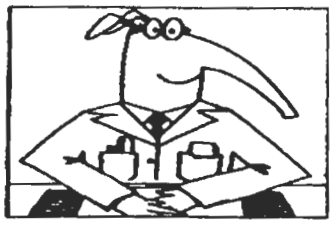
Top 10 Grantwriting Do's and Don'ts[1]



Here are the major criteria for which funding agencies look. We have borrowed some suggestions directly from Joan Straumanis, former FIPSE program officer and current Dean, College of Arts and Sciences, Lehigh.

DO:

1. Innovate — and if you can't think of anything brand new, do something unexpected. This is your angle; now feature it.

2. Do your homework. Find your niche. What are others doing about this issue? Show that you know, and place your project within this context.

3. Build a team. Mix things up. Build and cross bridges — among departments, disciplines, and schools. Between academia and business. Between schools and colleges. Include students and administrators. Be generous: share work and ownership. Appoint an advisory committee of famous people in your field (to get a head start on dissemination) but don't give them much work to do, and you won't need to pay them back very much.

4. Call a representative at the agency and discuss your project. S/he can tell you whether your project is something the agency is likely to be interested in, and may be able to give you additional information about their interests that is not expressed in the RFP.

5. Write clearly and succinctly, and make your major points immediately. Proposals that pad information, use a lot of technical jargon when simpler words would be clearer, or beat around the bush are hard to understand and likely to lose the audience. Use a journalistic writing style. Use the "W" words of journalism: who, what, when, where, why, and how. Also use bullets, lists, outlines, diagrams, tables. Don't obsess on any topic, even if important. Make it interesting; let every sentence do a job. Assume that your reader is reading in bed, falling asleep — which is very likely true.

6. Follow guidelines to the letter. Keep them before you as you write, but don't quote them back to the agency. Match headings in the proposal to headings in the guidelines so the reader doesn't have to hunt for information. Use "signposts": I am about to explain why . . . I have just argued that . . ..

7. Prepare a budget that accurately reflects your needs. Asking for more money than you need because you expect the agency to give you less, or asking for less than you need because you're hoping for anything you can get, will lessen your credibility with the agency and may sabotage your project.

8. Make sure your project is a size you can manage.

9. Think about and address the future directions your research could take.

10. Get a sharp (toothed) reader. Best: someone unfamiliar with your field and your project. Not an editor/proofreader. Have them read your final draft without taking notes. Then, ask them to tell you, from memory, what the project will do, how it will do it, why it is significant, and how it is different. Rewrite the proposal if these answers aren't clear and correct, or they don't flow effortlessly.

Following are the errors that most frequently motivate reviewers to reject projects. The first eight are from Janet Melei Cuca's article[1] and reflect her study's ranking.

DON'T:

1. Experimental design: the technical methodology is questionable, unsuited, or defective.

2. Research problem: the hypothesis is ill-defined, lacking, faulty, diffuse, or unwarranted.

3. Experimental design: the study group or controls have inappropriate composition, number, or characteristics.

5. Experimental design: the data management and analysis are vague, unsophisticated, or not likely to provide accurate and clear-cut results.

6. Research problem: is unimportant, unimaginative, or unlikely to produce new information.

7. Investigator: inadequate expertise or familiarity with literature in the research area, poor past performance or productivity, or insufficient time to be devoted to project.

8. Resources: inadequate institutional setting, support staff, laboratory facilities, equipment, or personnel; restricted access to research population; or insufficient involvement or collaboration of colleagues and coinvestigators.

9. The proposal does not respond to the parameters or design problem established in the RFP. Follow the guidelines.

10. The application is incomplete or goes over the page limit. In an effort to stay within budget, many agencies are eliminating proposals with format errors. gv

[1] As printed in *The GrAnteater*, Ed.Beth Riley (Spring 1998): 4-5.

[2] Janet Melei Cuca, IH Grant Applications for Clinical Research: Reasons for Poor Ratings or Disapproval," *Clinical Research* 31: 453-61.