

Securing External Funding: Tips for Successful Grant-writing

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Obtaining External Research Grants

- ◆ Many public and private sources exist to fund research, outreach and other activities at academic institutions.
- ◆ Depending on the field of research, successful grant-writers can easily obtain funds to support valued research.
- ◆ But, the majority of proposals are not funded.
- ◆ How can you improve the odds that your proposal is funded?



Identify (Good!) Opportunities

- ◆ There are many opportunities that can be located using simple means (e.g., www.grants.gov).
- ◆ The trick is to identify which ones will offer the most promise for success.
- ◆ Many opportunities that look appealing on the surface may offer a low-likelihood of funding, and vice versa.
- ◆ Choosing the right opportunity is critical.

Identify Opportunities: Key Questions

- ◆ First, are you eligible? Are you qualified?
- ◆ What kind of work has the group funded in the past? Look for opportunities in which those in your field have been repeatedly successful.
- ◆ Who will likely review the proposal? Are they likely to support your approach and perspectives?
 - ◆ Are they *really* looking for the kind of work you want to provide?
- ◆ What is the overall success rate for proposals?
- ◆ What is the typical size of proposals? Are their funding limits?

Identify Opportunities: Key Questions

- ◆ Who else is likely to apply?
 - ◆ Certain RFPs are famous for attracting many high-quality proposals (e.g., NSF IGERT or CNH). Others may be narrower or much less competitive. *It's NOT always best to follow the herd.*
- ◆ Look for funding programs that are *new* (first time is best), or with *short response times*. These are likely to garner fewer applications.
- ◆ In general, bigger name programs (NSF) tend to be more competitive. Look for programs that are more specialized and less well-known.
- ◆ Find successful grant-writers in your field and find out where they have been successful.

Your Research Ideas

- ◆ It is generally insufficient to have a “good idea” or to be working on an “important problem.”
- ◆ The best proposals provide a unique and compelling solution to a critical problem.
- ◆ Four important questions
 - ◆ What is the critical problem that no one else has addressed?
 - ◆ Why is competing or prior work insufficient to solve the problem?
 - ◆ Why is your work the solution?
 - ◆ What will be gained by funding you? And what will be the (bad) result if you are NOT funded.

Understand the RFP

- ◆ Many proposals fail because the authors do not read the RFP closely.
- ◆ Read the entire RFP – multiple times – before you begin work.
 - ◆ What – exactly – does the RFP call for? What is its *primary* purpose?
 - ◆ What are the required elements of the proposal? Is there a suggested order and format? Follow it!
 - ◆ What is the primary focus of the RFP?
 - ◆ Who is eligible?
 - ◆ What is the due date and is a preliminary proposal or LOI required?

Understanding the RFP

- ◆ Is there literature cited in the RFP? If so, look it up.
- ◆ What are the review criteria?
 - ◆ Is there a “technical” and “relevance” review?
- ◆ Common mistakes:
 - ◆ Writing a proposal that does not correspond closely to the primary topic of the RFP. Thinking “it’s close enough.”
 - ◆ Ignoring the primary focus areas of the RFP.
 - ◆ Omitting a required section of the proposal.
 - ◆ Not organizing or formatting the proposal as suggested by the RFP.
 - ◆ Violating budget guidance.

Writing a Strong Proposal

- ◆ Researchers that are highly successful obtaining external funds have one thing in common – they write excellent proposals.
- ◆ How can you do it too?



Shakespeare

A Strong Proposal - Planning

- ◆ Begin planning for your proposal as far in advance as possible.
 - ◆ Obtain research materials (books, articles, etc.).
 - ◆ Coordinate your team and schedule proposal-writing meetings.
 - ◆ Write and debate outlines.
 - ◆ Begin working on your budget and paperwork.
 - ◆ *Call the program officer!* Don't be afraid to ask questions.
 - ◆ Leave time for administrative review and submission process. This can take weeks.

A Strong Proposal - Components

- ◆ Strong proposals tend to include...
 - ◆ A clear and compelling justification – why is the work important?
 - ◆ Well defined goals and objectives : what exactly will be accomplished?
 - ◆ A clear, very detailed and convincing research plan: what exactly will you do and how will you do it?
 - ◆ An awareness of pitfalls – what are the potential challenges and how will you address them?
 - ◆ A clear set of benefits, impacts and outcomes – what are the good things that will happen as a result of the work? Why is the work relevant and to whom?
 - ◆ Extensive citations of the relevant literature and a demonstration that you are aware of the full range of relevant work.
 - ◆ If possible, results from demonstration or seed projects to illustrate the concept and viability.

