**Audience**

The majority of grant programs recruit academic reviewers with knowledge of the disciplines and/or program areas of the grant. Thus, when writing your grant proposals, assume that you are addressing a colleague who is knowledgeable in the general area, but who does not necessarily know the details about your research questions.

Remember that most readers are lazy and will not respond well to a poorly organized, poorly written, or confusing proposal. Be sure to give readers what they want. Follow all the guidelines for the particular grant you are applying for. This may require you to reframe your project in a different light or language. Reframing your project to fit a specific grant's requirements is a legitimate and necessary part of the process unless it will fundamentally change your project's goals or outcomes.

Final decisions about which proposals are funded often come down to whether the proposal convinces the reviewer that the research project is well planned and feasible and whether the investigators are well qualified to execute it. Throughout the proposal, be as explicit as possible. Predict the questions that the reviewer may have, and answer them. Przeworski and Salomon (1995) note that reviewers read with three questions in mind:

* What are we going to learn as a result of the proposed project that we do not know now? (goals, aims, and outcomes)
* Why is it worth knowing? (significance)
* How will we know that the conclusions are valid? (criteria for success) (2)

Be sure to answer these questions in your proposal. Keep in mind that the reviewer may not read every word of your proposal. She may only read the abstract, the sections on research design and methodology, the vitae, and the budget. Make these sections as clear and straight forward as possible.

Style

The way you write your grant will tell the reviewers a lot about you (Reif-Lehrer 82). From reading your proposal, the reviewers will form an idea of who you are as a scholar, researcher, and as a person. They will decide whether you are creative, logical, analytical, up-to-date in the relevant literature of the field, and, most importantly, capable of executing the proposed project. Allow your discipline and its conventions to determine the general style of your writing, but allow your own voice (and personality) to come through. Be sure to clarify your project's theoretical orientation.

Because most proposal writers seek funding from several different agencies or granting programs, it is a good idea to begin by developing a general grant proposal and budget. This general proposal is sometimes called a "white paper." Your general proposal should explain your project to a general academic audience. Before you submit proposals to different grant programs, you will tailor a specific proposal to their guidelines and priorities.

**Organizing Your Proposal**

Although each funding agency will have its own (usually very specific) requirements, there are several elements of a proposal that are fairly standard and they often come in the following order:

* Title Page
* Abstract
* Introduction
* Literature Review
* Project Narrative
* Personnel
* [Budget and Budget Justification](http://www.uwgb.edu/research/developing/budget.asp)
* Timeframe

Format the proposal so that it is easy to read. Use headings to break the proposal up into sections. If it is long, include a table to contents with page numbers.

**Title Page:** The title page usually includes a brief (yet explicit) title for the research project, the names of the principle investigator(s), the institutional affiliation of the applicants (the department and university), name and address of the granting agency, project dates, amount of funding requested, and signatures of university personnel authorizing the proposal (when necessary). Most funding agencies have specific requirements for the title page; make sure to follow them.

**Abstract:** The abstract provides readers with their first impression of your project. To remind themselves of your proposal, readers may glance at your abstract when making their final recommendations, so it may also serve as their last impression of your project. The abstract should explain the key elements of your research project in the future tense. Most abstracts state: (1) the general purpose, (2) specific goals, (3) research design, (4) methods, and (5) significance (contribution and rationale). Be as explicit as possible in your abstract. Use statements such as, "The objective of this study is to..."

**Introduction:** The introduction should cover the key elements of your proposal, including a statement of the problem, the purpose of research, research goals or objectives, and significance of the research. The statement of problem should provide a background and rationale for the project and establish the need and relevance of the research. How is your project different from previous research on the same topic? Will you be using new methodologies or covering new theoretical territory? The research goals or objectives should identify the anticipated outcomes of the research and should match up to the needs identified in the statement of problem. List only the principle goal(s) or objective(s) of your research and save sub-objectives for the project narrative.

**Literature Review:** Many proposals require a literature review. Reviewers want to know whether you've done the necessary preliminary research to undertake your project. Literature reviews should be selective and critical, not exhaustive. Reviewers want to see your evaluation of pertinent works. For more information, see this [handout on literature reviews](http://writingcenter.unc.edu/handouts/literature-reviews/).

**Project Narrative:** The project narrative provides the meat of your proposal and may require several subsections. The project narrative should supply all the details of the project, including a detailed statement of problem, research objectives or goals, hypotheses, methods, procedures, outcomes or deliverables, and evaluation and dissemination of the research.

For the project narrative, pre-empt and/or answer all of the reviewers' questions. Don't leave them wondering about anything. For example, if you propose to conduct unstructured interviews with open-ended questions, be sure you've explained why this methodology is best suited to the specific research questions in your proposal. Or, if you're using item response theory rather than classical test theory to verify the validity of your survey instrument, explain the advantages of this innovative methodology. Or, if you need to travel to Valdez, Alaska to access historical archives at the Valdez Museum, make it clear what documents you hope to find and why they are relevant to your historical novel on the '98ers in the Alaskan Gold Rush.

Clearly and explicitly state the connections between your research objectives, research questions, hypotheses, methodologies, and outcomes. As the requirements for a strong project narrative vary widely by discipline, consult a discipline-specific guide to grant writing for some additional advice.

**Personnel:** Explain staffing requirements in detail and make sure that staffing makes sense. Be very explicit about the skill sets of the personnel already in place (you will probably include their Curriculum Vitae as part of the proposal). Explain the necessary skill sets and functions of personnel you will recruit. To minimize expenses, phase out personnel who are not relevant to later phases of a project.

**Budget:** See [budget development](http://www.uwgb.edu/research/developing/budget.asp).

**Timeframe:** Explain the timeframe for the research project in some detail. When will you begin (and complete) each step? It may be helpful to reviewers if you present a visual version of your timeline. For less complicated research, a table summarizing the timeline for the project will help reviewers understand and evaluate the planning and feasibility. Example below:

|  |  |
| --- | --- |
| Exploratory Research | Completed |
| Proposal Development | Completed |
| Ph.D. qualifying exams | Completed |
| Research Proposal Defense | Completed |
| Fieldwork in Rwanda | Oct. 2010 - Dec. 2010 |
| Data Analysis and Transcription | Jan. 2011 - March 2011 |
| Writing of Draft Chapters | March 2011 - Sept. 2011 |
| Revision | Oct. 2011 - Feb. 2012 |
| Dissertation Defense | April 2012 |
| Final Approval and Completion | May 2012 |

For multi-year research proposals with numerous procedures and a large staff, a time line diagram can help clarify the feasibility and planning of the study. Example below:



**Revising your Proposal**

Strong grant proposals take a long time to develop. Hopefully, you will have started the process early and will have time to get feedback from several readers on different drafts. Seek out a variety of readers, both specialists in your research area and non-specialist colleagues. You may also want to seek out assistance from knowledgeable readers on specific areas of your proposal. For example, you may want to schedule a meeting with a statistician to help revise your methodology section. Don't hesitate to seek out specialized assistance from the IFR.

In your revision and editing, ask your readers to give careful consideration to whether you've made explicit the connections between your research objectives and methodology.

* Have you presented a compelling case?
* Have you made your hypotheses explicit?
* Does your project seem feasible? Is it overly ambitious? Does it have other weaknesses?
* Have you stated the means that grantors can use to evaluate the success of your project after you've executed it?

If a granting agency lists particular criteria used for rating and evaluating proposals, be sure to share these with your own reviewers.

Resources