SIX CRITICAL QUESTIONS
to Launch a Successful Grant Proposal

By Robert Porter

Pre-abstract

This article describes a practical exercise that proposal writers can use to create a mental outline of the key points that grant reviewers will look for in the early sections of the document, especially on the first page. The principal purpose of the exercise is to break out of the habits and patterns that researchers typically employ when writing their academic papers, and to begin their proposal writing by adopting a style more appropriate to the world of competitive grant proposals. Answers to the six critical questions can also be used to construct a pre-abstract which could be used to obtain early feedback from colleagues and to start a dialogue with grant program officers.

Introduction

When starting to write a grant proposal, researchers are prone to lapse into the same mindset and writing habits they employ when writing an academic paper. This can be risky, as the writing style that works best for competitive grant proposals differs somewhat from the preferred styles of most academic journals.[1] One core difference centers on the *expository* rhetoric of traditional academic prose, language intended to explain to the reader what the writer has accomplished and how s/he thinks, as opposed to the *persuasive* rhetoric typical of most successful grant proposals, writing intended to sell the proposed research to skeptical reviewers and convince them that the project is worthy of funding.

A warm up exercise

To start off on the right foot, it is essential for the writer to recognize that grant reviewers are impatient readers who expect to see answers to fundamental questions on the very first page of the proposal. Some will admit they prefer to see those answers in the proposal's pre-abstract.[2,3] Before starting on the actual proposal, therefore, the writer is well advised to dwell on six critical questions, the answers to which can provide strong guidance as to the proper tone, content, and structure of the final document.

For the past twelve years, the author has employed these questions in grant writing workshops throughout the US and internationally, with uniformly positive results. It starts with the strong advice for workshop participants to come up with concise, convincing answers to six questions **before they decide to write their proposals**. The exercise is simple: Participants are given time to write answers to the following questions:

1. *What are you passionate about, i. e., where do you think you can make a uniquely significant contribution to your field?*

2. *What is the need, problem, or issue you want to address and why is it important?*

3. *If present knowledge or practice is inadequate, why do we need to know more and do better?*

4. *In what sense is your idea innovative, i.e., how does it differ from what has already been done?*

5. *What makes you think your idea or approach will have better outcomes?*

6. *What will your research contribute and who will benefit from it?*

Once the writer is satisfied with answers to all six questions, s/he will be in a much stronger position to begin serious work on the proposal, for the following reasons: 1) The mental perspective has shifted, highlighting key "selling points" that must be introduced quickly in the proposal, then expanded systematically throughout the document; 2) By melding the answers into a coherent paragraph or two, the grant writer now has a talking paper, or pre-abstract, that can be used to test the inherent strength of the core concept with knowledgeable colleagues, and more importantly, to test the idea for possible fit with targeted grant programs. Note: These two *working steps* must be done before the researcher actually decides to begin *writing* the proposal, as feedback from colleagues and grant program officers is likely to change the researcher's mind about the research design, which program(s) to submit to, the best funding mechanisms, or whether to write the proposal at all.

Import of the six questions

The following discussion treats the import of each question, and how each contributes to creating the proper mental framework from which to begin writing a strong proposal.

1. What are you passionate about?

Unlike the dry, dispassionate tone of most academic papers, strong grant proposals typically convey the excitement and personal commitment of the researcher toward the proposed project. The grant writer's aim: To transfer that same sense of excitement to the grant reviewers, two or three folks whose comments set the tone for the rest of the review panel. To illustrate the point, it is instructive to look at the NIH peer review video and note how often the panel chair asks reviewers about their level of "enthusiasm" for the proposal at hand.[4] Many successful proposal writers use the first person liberally; one sees "I" and "we" quite frequently in their writing. Adjectives such as "ambitious", "exciting" and "unprecedented" lend a confident tone to the proposal, and are consciously designed to stir a similar reaction with reviewers. In short, a writing style that is discouraged, even forbidden by academic journals can contribute to success in the competitive peer review of grant proposals.

2. What is the need, problem, or issue you want to address and why is it important?

As competition intensifies and budgets flatten for many grant programs, reviewers experience an ever stronger need to be convinced that the proposed research needs to be done, that it addresses a recognized problem, and there is a sense of urgency to find a solution, or to move out in an entirely new direction. It is simply not sufficient to note that "little research has been done" in a given area—perhaps there are very good reasons for the lack of scholarly interest. To answer this question, the grant writer must present a convincing scholarly argument that the research is focused on matters of importance to the discipline, or that it will help us to know more and do better about a significant problem or issue. For most reviewers, the issue of significance is primary, and serves as the gatekeeper question for the rest of the proposal. A weak argument here can doom the entire effort.

3. If present knowledge or practice is inadequate, why do we need to know more and do better?

Here the writer must present the case for discovery, for moving ahead, advancing the cause, and carving new pathways. A researcher's gut sense of dissatisfaction with the status quo can be a strong springboard for a robust research idea. First, the writer must specify precisely how and why present knowledge is inadequate to the task, while convincing the reviewer that the researcher's new and unique approach has a strong chance to do better.

