

Writing Scholarship Applications

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Acknowledgement: Much of the information contained
in this document was adapted from a presentation by
[Dr. Robert Porter](#) author of *[Why Academics Have a
Hard Time Writing Good Grant Proposals](#)*

Scholarship Writing is NOT the same as Academic Writing

Academic Writing

Past oriented:

Work you have done

Expository:

Explaining to reader

Impersonal:

Objective, dispassionate

Verbosity rewarded:

Few length constraints

Specialized Terminology:

“Insider jargon”

Scholarship Writing

Future oriented:

Work you wish to do

Persuasive:

“Sell” the reader

Personal:

Convey Excitement

Brevity rewarded:

Strict length constraints

Accessible language:

Broad audience

So what's the problem?...

“The problem makes the proposal.”

- ✓ An important need or issue that should be addressed
- ✓ A gap between where we are now and where we could be
- ✓ A limitation of current knowledge or way of doing things

It's also an opportunity...

- ✓ A fresh idea that can advance our understanding or address a societal need
- ✓ A refinement that improves efficiency or lowers the cost of goods and/or services
- ✓ A new paradigm that reshapes our thinking or way of doing things

What makes a proposal competitive?

- ✓ Significance (important area of research)
- ✓ Original approach
- ✓ Strong likelihood of success, i.e., will make a significant contribution to the field
- ✓ Knowledge in the discipline
- ✓ Knowledge of essential methodology
- ✓ Succinct, logical and focused project plan
- ✓ Realistic amount of work
- ✓ Sufficient detail

Reasons for Failure

1. Lack of original ideas
2. Diffuse, unfocused or superficial Research Plan
3. Lack of knowledge of relevant published work
4. Lack of knowledge in essential methodology
5. Uncertainty concerning future directions
6. Questionable reasoning in experimental approach
7. Absence of acceptable scientific rationale
8. Unrealistically large amount of work
9. Lack of sufficient experimental detail
10. Uncritical approach

Consider the Reviewer...

- Most competitive programs utilize review panels
- The more competitive the program, the more reviewer(s) will look for reasons to reject proposals

Success = Good Ideas - Mistakes

- There is plenty of evidence to show that good ideas are often undermined by mistakes in proposal preparation
- The following are some common proposal mistakes and strategies to avoid them

How to Start If You Don't Know Where to Start

- What are you passionate about?
- What is the problem (and why is it important)?
- How is existing knowledge or practice inadequate?
- Why is your idea better?
- How is it new, unique, different?
- What will it contribute and who will benefit from it?

Structure the Proposal

(Mistake: Poor organization)

Always follow the format provided by the sponsor! Where none is provided, build your case in distinct sections:

- I. Problem Statement; or Significance of the Research
- II. Project Purpose (Overall goal + Specific objectives)
NB: Cite “fit” with program objectives!
- I. Research Design; or Workplan (Activities + Timelines)
- II. Applicant Qualifications and Capabilities
- III. Evaluation Plan; or Expected Outcomes

Appendix (supplementary materials)

Prove the importance of your project (Mistake: Weak Argument)

- State your purpose and case for need up front; build a compelling argument
- Think “Sales” not academic journal
- Cite an authoritative source(s)

Start with the Pitch: Sell Your Idea!

I. Set the Stage – Lay Out the Problem (*“Who Cares?”*)

- A. Get the reviewer interested at the outset
- B. Identify the importance—stress the need
- C. Summarize the state of the art
- D. Describe technical challenges to solving the problem and potential benefits

II. State the theme – Your Solution

- E. Describe the concept and establish credibility
- F. Describe your project’s fundamental purpose

III. Create a Vision (*“So What?”*)

- G. Show how your work will advance the field
- H. Envision the world with the problem solved

This “pitch” should be the opening of the proposal’s very first section

Assume an uninformed but intelligent reader

(Mistake: Using Jargon)

- Use clear, accessible language
- Stick with direct statements and active voice
- Avoid insider jargon and acronyms

