THE ART OF PROPOSAL WRITING

A Presentation by the IU GradGrants Center
BASIC GRANT TIPS

- Start looking early
- Seek small grants first
- Search online funding databases regularly
- Know requirements specific to each grant
- Review funded applications as you prepare to write
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 or qualitative?
  - Theory building or policymaking?
  - Which disciplines?

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

- Who reads the applications?
  - Know your audience

- When is the grant typically due?
BEFORE YOU BEGIN DRAFTING

- Be aware of and set deadlines for different parts of the application

- Familiarize yourself with word counts, length, formatting, eligibility, other specifics

- Ask for letters of recommendation

- Ask for language evaluations
Proposal writing is a genre unto itself

Conventions of proposal writing include:

- direct, clear language
- avoidance of jargon for educated but non-initiated reader-reviewers
- repetition of your main objective/question and why it’s important
- self-referentiality
- readability/skimmability
- salesmanship
- a singular, feasible plan that draws on personal strengths/training

Your proposal will not contain your most beautiful or elegant prose, but it will contain some of the clearest, most lucid writing you ever produce
PROPOSAL GRAMMAR

- Try your best to avoid
  - contractions
  - repeated "I + verb" constructions, especially as topic sentences
  - passive voice
  - conditional verbs
  - forms of the verb “to be”
  - overly long sentences

- Strive for
  - careful word choice to show fit between different sections
  - clear, confident statements
  - active constructions
  - consistency in voice
CONFIDENT PROSE

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
- Estimated
- Gathered
- Instructed
- Assembled
- Detected
- Created
- Initiated
- Illustrated
- Guided
- Classified
- Compiled
- Critiqued
- Generated
- Hypothesized
SALESMA NSHIP

- Different grants, different pitches

- Qualifications and competencies
  - training
  - coursework
  - languages
  - special achievements

- Significance of your research
  - Why is it important to scholarship in and out of your field?
    - tests an important theory
    - moves toward policy change
    - fills a hole in the literature
  - Why is it important to funders?
    - helps fulfill their explicit mission
THE MAJOR POINTS EVERY PROPOSAL SHOULD ADDRESS

What we will learn as the result of the proposed project
Why it is worth knowing
How we will know that the conclusions are valid
Why you should be the one to conduct the study
ORGANIZING A PROPOSAL

- Hook
- Project overview
- Research questions
- Literature review
- Methods
- Academic background/preparation
- Expected results and broader impacts
Grab the reader’s attention with a
- challenging problem/enigma
- provocative statistic
- stimulating question

Put the “what” and “why” up front
- A good proposal emerges from a clear idea of the project goals and why they are significant

The central issue should stick in the reader’s mind an hour later

Workers do not organize unions; unions organize workers.

Population growth coupled with loss of arable land poses a threat to food security in the next decade.

Are strong party systems conducive to democratic stability?

Was the decline of population growth in Brazil the result of government policies?
PROJECT OVERVIEW

- Open with
  - Hook
  - “This research project…”

- A micro-level representation of the main components of your project/proposal

- Be wary of citing other work in this section
RESEARCH QUESTIONS

- Craft a clear hypothesis
- Avoid foregone conclusions
- Avoid long list of questions
  - Three usually suffice
- Number, bullet, boldface, or italicize
LITERATURE REVIEW

- Not all grants require full literature reviews, but almost all require that you show knowledge of your field
  - Who else has asked questions similar to yours?
  - What did they find?
  - What didn’t they look into?
  - Where does your work build off of and add to previous scholarship?
  - What is the broader significance of your work to people outside your specific area/discipline?

- Tailor to specific agency and its goals
  - SSRC IDRF: interdisciplinarity, humanities-oriented social sciences
  - Wenner-Gren: anthropological theory
  - Fulbright-Hays: area studies beyond Western world, LCTLs

- Avoid citing many secondary sources outside your lit review
METHODS

- Amount of detail depends on the specific grant

- Link methods explicitly to research questions
  - Why is a particular method the best way to answer a particular question?

- Address feasibility
  - Think carefully about time frame, personal skillset, environment, any likely obstacles (e.g., internet access)

- Methods sections often include timelines
  - e.g., “From January to March, I will conduct fifteen semi-structured interviews with . . .”
  - “The first phase of my project . . .”

- Strong, active verbs of intent especially important here
Coursework
- What kinds of courses have you taken (theory, methods, etc.)?
- How has coursework prepared you for this specific research project?

Previous research on topic
- When and where have you been for previous research related to this project?
- What did you learn?
- How will you build on these previous experiences?

In-country contacts and affiliations
- Name names if you can

Language training (if applicable)
- “I have a high-advanced proficiency in Mandarin”
- What can you do with your language?
CONCLUSIONS AND BROADER IMPACTS

- Re-address the importance of the project

- How is your project innovative?

- Re-emphasize your merits and connect the grant to your future goals:
  - “I will do X, Y, and Z upon finishing my studies or after the grant period”

- State the impacts of the grant on your personal/professional trajectory

- Note impacts on the mission of the funder and also on your field and scholarship more broadly
  - What is important depends in large part on the funder and its goals
FEEDBACK

- Circulate your proposal for feedback
  - ADVISORS, colleagues, friends, GGC, past winners of this fellowship
  - Choose readers in accordance with particular grant (e.g., NSF vs. Fulbright)
  - Account for lots of time to review longer proposals (especially during summer)
- Try explaining to others (orally) what the project will accomplish and why it’s important
- Remember: critical feedback is good feedback
- Write and re-write based on the various critiques you receive
HOW THE GRADGRANTS CENTER CAN HELP

- In-person appointments
  - Email gradgrnt@indiana.edu
  - Provide GGC with draft materials 48 hours in advance of consultation

- Brainstorming, drafting, editing grant proposals
  - Either in-person or electronically via email or Skype

- Searches for external (non-IU) funding opportunities
WEEKLY WALK-IN HOURS

- 12:00pm to 2:00pm, Tuesdays & Fridays
- Wells Library, Room 544E (5th floor, East Tower)
- Internal and external grants, funding searches, and general questions
Avoiding Common Application Errors
Thursday, March 23, 1:00–2:00pm
Q&A/Walk-in hour, 2:00–3:00pm

Social Science Research Commons
Woodburn 200
CONTACT THE GGC

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