4. In what sense is your idea innovative, i. e., how does it differ from what has already been done?

All grant programs stress innovation as a key criterion for success, but it is not enough for the writer to claim uniqueness; s/he must specify the dimensions of creativity in concrete terms that distinguish the proposed project from past practices.

5. What makes you think your idea or approach will have better outcomes?

Although reviewers seek creativity, they also habitually avoid risk, i. e., they are rightly concerned about a project's likelihood of success, and will turn thumbs down on a project whose outcomes are in doubt. This places a burden on the writer to provide assurance that the proposed project is feasible and very likely to accomplish its stated goals and objectives. The easiest way to do this is to cite any evidence researchers have to indicate they are on the right track. Published citations provide the strongest evidence, but any preliminary results can make the case, especially if they grow out of a line of research that has a history, showing the proposed project is building on what has already been accomplished. The key here is for the writer to display a justified confidence in the strength of the research design and its likely outcomes.

6. What will your research contribute and who will benefit from it?

Academics new to sponsored research can make the mistake of thinking that grant programs exist to make them successful, that winning awards will enable them to enhance their professional reputations, attain tenure and work their way up the academic ladder. From a grant writing perspective, however, such a posture is perilous, as it can place too much focus on the researcher's talents and accomplishments, and not enough on what the funder wants to support. What reviewers and funding agencies want to see, clearly spelled out in the pre-abstract and throughout the proposal itself, is precisely how the research project will benefit the grant program, the funding agency, and society as a whole. In recent years, the National

"This exercise helped me make a road map in my brain about my proposal."

— Quote from a researcher attending a grant workshop

Science Foundation and the National Institutes of Health have jointly enshrined this concept by requiring proposals to cite early on how the research will have "benefits to society" (NSF), or to delineate the project's "relevance to public health" (NIH).[5,6] The good news: By adopting a service attitude toward the aims of the funder and the grant program, the proposal is likely to score higher in peer review, and a string of awards will certainly further the writers' academic careers!

Uses of the exercise

It is best for the writer to take several runs at this exercise before putting it to practical use. An answer that looks perfectly clear today can turn muddy when given a few days' rest in a drawer or on a computer drive. Likewise, a blank section today might be filled in easily a few days from now, as the import of the question ripens in the writer's mind. Once the researcher is satisfied with all six answers, two important possibilities present themselves: 1) It is likely the researcher is on to a fundable idea; and 2) s/he is now ready to start working on the proposal. Note the choice of language here: It says the writer is ready to start *working* on the proposal, not *writing* it. But how on earth can one work on a proposal without writing it?

Here the researcher should be reminded that, unlike working alone on an academic paper, grant writing is a team sport; feedback is required every step of the way, from the first expression of the proposal's core theme to its final draft. The more the writer understands how others are reacting to the evolving document, the more able s/he will be to shape the proposal in ways that will gain a favorable review.

Obtaining feedback

Step one: Test the strength of the basic idea with your colleagues, folks steeped in the discipline who can comment knowledgeably on the appeal of the project's scientific or scholarly foundation, its basic thrust, and the logic of the overall approach. Here is an opportunity to take advantage of a singular skill shared by all academics, one that most enjoy exercising— critiquing other people's ideas. Especially valuable are perspectives of folks who have served on review panels. For maximum benefit, the writer should request colleagues to be frank, as their responses to the pre-abstract can be early indicators of how grant reviewers will react to the final proposal. Some key questions: *If you were to read this in a proposal pre-abstract, how would you react to the basic idea?*

Would you look forward to reading the rest of the proposal? What weaknesses do you see? How can I make this first draft stronger? With each critique, the pre-abstract should be rewritten until it incorporates the best of the early feedback.

Step two: Use the revised and polished pre-abstract to start a dialogue with at least one grant program officer, preferably two or three. Here the researcher seeks preliminary responses to a critical question, one that could determine the fate of the final proposal: *How well does this research idea fit what the grant program wants to fund?* Seasoned grant writers know that in addition to strong grant writing abilities, relational skills are key to success in sponsored research, and many assert that they do not start writing a proposal until they have initiated a line of communication with the funding agency.[7,8] Once the conversation has started, answers to the following questions can have a dramatic impact on the tone and structure of the final proposal: *What funding mechanism is best for this idea, considering the present stage of my career? What are some of the reasons proposals are rejected by your review panels? Do you have any suggestions that might improve my chances for success?* Once again, the pre-abstract should be amended to reflect key points from the PO's perspective. If possible, a subsequent face-to-face meeting with the PO while still in the pre-proposal phase can yield even richer results.[9]

Launching the proposal

Assuming that there is sufficient encouragement to proceed, the researcher is now ready to begin writing the proposal itself, and is poised to reap the most important benefits of this preliminary exploration—namely, a starting point that will quickly touch upon critical benchmarks sought by grant reviewers, an outline upon which to expand as the proposal is developed, and most importantly, a final document that is likely to land on the right desk. N

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