A Strong Proposal - Components

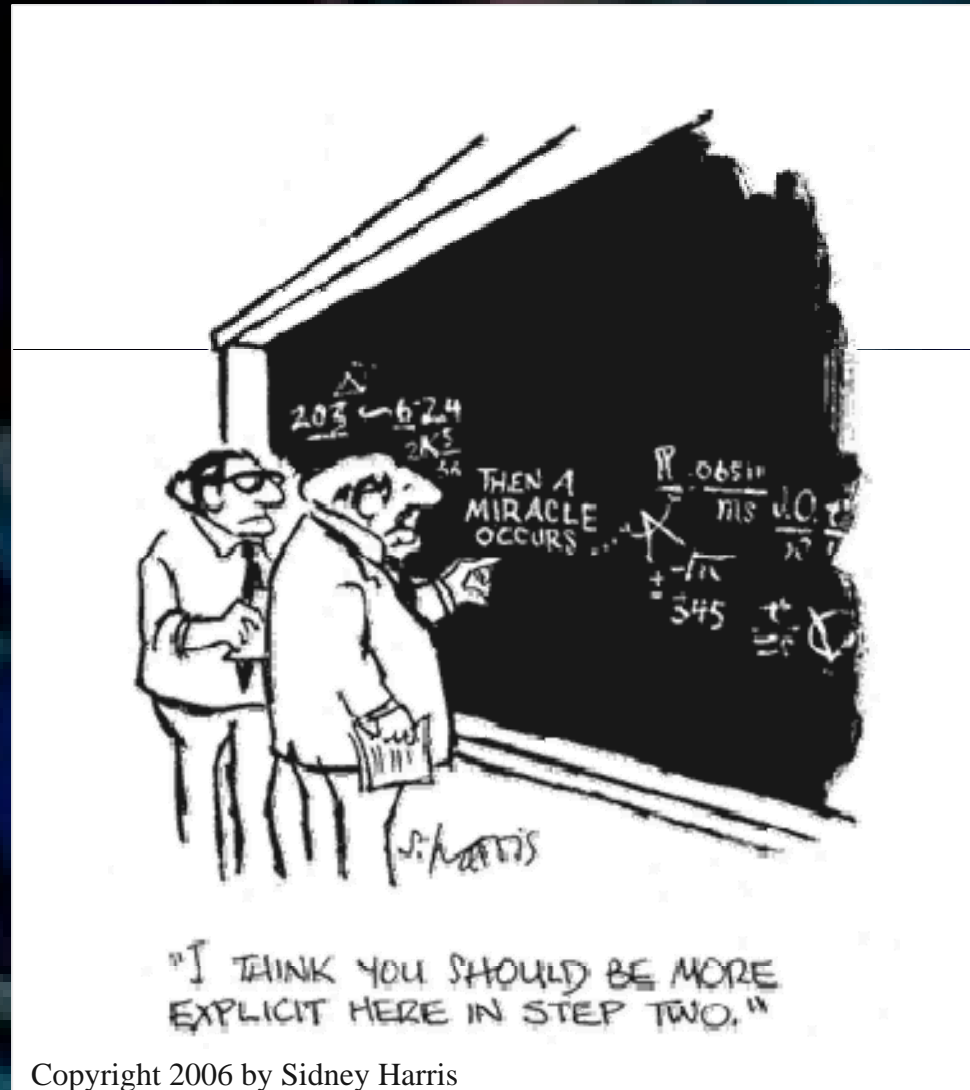
- ◆ Strong proposals tend to include...
 - ◆ A detailed justification of the research team, and why the team is particularly well-qualified to complete the work.
 - ◆ Evidence of “homework,” including commitments from project partners.



A Strong Proposal – Helpful Hints

- ◆ Successful proposals often squeeze large amounts of well-organized information into page limits, and engage in lots of very careful editing.
- ◆ If you find that you need to “stretch” your text to fill the page limit, or you come in under the limit, it is unlikely that you will be successful.
- ◆ Text tends to be very “dense,” but clear and readable.
- ◆ But, do NOT do anything that will annoy panelists or reviewers (e.g., tiny font or margins).

A Strong Proposal – The Research Plan



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A Strong Proposal – The Research Plan

- ◆ A large number of otherwise excellent proposals fail because they do not have a clear research plan – their methods are not specified clearly and carefully.
 - ◆ The research plan is the most important part of the proposal – this is what most experienced researchers will turn to almost immediately.
 - ◆ Do not assume that reviewers will know what you are planning to do.
 - ◆ Write “dense” text that specifies all aspects of your activities and plans for pitfalls or challenges.
 - ◆ Justify your methods with citations.
 - ◆ Never be vague or evasive – reviewers will notice this immediately.

A Strong Proposal – Narrative and Organization

- ◆ Reviewers and panelists are busy people – don't annoy them!
- ◆ Your proposal should have clear organization and a through-narrative.
- ◆ Make sure that readers know why they are reading each section.
- ◆ Carefully edit your text for readability and proofread for mistakes!
- ◆ Your proposal will likely be read quickly – make sure that the main points are easy to identify.
- ◆ A clear abstract is *critical*. Write it last and carefully.

Find Good Examples

- ◆ Successful grant-writers often have numerous tips and strategies that work in particular fields.
- ◆ If you have had little experience in successful grant-writing, seek out a colleague with more experience and ask him/her to collaborate.
- ◆ Offer to do much of the work in return for insight and assistance, and perhaps their name on proposal.
- ◆ Learn by working with someone who has already been successful.
- ◆ Ask for copies of successful proposals from colleagues.

Final Thoughts

- ◆ External funding is very rewarding, but requires hard work to obtain.
- ◆ Those who master a system for successful grant-writing often have very high success rates.
- ◆ It's better to write a small number of excellent proposals than lots of mediocre ones. Take your time and do it right.



Questions?

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