Research Funding Toolkit
Successful grant writing

TOP FIVE GRANT WRITING MISTAKES

1 Failing to say what research you will do or how you will do it

2 Not providing evidence of the project's importance or your competence

3 Assuming that you and the decision-makers agree on what is important

4 Assuming that decision-makers have time to consider your application closely

5 Obtaining feedback from colleagues who are too senior, too close

KEY FEATURES OF FUNDED RESEARCH

- A defined programme that answers a specific question
- A sum of money given to finance a defined programme
- Grants usually awarded competitively
- The funder invests in the promises you make

WHAT THAT MEANS FOR YOU

- Your proposal must show how the agency's investment will pay off
- Your proposed project must meet generic and specific criteria
- You must describe in full what you will do and how you will do it
- You must propose better projects than other applicants

ABOUT FUNDING AGENCIES

- They fund research projects that help them meet their overall aims
- They can only afford to invest in a few projects
- They must pick those that best meet their criteria
- They must make speculative investments and need evidence of likely success beforehand
- They must usually do all this transparently

THE ASSESSMENT PROCESS

- **Rigorous:** it is a speculative investment
- **Competitive:** not every excellent project gets a grant
- **Non-specialist:** decision-makers cover a wide variety of disciplines
- **Comparative:** you are ranked against (dissimilar) projects

THE GRANTS COMMITTEE

- Rarely represents a single discipline
- Usually 10-20 members
- All distinguished but not specialist in your field
- Committees typically rank 50-100 applications
- Supported by peer review reports on each application

HOW THE COMMITTEE WORKS

- Each application assigned to two members (can be 10-15 applications each)
- Designated members give a two minute presentation on your application and its reviews – and suggest a grade

- Committee discussion to finalise grade
- Committee ranks proposals in order of merit

HOW DO THEY FIND THE PROCESS?
- Hard work
- Stressful
- Frustrating
- Depressing
- Competitive
- Intimidating

SURVIVING THE PRESENTATION
- Use your summary to help designated members prepare their presentation
- Make your application quick to read and easy to understand
- Help them find their way through the document
- Keep important arguments and evidence prominent
- Aim to enthuse them about your research

SURVIVING COMMITTEE DISCUSSION
- Provide a strong project summary that can be read in seconds
- Make your application speed-readable
- Cater for non-specialists
- Give them a few memorable ideas and phrases

FEATURES OF A WINNING APPLICATION
1 Are absolutely outstanding....or high quality and lucky

2 Provide evidence relevant to generic and specific evaluation criteria

3 Are comprehensible to non-specialists

4 Are clearly and logically structured

5 Can be remembered easily and explained quickly by busy, non-specialists

IT'S A LOTTERY
- The committee has to rank large numbers of high quality applications
- There is not enough funding for all of them
- Incremental differences become important
- One poor referee report can sink your bid
- You need to maximise your chances, make batches of proposals and keep on trying

FUNDABLE RESEARCH PROJECT CHECKLIST
- Asks an important research question
- Is likely to succeed
- Is likely to provide usable knowledge
- Is led by competent investigators
- Offers value for money
- Has a clear and logical structure
- Includes all the evidence the decision makers need to evaluate it

FOUR KEY PROPOSITIONS
All fundable applications make four key propositions (to meet generic criteria):

1 **Importance:** the proposal asks an important question

2 **Success:** this project is likely to answer the question

3   **Value:** the likely gain from this project is worth the resources requested

4   **Competence:** the applicant and team are competent to carry out the project as described

PROPOSITION 1: IMPORTANCE

- Defined by the agency
- Comprehensible to a non-specialist
- Memorable amongst other projects
- Supported by evidence

Your project won't have a chance if you cannot demonstrate importance in these terms

PROPOSITION 2: SUCCESS

- A full account of what you will do to answer the question
- Evidence that your approach is likely to work

This is the most important (and neglected) part of research grant applications

PROPOSITION 3: COMPETENCE

- Self-citation is essential
- Provide evidence of ability to use the methods proposed
- Provide evidence of your ability to deliver a project of the scale proposed
- Do not overstate the importance of your contribution to the field

Your 'competence' is relevant to the scale of the project and your role within it

PROPOSITION 4: VALUE

- The outputs are worth the sum requested
- The project may not be cheap but it must be cost efficient
- Under-pricing worse than over-pricing
- Support the value proposition within the main proposal (don't just leave it to a justification of costs appendix)

Funding agencies will only support projects whose resources are necessary and sufficient

THE GRANT WRITER'S DILEMMA

- Your question/problem is complex and the programme of activity is extensive
- You must structure and explain all this within a rigid template set by the funder
- No-one has much time to read your application and disentangle a convoluted project structure

USEFUL TEMPLATE

1   Summary including aim and research question

2   Your project aim

3   Your research question

4   Your evidence:

- Why the question is important
- Why you are competent
- Why your approach will succeed

5   3-5 things 'we need to know' in order to answer the question (i.e. your sub-questions/objectives)

6   Overview of your method

7   Description of 3-5 activity components that each answer one sub-question plus an account of the necessary resources

8   Your project outputs

WHY DO 'WE NEED TO KNOW'?

