

Grant Proposals for Graduate Students

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There are two major steps involved in securing a grant: locating sources of funding and writing the proposal. These steps can be as time consuming and maybe more frustrating than conducting the project for which funds are being sought.

Remember that no two projects and no two sponsoring organizations are the same. Each project and sponsor brings together new sets of circumstances, potential pitfalls, and potential payoffs. Also note that it may be necessary to find funding from two or more sources to conduct one project; this is acceptable as long as all sources agree and proper accounting methods are established.

Choosing a Funding Source

The following steps may be useful as you begin to look for sources of funds for your project.

- **Determine what you need to successfully conduct this project.**

What type of funding is required?

Research, training, conference, fellowship, travel, equipment, dissertation are all common categories. There may be some overlap among them. For example, a research grant may involve purchase of equipment, or a fellowship may be granted for the conduct of research.

Where will the project be conducted? What population will benefit?

How much money is needed, and for what purposes?

What time factors are involved?

- **Determine which organizations are likely to provide funding for you or your project.**

Federal and state governments, private foundations, and business and industry are all possibilities.

Federal and state agencies often have specific grant programs with detailed proposal preparation instructions. Personal contact is recom-

mended. **Private foundations** often have funding priorities, and their application requirements usually are not as structured. Personal contact is often important. **Business and industry** tend to fund projects in communities in which they do business, or fund projects related to their business interests. Generally no proposal preparation guidelines are published; personal contact is critical.

Conduct funding searches. Database searching is available through the GradGrants Center on the Bloomington campus, Grantline/Online can be accessed on IU's AIE vax computer system, and manual searching of funding source directories (some specifically for graduate students) is also a possibility. Generate a large list of possibilities and **call or write the sponsor to request guidelines and application materials.**

Review sponsor information (brochures, annual reports, guidelines) to determine their funding priorities.

Note applicant requirements.

Sometimes the applicant organization and/or the project director must meet certain criteria, e.g., age requirements or minority status. Graduate students should particularly note if the proposal is to be submitted by an *institution* or an *individual*. If institutional approval is required, then the proposal must be submitted by Indiana University (contact Sponsored Research Services, IUB, 855-0516, for assistance).

Note budget limitations.

Some sponsors have restrictions on what they fund (travel is a common example). Don't include in the project budget items that the sponsor specifically does not support.

Note time factors.

Meet application deadlines! Also note how long it takes the sponsoring organization to make a decision. The rule of thumb is that it takes about a year to identify funding sources, write a proposal, submit the proposal, and receive official notice of the success (or rejection) of the application.

Review funding history.

What has the sponsor funded in prior years? Are sample proposals available? (Proposals to federal agencies are available to the public, usually with a simple request to the program office.)

Identify those sponsors which most closely match your area of interest and the needs of your project.

Contact the Funding Source

Contacting the funding sources you've identified can be accomplished in several ways, which should be determined by the guidelines you received from each sponsor.

- **Some request a letter of inquiry, also called a preliminary proposal.** This is a 2- to 5-page letter (length may be specified in the guidelines) outlining your idea and basic approach. Most of the elements of a full proposal are included, only in a very brief fashion.
- **In some cases it is appropriate to make personal contact through a telephone call, electronic mail, or in-person meeting.** Attending professional meetings is a good way to meet sponsors in a professional but informal way. It is also often acceptable to make an appointment to meet with the sponsor at his or her office if you plan to be in the sponsor's city. Some sponsors specifically state in their guidelines that they do not want phone calls or visits from potential applicants; respect that.
- **At some point, you must submit a full proposal.** For many sponsors, this is your only contact.

No matter how you contact the potential sponsor, remember that you need to convince the sponsor that your idea or your project will fulfill their mission. Remember that you will be competing with many other applications, and you should always keep the sponsor's point of view in mind.

Proposal Elements

Most proposals contain the elements described here. If the prospective grantor prescribes a format, follow it! If a format is not given, the following elements can be used as a guide.

- **Cover.** If the grantor does not provide a cover form or format, create a simple cover. Include grantor's name (and any program name or number), applicant organization (if appropriate), submittal date, project title, proposed project period, amount requested, project director's name and signature, and name and signature of the organization's authorized representative (if the proposal is submitted from the university) or the name, address, and signature of the individual submitting the proposal.
- **Table of Contents.** Guidelines often do not mention a table of contents, but it is helpful to include one unless the proposal is very short, or under five pages.

Include major proposal sections, but do not make the contents so complex that it is not useful.

- **Abstract** (also called **Project Summary**). Briefly state the problem, significance, objectives, method, and anticipated outcome. The typical length is 150-250 words. This may be the first or only thing a reviewer reads! (See **Problem Areas** on page 41).

- **Project Description** (also called **Narrative** or **Research Plan**). This is the major portion of your proposal. Sometimes the sponsoring organization asks specific questions or provides specific forms for the items discussed below. Be sure to follow the guidelines exactly.

Introduction—introduce applicant; establish credibility particularly in the area funding is being sought

Significance (also called *Statement of Need* or *Problem Statement*)—discuss the condition the applicant wishes to change; give evidence of the problem; explain why solving the problem is important to the grantor, the applicant, and others (see **Problem Areas** on page 41)

Literature Review (may be incorporated in *Significance* section)—describe work already done by the applicant and others

Objectives (also called *Specific Aims*)—state in measurable terms the project's specific desired outcomes; relate the objectives directly to the stated problem (see **Problem Areas** on page 41)

Methodology (also called *Procedure*, *Plan of Work*, or *Experimental Design*)— describe activities to be performed to meet the stated objectives; defend choice of activities; discuss who will perform activities; include a timetable

Personnel and Facilities (also called *Qualifications of Applicant Organization*)— describe in detail the qualifications of key project personnel and describe the facilities already available or promised for performance of project

Evaluation—state plans to evaluate the project; indicate who will conduct the evaluation (project personnel or a consultant?) and what will be done with the results

Long-term Project Plans—describe plans for the project after the requested funding period; if it will continue, what has been done or will be done to ensure support?

