CAREERS

It takes time and a team to win grants

Start and finish early, seek feedback and file before deadline, says Ingrid Eisenstadter.

In the 25 years that I have been director of grants for a small family foundation that supports scientific research, I have reviewed a few thousand grant proposals. All our applicants are people who were bright enough to get PhDs and MDs, but the proposals we receive tend to share the same flaws, whether they come from recent graduates or from researchers with years of experience.

Applicants often submit proposals in which the research protocol is insufficiently planned or explained. The language is sometimes too technical for reviewers who do not specialize in that discipline. The proposal text can be wordy or fails to convey the study's novelty or urgency. These problems inevitably result from applicants' failure to allow themselves enough time to write the proposal and to circulate it to colleagues, advisers and department heads for feedback. This pattern is repeated twice a year, every year, when our submission deadlines approach.

I am also amazed anew each time to find that most of our grant-seekers wait until five minutes to midnight to meet our published deadlines. Yes, we circulate and read last-minute applications, but we have less time to ask for clarification or extra information in this flood tide because the clock is ticking for our next board meeting. And foundations always get more good proposals than they can fund.

ALLOW ENOUGH TIME

Scientists cannot plan their protocols for hypotheses, goals, controls, methodologies and analyses and then write, edit, proofread, copy-edit, chart, graph and lay out their work effectively and error-free without input from colleagues. If your institution does not have an internal review process, then you are already at a disadvantage in the heated competition for funding and should take the initiative and ask your co-workers to critique your efforts. This means finishing your draft well in advance of submission dates. You need to give yourself enough time to polish your proposal — and to get useful, meaningful input on it. Two months ahead may not be too early.

Scientists are not trained as writers, and their applications would often benefit from editing. Although the proposals we receive do not usually contain vocabulary or grammatical errors, they are frequently repetitive. Often, the very point of the research is deeply buried in the proposal and does not emerge until well after a lengthy discussion of the background, when it should appear in a brief introduction or a summary at the top of the document. I also find with surprising frequency that important information — the current population of an endangered species, for example, or why a species should be studied at all — is missing, either because applicants think "everyone knows that", or because details are lost when the focus is on the big picture. Do not make this mistake — it results from being too close to your own work to read it objectively, and you can avoid it by seeking comment and by scheduling enough time into the process to let the
proposals that seek less rather than more may be missed. If your research will facilitate other uses for the data generated by your research, or if it will lead to the development of new technologies, you should point this out in your proposal. Subheads are an important navigation tool created by the grant-giver, consider adding subheads to emphasize your proposal’s strengths and urgency. Some grant-givers have such a strict set of questions that there is little opportunity to explain the goal or necessity of your work. If so, add an ‘introduction’ subhead to bring out these points, and if you keep the accompanying text to a few sentences that enable you to address the issue missing from the one-size-fits-all questionnaire, you may not get into trouble.

ILLUSTRATE WELL

Similarly, photos, charts and graphs should highlight and emphasize the importance and significance of your work. Now that technology has facilitated the use of photos in grant proposals, we are seeing them more often. If you plan to use them, remember that they should be informational, not decorative. You also need to remember that evaluators will look at photos, charts, graphs and their captions before they read the text on that page, so captions should underscore the significance of the work.

It is also important to explain the future ramifications of your research after you complete the current phase for which you are seeking funding. That information is often missing. If your research will facilitate others’ investigations, or will continue in some other way to ripple in the water, then say so, whether your proposed research programme is basic or applied. Do not leave the evaluators of your proposal to have to figure this out.

Most of the researchers and institutions that we have funded end all communication with us when we get their final reports. But every now and again, wise researchers send us copies of their publications as the years pass, along with a note that explains the relevance of the studies to the earlier work that we funded. This practice boosts your chances of success should you ever want to seek funding again. It is also the courteous thing to do.

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