- If no-one needs to know the answer to your question, why would the funder support it?
- If your project doesn't need every proposed activity component in order to succeed, how will it survive peer review?
- If the committee doesn't see these needs quickly and easily, they will not rank it highly
- 'We need to know' process breaks down the research question into sub-questions and links them to specific activity components

ESTABLISHING THE 'NEED TO KNOW'

- List your activity components
- 3-5 items are easily memorable (4 is best)
- State what completing each component successfully will tell you
- Summarise this as a sub-question
- Re-phrase sub-question as an objective
- Use a word or phrase from the objective/sub-question as a heading for each component

THE EFFECTIVE APPLICATION

- A busy person can speed read it
- A non-specialist can understand it
- It convinces readers (through evidence) that it is worth the speculative investment
- It is more memorable than its competitors
- The importance of the research is supported by evidence and clear argument

THE GRANT WRITING CHALLENGE

- To fit the template
- To meet the generic and specific criteria
- To produce a document that is easy to read, easy to understand, easy to remember and convincing
- To include every relevant piece of information and evidence in the best place

EASY TO READ

- Use simple language
- Use short sentences and paragraphs
- Avoid abbreviations and acronyms
- Avoid jargon
- Use plenty of headings, sub-headings and bullet points

EASY TO UNDERSTAND

- Start with a strong summary (that you write last) and summarise each section up front
- Position key assertions in prominent sections of your application and support with evidence
- Define technical terms and use them consistently
- Use key phrases/headings to label and link related parts of the case for support
- Signpost important information

EASY TO REMEMBER

- Keep lists at 5 items maximum (aim for 4)
- Use the 'we need to know' structure so that objectives, questions and activity match
- Repeat key phrases and technical terminology
- Make your project summary simple and memorable

CONVINCING

- Provide evidence for generic and specific criteria
- Position key evidence in prominent sections of your application

- Use evidence that works for non-specialists
- 'Prime' readers in advance so that they are ready to accept the main demands of your project

EVIDENCE CHECKLIST

- Why is your question important?
- Why does it need to be answered now?
- Why does your project need external funding?
- Why are you the right person to lead this project?
- Why is your project likely to succeed?
- Why is a project of this scale needed?
- Is the research environment appropriate?
- How will all the requested resources help carry out this project?
- Who will find the knowledge useful?
- How will they use it?
- How will you communicate the outputs to them?

WHAT COUNTS AS EVIDENCE?

- Pilot data
- Citations and self-citations
- References to public sources, policy etc.
- Real world/lay examples
- Graphs and illustrations
- An account of planned activity
- Justifications of costs

HOW TO GET WRITING

1. Describe all of your proposed research activity in detail

2. Break it into 3-5 sections and assign each a sub-question

3. Explain what each of the 3-5 sections will tell us

4. Explain what you will do with the knowledge

5. List the resources needed to achieve this

6. Define your overall question and matching project aim and group the 3-5 sub-questions beneath it

7. Write the background section with evidence for the question, your competence and your approach

8. Replicate/expand material to appendices

9. Write the summary

USEFUL CASE FOR SUPPORT TEMPLATE

- Get your 'foot in the door' with a summary that previews the project
- State the problem we need to solve and provide evidence that (i) it needs solving, (ii) you are the one to solve it, and (iii) that the proposed project is likely to solve it via the 3-5 questions
- Describe the project that solves it: (i) your design and methods, (ii) your 3-5 activity components and (iii) what you will do with the knowledge

THE EFFICIENT APPLICANT

- Asks the right people for feedback
- Test draft applications
- Repeats and replicates information within and between applications
- Never exhausts an idea on one application
- Deals with rejection

THE 'RIGHT PEOPLE'
- Use feedback to replicate the decision-making process
- Choose non-specialists
- Don't choose friends
- Don't choose people who never win research grants
- Choose people with grants' committee experience

TESTING
- Ask testers to read your application quickly
- Avoid kind, supportive feedback
- Elicit negatives
- Provide a structured framework for their comments
- Ask them to give you a two minute presentation on your project

REPETITION AND REPLICATION
- You can't plagiarise yourself
- You are not writing for publication
- You must use the same text in different applications (where appropriate)
- A structured approach to project design makes it easier to 'cut and paste'
- You can't repeat, replicate, summarise and expand throughout each application

AVOIDING PROJECT EXHAUSTION
- Think of a different way of answering your question and generate a new project
- Consider whether your planned activity be used to answer a different question
- Is there a parallel project?
- Are there 'spare' sub-questions that could form a new project?

REJECTION
- Remember that luck plays its part
- Don't get down to your last idea or application
- Remember that everyone announces their successes and keeps quiet about the rejections: you are not alone
- Senior colleagues get multiple rejections and it feels awful for them as well

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