CRAFTING A WINNING RESEARCH PROPOSAL
OUTLINE

- Before you begin writing
- Customizing your proposal
- The genre of proposal writing
- Organizing your proposal
- After the first draft
- Proposal-specific writing tips and mechanics
- More resources
BEFORE YOU BEGIN WRITING

- It’s never too early to get started
  - Most winning proposals are started 3+ months prior to deadline
  - Summer and Winter Breaks should not be wasted!
  - Allow ample time to pass proposals to colleagues, advisors
  - Make a 5-year funding plan
- Letter writers
  - 6+ weeks notice
  - Provide proposal, CV, bullets of most important aspects of your skillset and what you want them to emphasize in the letter
- Set your own deadlines
  - Use stepping stones to break up the task
- Know word counts, eligibility, other specs before you start writing
GATHERING BACKGROUND INFO

- Who is funding the grant/fellowship?
  - Mission statements, key words

- What is the goal of this particular grant?
  - Expected results, types of candidates

- What types of projects has the grant funded in the past?
  - Quantitative v. qualitative
  - Theory building v. policymaking
  - Which disciplines?

- What are the selection criteria?
  - Often links with mission statement

- Who reads the applications?
  - Know your audience
Different grants, different pitches
This is not the time to be modest. Talk yourself up!
Are you qualified and competent enough to complete your project?
- Previous training, languages, coursework, achievements, etc.
- But not an annotated CV
What is significant about the project? Why is it important?
- Fills a hole in the literature, tests an important theory, a step to World Peace
- Importance is relative. How is it important to funders?
EVERY PROPOSAL MUST SHOW

- What will we learn as the result of the proposed project that we don’t know now?
- Why is it worth knowing?
- How will we know that the conclusions are valid?
- Why should you conduct the study, i.e. How have you prepared?
ORGANIZING YOUR PROPOSAL

- Grabber
- Research objectives
- Research questions
- Methods
- Literature Review
- Expected results and broader impacts
THE GRABBER

- Grab the reader’s attention
  - Provocative question based on central research question
  - Provocative problem/enigma
  - Provocative statistic
  - State your central point
  - Some combination of these

- The central idea/question should stick in the reader’s mind hour later

- Put the what and why up front
  - Grants are funded on merit, not need, so a good proposal begins with a clear idea of the goals and objectives of the project and why it is significant

Workers do not organize unions; unions organize workers.

Population growth coupled with loss of arable land poses a threat to North African food security in the next decade.
Avoid foregone conclusions
Clear hypotheses
Avoid a laundry list of Qs
Numbered or bulleted, boldface or italicized
Work with colleagues, advisors (good questions aren’t born overnight)
Not all grants require full literature reviews, but almost all will require you show knowledge of the field

- Who else has asked similar questions?
- What did they find, and what didn’t they look into (which your work will)?
- Tailor the lit review to your contributions (so shape the gaps)

Again, tailor literature review to the funding agency

- E.g. SSRC focuses on humanities-based social sciences (interdisciplinarity), and Wenner Gren on anthropological theory
METHODS

- Amount of detail depends on the specific grant
- Clarity
- **Explicitly** link methods and questions
  - i.e. why is this method the best way to answer your question?
  - Often good to refer back to the questions as you discuss methods
- Methods sections often include timelines
  - (e.g. “January–March, I will conduct semi-structured interviews with ...”)
  - (Keep in mind you’re not locked into this timeline)
DESIGN/METHODOLOGY

- Clear and well thought out
- Measurement
  - Survey research
  - Quantitative
  - Qualitative
  - (also, see Statistical Consultants here in SSRC!)
- Feasibility
  - Think carefully about feasibility; consider time frame, environment (e.g. internet access)
  - Funding agencies want you to succeed; be realistic
CONCLUSIONS/BROADER IMPACTS

- Why is the project important, again?
  - The “So, what?”

- Why is your project innovative?
  - Clarity important here. Funders want to know what they get out of investing in you

  (sometimes finish with:)
  - I will do X, Y and Z upon finishing my studies or after the grant period (proving your further worth)

- Impacts on your personal/professional trajectory

- Impacts for the mission of the funder (and maybe also your field)
  - What is important (i.e. a broader impact) depends on the funder
THE GENRE OF PROPOSAL WRITING

- Get to the point quickly!
- Readability
  - Use boldface, italics, and anything to make the proposal easier to read
- Clear, confident, & specific statements (avoid conditionals)
- Always keep guidelines in mind
- A good proposal is always readable, well-organized, grammatically correct, and understandable
- Be explicit about time frame of your project
  - Often tables can be handy and save space
- Be explicit about outcomes, and how you will measure success
PROPOSAL GRAMMAR

- Repetition
  - Use space wisely, but it’s also important to reiterate your main objective/question and why it’s important
  - Make the proposal read like a package
- Self referential
- Read aloud
- Proposal specific grammar
  - Sentences <25 words unless you have a direct quote or serial commas
  - No passive voice unless absolutely necessary
  - No contractions
  - try to avoid repeated "I + verb" constructions, especially as lead sentence of paragraph.
  - Consistency with verb tense, and avoid conditional
  - Avoid forms of the verb “to be”
Instead of conditionals like can, could, would, hope to use strong verbs of intent like plan, envision, imagine, seek to.

I would like to attend the Summer Language Workshop. By attending the Summer Language Workshop, I will.
ACTIVE VERBS

- Identify
- Assess
- Contrast
- Apply
- Examine
- Employ
- Illustrate
- Debate
- Integrate
- Predict
- Suggest
- Measure
- Distinguish
- Infer
- Synthesize
- Differentiate
- Translate
- Revise
- Generalize
- Evaluate
- Appraise
- Compose
- Collect
- Complete
- Deduce
- More [here](#) and [here](#) and [here](#)
- Estimated
- Gathered
- Instructed
- Assembled
- Detected
- Created
- Initiated
- Illustrated
- Guided
- Classified
- Compiled
- Critiqued
- Generated
- Hypothesized
Circulate your proposal for feedback

- Colleagues, advisors, friends, GGC, past winners of this fellowship. Choose readers in accordance with particular grant (e.g. NSF v. Fulbright)
- Allot 5+ weeks for longer proposals (especially during summer)

5-6 drafts

Try explaining (verbally) what the project will do/accomplish and why it’s important

Critical feedback is good feedback
HOW GRADGRANTS CAN HELP

- Databases for running searches
- Resources for grant-writing
- One-on-one consultations
  - External funding
- Open hours and workshops in SSRC
  - Internal funding
  - Database searches
  - Questions
  - Focused workshops (5-year funding plan, planning the summer prior to submitting dissertation research proposals, proposal writing)
- SAA Vacancies
- Twitter page with up-to-date funding opportunities @IUGradGrants
PROPOSAL WRITING RESOURCES

- Indiana University
  - GGC
    - Proposal editing, office hours
    - Writing Tutorial Services
    - Statistical Consulting (methods)
    - Office of Research Administration (ORA)

- Online Resources
  - SSRC’s The Art of Writing Proposals

- Grant-specific sites
  - NSF GRFP
  - Fulbright