

Value of Collaborating

“Go to conferences and professional meetings as much as you can – this is how you get ideas and meet collaborators.”

“Establishing and maintaining productive collaborations has been totally critical for success. This may not be as important for humanities people, but in a lot of cases I think grants can benefit greatly from being collaborative. In writing grants and brainstorming ideas/structure, meeting with these people in person is most effective, though frequent phone calls can work too. I have also been successful doing smaller grants/projects with these collaborators initially, which provide good preliminary data for a larger grant.”

Conceptualizing the Proposal

“Give yourself time to conduct the research for the proposal, draft the proposal and have the proposal reviewed by experts and non-experts. Approach grant writing like any other project/major task. Create a reasonable timeline.”

“Start writing as early as possible. This gives you more time to refine it and get feedback. Read the RFP carefully and make sure to address all that is important in it”

“Have part of the work you are proposing already done. The fact that you’ve already completed the initial steps in the work makes it much easier to describe and explain the details of what you are proposing to do.”

“Collaborate – nothing is better than having somebody you have to respond to by a certain deadline. If working with collaborators who are far away, work first separately but then schedule a three hour zoom meeting – nothing beats face to face editing of proposals.”

“Make sure your proposal has a good idea in it that makes it stand out from the pack.”

Two things matter initially: 1) A good, cutting edge idea; and 2) Fit with the [sponsor]” ... “[its] really about the idea and [you].” ... “I was also turned down 3 times previously by foundations for the same project. So again, fit, fit, fit.”

“Make sure that your proposal matches what is required exactly. If possible, look at other past successful projects or proposals that the funders have funded.”

“Talk to others who have gotten funded for the same grant type you'd like to apply for. Ask if they'd be willing to share their successful proposals.”

A Proposal is a Sales Pitch

“Remember that you are selling an idea! You need to produce evidence that your idea makes total data driven sense. In other words, you need to demonstrate there is a burning platform and your proposal is a way through it.”

“You are selling yourself as the right person to do the proposed project. Take on the persona of a sage professional - as opposed to a snake charmer.”

“You are selling your team. Convince reviewers you have assembled just the right group of collaborators.”

Crafting Compelling Proposals

“For Project Summaries and Letters of Intent, it is critical “to crisply describe [the] project, paying close attention to really answering the prompt questions.”

“For social scientists, make sure the research question is grounded in the literature—consider, how will said research question resolve a broader puzzle or theoretical gap? Ensure alignment between research question, theoretical framework, methods, and analysis.”

“Ensure that every choice (from the research question, theoretical framework, research design, analysis and data representation) is justified. If you can’t justify any aspect of the proposal, is it needed?”

“If I think that my proposal is lacking some detail, it is very likely that the reviewers will see that too – so ... address all the details and answer all the questions that pop into your mind as you are writing the proposal.”

“Never underestimate the importance of a well-organized proposal. All of my first drafts of the proposal were in outline form, and this made it easier to do the budget (since there were different objectives, costing different amounts, for each part of the proposal). There are definitely different ways to organize things, but if you make it as clear to the reviewer as possible, it can really help. I had three parts to my proposal and this made it easier for my collaborator to write one section and the accompanying budget/budget justification.”

“Developing a reasonable budget/scope-- this can be tricky. I have a tendency to short-change myself, so taking good advice from my SRO to give myself enough money to actually accomplish what I have to do is good. In serving on the grant panel at NSF, I NEVER remember somebody saying "that seems too expensive" and in fact we were not instructed to really look at the budget, just the science. I guess I would say if the science (=project) is good enough, the budget should be worth it”

“Make sure that everything in your budget is clearly tied to every part of your proposal, and vice-versa. In other words, your proposal should be very cohesive from prose to budget.”

“[In serving on a NSF panel,] I essentially got the message that following the directions was very important and that they considered both/all parts of the grant when making decisions!”

Using language strategically

“Write in very plain terms, free of academic jargon if possible. At least for the social sciences, reviewers may not be an expert in your field/discipline/topic. In short, write for a non-expert; this keeps your proposal accessible to all readers.”

“Write plainly and in a straightforward manner. Avoid jargon and define terms that are field-specific.”

Improving as a Grant Writer

“Remember that writing a proposal is also an opportunity to get clearer about what it is you want to study and how, regardless of whether you get funded or not. So even if you don't get funded, you will have moved forward in your work!”

“Volunteer to be on a grant review panel (esp. NSF).”

“Get feedback on your proposal from others with grants or Program Officers.”

“Workshop your proposal and encourage colleagues to really rip into your ideas (including their assumptions!)—this isn't easy but its a great way to strengthen/tighten up your ideas”

“Have people read your proposal who are outside of your field – you will most likely be writing for grants to people who are not knowledgeable about your field. Your outside reader can tell you if they don't understand what you are writing about or if you are using too much jargon.”

Contacting the Program Officer

“You should never be afraid to contact the granting agency / grant officer. Grant officers are humans, too! Give a call, give a quick pitch, and often they'll tell you if it's a good fit or something they'd be interested in, or, if it's not for them. Never hurts to chat, get in a few words about who you are and what you're doing, etc. Sometimes you meet these folks at conferences. Sometimes these conversations lead to revised or amended or future RFPs being issued that make your topic/area part of the deal! And in a best case scenario, sometimes these conversations can lead to direct-funding opportunities or “off schedule” proposals.”

Persistence

“If you do not get funded, don't fret. If possible, learn what you can from the experiences, and keep going and look elsewhere!”

“When I was a junior faculty member, somebody said: “Before I had my first grant funded, I could have wallpapered my office with rejection letters.” This was a good perspective for me to remember. Acknowledge the rejection, learn from feedback, and move on!”