

## **Best practice in preparing a grant application**

Writing a grant application is a complicated task and the area of a fierce competition for funding. It is crucial to submit a strong proposal the first time round. Below, we offer some general recommendations and tips on submitting, writing style and presentation.

### **Get prepared**

- Guidelines: each funder will have specific criteria for specific schemes. Ensure that you are aware of the generic and scheme specific application requirements and process.
- Assessment criteria: check the assessment criteria carefully to ensure that you can meet all of the criteria before investing significant time in developing the proposal.
- Eligibility criteria: check that the Institute (and collaborating institutions) are eligible for the scheme.
- Registration: establish the funder's application process and identify/complete any pre-submission registration requirements for online submission.
- Timelines: develop a feasible timeline with draft application deadlines. Be realistic about the time it can take to write and revise the application.

### **Content of the proposal**

You will need to describe the proposed research, stating its significance and how it will be conducted.

- Show that you have thought the proposal through and explain how it will succeed.
- Remember that the reviewers may not be an expert in your research area.
- Always keep in mind the published criteria that the reviewers will use to score.

A good research proposal will:

- Formulate the problem to be addressed
- Clearly state the aims and objectives
- Have a clear work plan
- Describe appropriate research design and methods
- Outline plans for data collection, storage and analysis
- Justify all requested resources
- Highlight potential users and user engagement
- Show that you have considered ethical issues
- Cite all key publications
- Outline a dissemination strategy
- Convey your skills, competencies and genuine interest and understanding
- Address any potential difficulties and the ways you will deal with them (called risk management)

It's highly recommended to take a look at the reviewer's assessment scorecard to better understand eligibility criteria before developing a project idea and submitting it. Remember that, reviewers are generally asked to consider:

- Research quality and originality
- Timeliness and context
- Aims and objectives and their linkage to methodology
- Methods (different to methodology but must link)
- Follow up and dissemination of results
- Impact on the stakeholder including the user community, local/regional community, industry, policymakers

- Planning and project management
- Ability of investigator to run the project
- Value for money

### **Writing tips**

To succeed in peer review, you must win over the assigned reviewers. The following tips will help you write and organize your application so that the reviewers can readily grasp what you are proposing.

- Use plain English. Always describe your research in terms that are easily understood by peer reviewers who might not be an expert in your research area. Include enough background information to enable them to understand your proposed work, but be clear and concise.
- Think like a reviewer. Since most funders impose a word count and ask that materials are organized in a particular format, reviewers become accustomed to finding information in specific sections of the application. They must often read many applications in great detail and form an opinion about each, so organizing your application to effortlessly guide them through it will give you a better chance at being successful. Make a good impression by submitting a clear, well-written, properly organized application. Identify weak links in your application so the application you submit is solid, making a strong case for your project.
- Make one point in each paragraph. This is key for readability. Write simple, clear sentences.
- Have a realistic budget. Before you start writing the application, think about the budget and how it is related to your research plan. Remember that everything in the budget must be justified by the work you propose to do.
- Be realistic. Don't propose more work than can be reasonably done during the proposed project period. Make sure that the personnel has appropriate scientific expertise and training.
- Why this project? You must capture the reviewers' attention by making the case for why they should fund your research rather than one of the other bids competing for the limited money available. Explicitly tell reviewers why testing your hypothesis is worth their money, why you are the person to do it, and how Sheffield will give you the required support to get it done. Where possible, say how your research project fits within the funder's mission and vision.
- Be convincing. Use the active, rather than passive, voice. For example, write "We will develop an experiment," not "An experiment will be developed". Make your points as directly as possible.
- Be clear and don't waffle. Be clear and concise, and use sub-headings, short paragraphs, bullets and numbered lists and bold print to make the application as easy to navigate and read as possible. Be specific and informative, and avoid redundancies. Use diagrams, figures and tables, and include appropriate legends, to help the reviewers to understand complex information.

### **Pre-submission tips**

- Allow sufficient time to put the completed application aside, and then edit it from a fresh vantage point.
- Ask colleagues within and outside of your department to review and comment on your proposals. The clarity and ability to convey your research to non-specialists is crucial. The application should be easy to understand by all. Some schemes use your ability to convey science in simple language as an assessment criterion. A non-specialist view will help to pick out areas that may not be well explained, but which you and colleagues do not identify due to your closeness to the subject.
- Be sure to leave yourself sufficient time to learn and complete any online submission system