Planning to Apply

Decide where to apply for funding

Determine which funding agencies or foundations are most appropriate for your ideas.

- Look at websites of funding agencies to see what proposals they have funded recently; talk to colleagues and your Office of Sponsored Research.
- At conferences, attend workshops and information booths; speak to grant agency representatives so that they will know who you are.

Once you have targeted a potential funder, email the person at the agency who is most relevant to your area with a brief description of your work and ask for a telephone appointment.

- Discuss what areas they want to fund, whether they might fund your research, and the best way of framing your proposal.
- Talking to foundation personnel is particularly important; they are unlikely to fund a proposal that comes in cold.

The panel that you submit to matters; some will be more receptive to your work than others.

- Get advice. At some agencies, you can ask for more than one panel to read your proposal; talk to the program directors to see what they advise.

Create an application timeline

- Gather information from the funding agencies. What are the submission deadlines? Will you need to submit a hard copy or an electronic version of the proposal?
- Talk to your Office of Sponsored Research. What aspects of the proposal process will they take care of? How much lead time will they need? What other services will they provide?
- If necessary, plan ahead for Institutional Review Board (IRB) or Institutional Animal Care and Use Committee (IACUC) approval.
- Start working on your budget as early as possible. If there is institutional support for constructing a budget, do not wait until the last minute to seek their assistance. Re-use budgets from previous proposals, but update figures (e.g., indirect costs, fringe).
- Leave time to get feedback on your proposal from colleagues.

Elements of a Strong Proposal

Significance

The proposal must ask and provide potential answers to an important question. That question (and your hypotheses) must be stated as early in the proposal as possible, ideally on the first page. Find out whether the agency to which you will be applying puts a priority on the theoretical importance or applications of the work.

Coherence

The different parts of your proposal have to fit together; everything should interlock conceptually. Each part of the proposal should demonstrate how it helps to answer the questions you posed at the outset.

Originality

Proposals lacking an original idea can still be funded if they will provide useful information to the scholarly community or useful applications. A proposal with an absolutely original idea must have some pilot work that suggests that the idea has some chance of panning out.

Scholarship

Each part of the proposal should demonstrate knowledge of relevant prior work and demonstrate how the proposed work will make a contribution to the existing literature.

- The proposal is not a literature review. The description of your research plan should take up the bulk of the proposal. Determine what references are most important (keeping likely reviewers in mind). Use primary sources, not reviews.

Detail

Your research plan is the most important part of your proposal. You need to convince the reviewers that your methods will allow you to answer the questions that you are asking. Reviewers also need to be convinced that you know what you are doing and that you can do what you propose to do. Details and justifications help do that.

Feasibility

Figure out what you can realistically accomplish in the period of time and with the amount of money that you are proposing. Talking to other people will help you establish whether your project is too ambitious or not ambitious enough. Including a timeline – what you expect to accomplish each year – will help convince reviewers that your plan is feasible. Pilot work demonstrates that the project is feasible and that you in particular can do the work.
Writing the Proposal

- **Use successful proposals as models.** Use proposals that are close to your area. Ape the language, structure, and funding.

- **Do not try to do everything at once.** Initially, aim for a draft that will show the scope of the proposal. Plan to write several drafts. Do not worry about felicity of expression until near the end.

- **Construct your timeline early enough so that you can modify the proposal to fit a realistic schedule.** Specify how much time will be spent performing the experiments; analyzing the results; writing up and presenting the findings.

- **Design your proposal so that no matter how your research turns out, it will provide a contribution to knowledge and understanding.**

- **For each study, present the possible results or outcomes and what each will mean.**

- **Include pilot or preliminary work and explicitly highlight publications that use your procedures.** For methods that do not have a publication history, pilot work demonstrates that the methods are likely to work and that you are likely to be able to do the work.

- **Make it clear – if it’s true! – that you have the relevant experience and knowledge to carry the work through to completion.**

- **Use your discussion of the relevant literature to motivate your research.** Summarize what the world will know should your work be funded and completed.

- **Graphics are nice. But never sacrifice content for a graphic.**

- **Tie your work to current topics if you can.**

- **Make clear, strong connections to a theory or theoretical question.**

- **Have colleagues read a draft of your proposal.** You want useful, constructive criticism, even if it hurts. Criticism you receive before you submit the proposal can prevent much more damaging criticism from reviewers.

- **In later drafts**
  - Use terms that present your ideas in compelling ways. Memorable terms will increase reviewers’ interest in your proposal.
  - Streamline and simplify the writing.
  - Lavish attention on the first page of the proposal to capture the reviewers’ attention and motivate them to keep reading.

- **Think about who the likely reviewers of your proposal will be.** If it is relevant to your proposal, refer to their work.

- **Suggest reviewers if the funding agency allows you to do so.**

- **Write your summary or abstract section last.** Write so that it can be quoted by reviewers and used verbatim for the panel summary.

- **Address diversity elements in the relevant section of your proposal.**

- **Use up all the pages.**

- **If appendices are allowed, use them to provide additional background information.** You cannot, however, be sure your reviewers will read the appendices.

- **When preparing your budget**
  - Get help from your Office of Sponsored Research.
  - If your work is labor-intensive, estimate how much time it takes to do some unit of work. This can help justify what might otherwise seem to be an inflated cost.

- **Show that the institution is willing and able to provide what is necessary for your research** (e.g., space, release time). Include letters of support.
If Your Proposal Is Not Funded

- **Your proposal probably won’t be funded on the first round.** But the reviews from your first submission will help you write a successful subsequent proposal.

- **Show trusted colleagues the reviews and ask for their advice.** They can make suggestions about how to respond to the reviews and indicate which comments are really important.

- **Contact the funding agency to discuss your reviews.**
  - Email the program director and ask for a telephone appointment to discuss the reviews. Present your thoughts about how to proceed and then ask for advice. The program director won’t tell you what to do, but he or she can help you focus.
  - At some agencies (e.g., NIH), you can also contact the institute staff, who sometimes attend study sections. Even though they don’t participate in the review process, they can provide valuable information about the tone of the discussion about your proposal.
  - When talking to the funding representative, do not be defensive. Listen carefully. The goal is to find out, in as much detail as possible, what went wrong and how to correct it. Take notes.
  - At some agencies, program directors have a fair amount of discretion and collegial discussions can work in your favor if your proposal is borderline.

- **When you resubmit, find out whether you should explicitly present reviewers’ concerns and how the resubmission responds to them.**
  - At some agencies (e.g., NIH), explicit responses are required.
    - If reviewers have made specific suggestions, follow them or make clear – in a neutral and friendly tone – why you are not following them.
    - Do not exaggerate the reviewers’ concerns. Colleagues’ advice can help you here.
    - In the beginning of the response section, indicate the reviewers’ overall positive and negative comments, how you have responded, and how the proposal has improved as a result. Don’t be defensive, hostile, or sarcastic.
    - Have a colleague read the reviews and your response.
  - At other agencies where ad hoc reviewers change from submission to submission (e.g., NSF), use the reviewers’ comments to rewrite the proposal but do not respond directly to them.

- **How soon you should resubmit will depend on the funder’s timetable and how much work is required to revise the proposal.**
  - Aim for the first deadline after you receive the reviews. But if the funder indicates that pilot work is crucial, that next deadline may not be a feasible goal.
  - Respond as fully as possible and as quickly as possible.
Helpful Sources