Passive vs. Active Voice

- *It has been demonstrated by research that...*
- *The SAP program is being implemented by our department...*
- *Following administration of the third dosage, measurements will be taken...*
- *Research shows clearly that...*
- *Our department launched SAP this year...*
- *After dosage 3, we will measure...*

Formulate specific, measurable objectives

(Mistake: Murky goals & objectives)

Goal: General statement of the project's overall purpose(s)

“Our aim with this innovative curriculum is to improve”

Objective: A specific, measurable outcome or milestone

Illustrate the Project concept and the work plan

(Mistake: Unclear project description and work plan)

If you can, use illustrations/charts...

- 1) Visualize the overall project with a drawing
- 2) Specify major tasks and timelines; use Gantt charts, calendars or flow charts

If you can't use illustrations/charts, ensure that you describe the research methods clearly

Follow application instructions exactly! (Mistake: Deviating from guidelines)

- Common sins:
 - Late submission
 - Narrative too long
 - Fonts, margins, spacing too small

Pay attention to all review criteria (Mistake: Ignoring review criteria)

- Read evaluation criteria carefully; then reference them in the project description
- Touch all the bases – not just the ones you are comfortable with

Reviewers will use the criteria to “score” your proposal

Polish the summary (If applicable) (Mistake: Weak abstract)

- Written last, but read first by reviewers
- Must be an intriguing “first advertisement”
- Should reflect entire scope of project
- Summarizes project purpose and methods
- Must convey:
 - **What researcher intends to do**
 - **Why it’s important**
 - **Expected outcome(s)**
 - **How work will be accomplished**
- Has to be both CONCISE and COMPLETE!

This may be the only part that some reviewers will read

Presubmission Review

(Mistake: Writing solo)

- Ask colleagues and your supervisor for comments and suggestions – consider asking others not familiar with your research (roommate, mother, etc) to read it and provide suggestions
- At least one reviewer should be qualified to critique the scholarly content
- Check your ego at the door
- Allow time for rewrites!

Use proofreaders

(Mistake: Document errors)

- Find an eagle eye perfectionist
- Proofreaders read for form, not content
- Must be someone who has no stake in the project!
- Learn to love what s/he will do for you
- Zero tolerance – no error is too small to correct
- Root out inconsistencies in format as well as typos, misspellings, grammar, etc.

Write, rewrite & rewrite (Mistake: Insufficient editing)

- Most winning proposals have been polished repeatedly
- Let it rest in between; sleep on every rewrite
- Fight the evil Pride of Authorship
- Must allow time!

More Writing Tips - Scholarships

- Avoid jargon - must be accessible to fields other than education
- Avoid acronyms
- Write in the present tense if possible
- Be clear and direct
- Write a concrete realizable plan –convince the reviewers that you are a good bet to get the research done
- Don't be shy about your talents or accomplishments - advocate for yourself and your research
- Consider using white space, headers –make it easy to read

Try to...

- use a “catchy” beginning –what is the problem?
- Replace words that appear “tentative” with words that show “confidence”
- Include a solid final statement –how will your research contribute.
- Make it easy to read -Paragraph breaks and white space
- Make the reviewer want to read it..

More Tips

- Use appropriate sentence structure, good grammar, correct spelling
- Ensure your literature review is appropriate
- Use proper citations
- Make sure the whole application is cohesive
- Can someone outside of your area of research understand what you intend to do and why?
- Are you leaving out important details?
- Think about the reviewer

Final Tips for Research Success...

- Find a mentor(s)
- Read successful applications; attend workshops
- Find collaborators; network
- Get funding alerts; conduct your own searches regularly. See [Pivot](#)
- Think big, think small, think different
- Submit, revise & resubmit! Don't give up!

Help With Your Application

- Binder of successful applications in the [Research Office](#)
- Send your reasonably final draft to [Karen Kueneman](#) in the Research Office for feedback.
- “Consult the Experts” (School of Graduate and Postdoctoral Studies) Sessions – all dates will be on the [Graduate Student Research Blog](#)