- **Bibliography** (also called **Literature Cited** or **References**). If the grantor wants just the literature cited, do not include a full bibliography. Be consistent in style

among references and check to see that the sources cited in the narrative are all included!

- **Budget.** This should be presented in a cost sheet format. Items commonly included are salaries and wages, fringe benefits, equipment, travel, supplies, other costs (e.g., publication charges, computer use, postage, telephone, conference, consultants, subcontractual costs), and indirect costs (indirect costs are not included for awards made directly to individuals).
- **Budget Explanation** (also called **Budget Justification**). Arrange by budget categories. Briefly explain how budget items were estimated. Details of personnel salary and benefit rates, travel rates, equipment needs, supplies, computer rates, and indirect cost rates are among the items usually included.
- **Vita** (also called **Resume** or **Biographical Sketch**). Include vitae for the project director and key personnel. Some grantors have a specific format for vitae and may specify a page limitation or that only recent publications should be included. If no guidelines are mentioned, keep the vita short—two to five pages is adequate.
- **Other Support** (also called **Current and Pending Support**). Indicate key personnel's current and pending funding for this and other work. Include granting agency, project title, amount awarded or requested, project period, percent of effort committed by the individual, and project location. Some grantors also require a brief description of the project.
- **Appendices** (also called **Attachments**). Depending on the format for the main part of the proposal, some of the components described here separately may be included as appendices. Possible appendices are: vitae, facilities description, letters of support, illustrations, or anything which is not included in the body of the proposal but should be accessible to reviewers. Some grantors do not allow appendices.

Problem Areas

Several parts of the proposal need special attention, either because of their extreme importance to the success of a proposal and/or because they tend to be frustrating for many proposal writers.

- **Abstract or Project Summary.**

Many funding organizations require that a project summary, or abstract, be submitted with a proposal. The summary should be short (preferably just one or two paragraphs, or about 200 words, or a length specified in the guidelines) and should accurately describe the proposed project. Very often the project summary is the first or only thing a reviewer reads; a reviewer may decide not to read the proposal

if the summary is poorly developed. Do not use the summary as an introduction to the proposal.

It is easier to prepare the summary after the proposal is written and in final form. A summary is also easier to write when the proposal itself is well written. Specifically, include information about the need for the project, the project's objectives, proposed methods, evaluation plans, expected outcomes, and how the project matches the funding organization's mission. If a dollar amount is mentioned in the project summary, list only the total cost.

Often information can be extracted from the proposal's major sections. The first and/or last sentences in those sections may provide the most important information or summary statements. The headings within the proposal may serve as a guide in determining the most important topics. Present information in the same order as it appears in the proposal.

Other tips:

Avoid the use of first person (even though the first person writing style may be appropriate for the rest of the proposal).

Define unfamiliar terms, acronyms, symbols, etc., the first time they occur in the summary. Be sure each is also defined the first time it appears in the proposal.

Do not use graphs or tables.

Do not refer to the proposal itself; a project summary may be published or distributed without the proposal.

Some funding organizations provide their own forms on which to submit the summary. If so, be sure to use the forms and stay within any space limitations. Place the project summary directly before the complete project description unless the funding organization specifies otherwise.

- **Significance.**

This is perhaps the single most important part of most proposals. You must convince the potential sponsor that the work you intend to do is important, not just to you but to your discipline, or to a particular population, or to a need that the sponsor has identified. The following suggestions (adapted from *Getting Funded: A Complete Guide to Proposal Writing*, Mary Hall) may help you discuss why your project is important and compelling.

Demonstrate an understanding of the problem; demonstrate it is feasible to solve, or that it will lead to new knowledge.

Convey the need for the project.

Describe the relationship of the project to a larger set of problems.

Establish regional/national/global significance.

Signify potential generalizability. How can what you learn through this project be used for other problems or other populations?

Provide discussion of related research and ongoing studies (literature review).

Establish your theoretical or conceptual base. Who else besides you thinks this is an important problem?

Introduce a justification for the methodology you plan to use.

Include statistical data (if appropriate). Justify why the problem should interest the funding source.

- **Goals and Objectives.**

There is much literature on the proper way to write good goals and objectives. Remember that goals provide an overall framework, objectives say what you plan to do in terms that are as measurable as possible, methods describe the activities you will perform to accomplish those objectives, and evaluation tells if the objectives were met. In brief: Goals provide the *conceptual framework*. Objectives say *what* you're going to do. Methods say *how* you're going to do it. Evaluation *asks did it work*.

Goals:

provide the conceptual framework
are abstract in content
are difficult to directly measure
focus on the long-term

Most projects have only one or two goals.

Objectives:

discuss what will be done to achieve the goal
are specific and concrete
are likely to be measurable
address short-term or intermediate steps

Projects may have many objectives.

Write and Rewrite

Just as you do for other major written work, proofread and rewrite. Potential funding organizations have only your proposal to judge your work, so it is important that you think of your proposal as representing you and your work. Have other people read your proposal. One reader should be someone familiar with your discipline (who can discuss the content), and one should be someone outside of your discipline (who can respond generally to style, organization, and presentation).

For Further Assistance

The GradGrants Center on the Bloomington campus and many other libraries have reference materials on proposal writing.

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