does not guarantee that your current project will be funded again. All applications are reviewed in the context of the evaluation criteria and available funding, and evaluated competitively against other requests. In addition, some agencies only award a single round for a particular project, because they view their function as providing *seed-funding*. Know the funding agency's intentions.