the 5 minute mentor
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Quick Tips for Student Success from the Graduate School

Successful Proposal Development:

part one: doing your homework

Proposal writing can make or break a research career, but you don't have to be an expert to be successful at it. Plenty of first-time proposal writers get funded. Still, every institution is trying to be a research university these days, so the competition is fierce. Here's a guide to get you started on the most important part of the proposal process: what you do *before* you start writing.

Proposals represent nothing other than your ability to read and follow instructions. If you can follow instructions and perform basic arithmetic operations, that's all you need to know to get a proposal funded. Of course, you must start with a worthy idea and have personal commitment: energy, attention to detail, dedication to the project, and willingness to see it through to the end.

Elementary Terminology

BAA	Broad agency announcement (for grants and contracts)
RFP	Request for proposals (grants)
RFA	Request for applications (contracts)
PA	Program announcement (grants)

These materials will give you more information about the particular funding opportunity. They should tell you:
- The scope of the work being targeted
- Who's sponsoring the award
- Who's eligible to apply
- How to apply
- General and specific award conditions
- The budget ceiling or award range or specific award amount
- Any special considerations

A **GRANT** is a financial assistance mechanism between a sponsor and a recipient for approved activities. The performance responsibility rests primarily with the recipient.
A **CONTRACT** is an award instrument establishing a binding legal procurement relationship between a sponsor and a recipient, obligating the recipient to furnish a project or service defined in detail, and binding the sponsor to pay for it.
A **COOPERATIVE AGREEMENT** is an award instrument reflecting an assistance relationship between a sponsor and a recipient in which substantial programmatic involvement by the sponsor is anticipated.

Federal agencies will use all three of these funding tools, while non-federal agencies use grants and contracts. From the point of view of the researcher, grants are the preferred method for research because it keeps the research honest. You don't have to meet specific goals that are legally binding. If you don't succeed with a grant, you don't have to give the money back. Researchers love universities because they can do almost anything that piques their interest. Grants allow much of that academic freedom.

Proposal development is expensive in terms of time, money and energy. Actually, most of your work will take place before you start writing. Doing your homework is the most important part of the grant process.

Your homework should start with learning as much about your sponsor as you possibly can. In looking for a sponsor, you can use the "rifle approach" or the "shotgun approach." The rifle approach targets a sponsor with a project that fits their interests and your needs, and if you hit that target, you're good to go. The shotgun approach sends out a stream of proposals, trying to get a hit, but won't necessarily hit a project that you really want to do. You might end up with funding for something you aren't that interested in.

To find potential sponsors and information about them, try the following:
Tap into Community of Science at **cos.com**
Research directories and annual reports
Talk to research administrators and development coordinators, both at UGA and at sponsoring organizations
Read "how-to" materials
Attend proposal-writing workshops
Talk to colleagues who have received grants
Obtain copies of funded proposals and study them

Questions to ask about potential sponsors:
Do they fund in your geographic area?
Do they fund projects like yours?
Do they fund organizations/institutions like yours?
How much money do they usually give? (Find out the range and the average of awards.)

Who really gets funding from them? Do they tend to give support to the same school over and over again?

Questions to ask yourself:
Is my project really needed? Does the literature support it? Does the industry recognize the problem?
Am I (or my institution or organization) capable of this project? Does my institution/organization support this project?
Is my project feasible? In terms of scope and size, are you being realistic about what you can accomplish? Once you've succeeded with a project once, it's easier to gain funding next time because you'll have credibility.

Ways to show that you and your institution are credible

1. Match your needs to your sponsor's funding interests
Absolutely understand what the sponsor wants. If the link between your needs and their interests is loose, pass on this one. It'll lower your credibility with the potential sponsor.

2. Develop a coherent plan
Review successful proposals. Start early. Think about details in advance and think them through. Avoid "red flags" and "feeding frenzies" at all costs. Red flags are items in your proposal that raise a reviewer's suspicion that something is wrong. A feeding frenzy occurs when one reviewer notes a red flag and raises the issue, after which other reviewers are more likely to agree.

3. Use outlines
This will save you considerable time, will reduce the number of drafts you have to create, and will ultimately give you with a more logically structured end product. Never start to write until you're 99.99% happy with your outline.

4. Make sure your project is the right size
Don't bit off too much. Novices should always start small to build credibility, which you can use to get funding for bigger projects later. Use pilot data to your advantage. Plans should be reasonable in scope and realistic. Keep budget requests within the range of funds available.

5. Don't work in a vacuum
Ask your colleagues or major professor to review your proposal. Call for technical advice or assistance. Prior contact is smart: If you have questions, write or call the program officer. Before you contact them, though, request all available materials (RFPs, annual reports). Read these carefully. During the call, ask for clarification, check for feasibility of your own ideas. Arrange for reviews of draft proposals, if allowed. People with prior contact with program officers have a better chance of being funded. ■

Based on the Graduate School seminar "Successful Proposal Development part one: Doing Your Homework," by Regina Smith, Associate Vice President for Research. To view this seminar in full, visit ***http://www.grad.uga.edu***.