Workshop on Writing Competitive Dissertation Grants

Institute for Research on Teaching & Learning (IRTL)

Chris R. Glass · February 24, 2012

Go ahead get out your research paper and start reading the “sample proposal”!
Plan For The Day

✓ 1 Overview of Practical Strategies
✓ 2 Guest Panel (Kris Renn + Mike DeSchryer)
   [Break]
✓ 3 Practice on Sample Proposal
✓ 4 Practice on Own Proposal

Have your proposal out throughout the presentation and make notes directly on it so you can target what you will work on towards the end of this workshop.
Today’s presentation is not just applicable to dissertation grant proposals. It will help you write competitive grant proposals as a faculty member or in positions in non-profit organizations or government agencies.
IRRESISTIBLE IDEA!
CLEAR IDEA + CLEAR ADVANTAGE
edit ruthlessly!

style
The workshop today assumes you have already written a **high-quality research proposal**.

It's sole focus is on how to turn that high-quality research proposal into a **competitive grant proposal**.
Let’s Start With The Good News

YOU ALREADY HAVE A GOOD IDEA!

• You’ve thought about this idea for a long time!
• You’ve received feedback on this idea from faculty in courses, your advisor, and/or others!
• Some of you have already defended (or are close to defending) this idea as a dissertation proposal to some tough critics – experts in your field!
YOU ALREADY HAVE A GOOD IDEA!

...but lots of good ideas

DON’T GET FUNDED.
WHY?

- Sometimes good ideas are never submitted as a grant proposal.

*You miss all the shots you don’t take.*

WAYNE GRETSKY
Why?

- Lots of people have good ideas – there is fierce competition among those who do apply.
WHY?

• Good ideas are not enough – grant writing is the fine art of assembling a persuasive narrative that convinces reviewers to fund your idea, and not other people’s ideas!

“Some appreciate fine art; others appreciate fine wines. I appreciate fine sentences.”

STANLEY FISH in How To Write A Sentence
Good ideas – alone – don’t get funded.

WELL-WRITTEN GRANT PROPOSALS GET FUNDED.
“There is no amount of grantsmanship that will turn a bad idea into a good one, but there are many ways to disguise a good one.”

WILLIAM RAUBFORMER
Deputy Director, National Institutes of Health (NIH)
Grantsmanship is a fine art.

There is a small difference between grant proposals, but those small differences make a big difference. Like any competitive activity, differences exist at the margins.

It requires attention to detail.
Never, Ever Forget

THE REVIEW PROCESS IS REALLY A “PROCESS OF ELIMINATION”

NEVER READ
– bad ideas
– don’t fit agency mission

REVIEWED WITH CAUTION
– extensively pursued ideas
– high risk projects

REVIEWED WITH INTEREST
– proposals that are clear, compelling, creative, distinctive, current
Reviewers DO NOT Read Every Proposal With The Same Level of Interest

READ QUICKLY
scan for general outline and main ideas

SKIM
get the gist; general ideas

READ EXTENSIVELY
develop understanding; spark curiosity

READ INTENSIVELY
close reading; specific detail

NEVER READ
tossed away

ONLY THE PROPOSALS REVIEWERS REALLY READ EVER HAVE A CHANCE TO BE SUCCESSFUL
URBAN LEGENDS
About Successful Grant Proposals

While you want your proposal to “stand out” don’t believe the urban legends about successful grant proposals:

• Only grants that are heavily theoretical with sweeping implications will get funded
• Only grants with lots of interesting ideas will get funded
• Only grants that are entirely original will get funded
INSTEAD THINK OF YOUR PROPOSAL IN ONE OF

3 Basic Paradigms

1. Examines **new topic** with a well-established approach

2. Examines well-established topic with a **new approach**

3. Examines **new topic** with a **new approach**

Knowing which paradigm your proposal reflects will help you know what to emphasize as your proposal’s “obvious relative advantage”
Paradigm 1

• Examines **new topic** with a well-established approach

Most dissertation proposals take this paradigm. The proposal promises to contribute by creating new understanding, which in turn will call for some reconsideration of what has already been done.
THREE BASIC PARADIGMS

Paradigm 2

• Examines well-established topic with a new approach

BE AWARE

You must make a strong argument for the need for new approach without denigrating previous work.
THREE BASIC PARADIGMS

Paradigm 3

• Examines **new topic** with a **new approach**

BE AWARE

By definition, the successful completion of your project will contribute to the field. The burden of this paradigm, however, is arguing why your topic and approach is indeed significant despite neglect by scholars.
What Leads To An “Early Exit”

What leads to an “early exit” from the review process:

- doesn’t fit agency mission
- not sufficiently original or significant idea
- does not follow structure outlined in the request for proposals (RFP)
- misspellings or grammatical errors
What’s The Definition of a “Good Proposal”?

“A good idea, well expressed, with a clear indication of methods for pursuing the idea, evaluating the findings, making them known to all who need to know, and indicating the broader impacts of the activity.”

The National Science Foundation (NSF)
Have Two Things Clear
Before You Start Writing

CLEAR IDEA

CLEAR ADVANTAGE
Have Two Things Clear Before You Start Writing

CLEAR IDEA

IRRESISTABLE IDEA!

CLEAR ADVANTAGE
Have Two Things Clear Before You Start Writing

Brainstorm *several ways* to frame your research, then select the clearest, most exciting way of describing your project and idea.

“The best way to have a good idea is to have lots of ideas.”

LINUS PAULING

Write 1-2 pithy sentences that help someone understand – and get excited about – your proposal.
Have Two Things Clear In Your Mind Before You Start Writing

Be brutally honest: “What will single out my grant application from all of the others under consideration?”

EXAMPLES

- understudied population or pressing issue (Paradigm 1)
- methodology (Paradigm 2)
- potential for dramatic breakthrough (Paradigm 3)

Make sure this advantage stands out throughout your proposal!
“The quality of applications is so high that the difference between getting an award and an honorable mention is paper thin. It makes the review process pretty tough.”

MYLES BOYLAN
Program Officer at the National Science Foundation (NSF)
Know Your “Fit” With The Agency

• know what the agency wants to fund – or is mandated to fund

• consider how your proposal will help the agency achieve it’s mission

• carefully review what the agency has funded in the past
Pick a Model and Study It!

• Review several successful proposals, then pick 1-2 as models for your proposals.
• Study your model proposal(s)
• Make some notes
• Keep your model proposal(s) nearby for easy reference
Most people think they are submitting their proposal to a monolithic funding agency, but you are really submitting your proposal to 2-3 reviewers.
UNDERSTAND THE REVIEW PROCESS FROM

The Reviewer’s Perspective

• Your reviewers are:
  – accomplished, dedicated, knowledgeable, conscientious
  – possibly past recipients of grants from the agency, or associated with it
  – reviewing large stacks of proposals thoroughly and quickly
  – busy, busy, busy
“A typical reviewer will read 50 proposals. It's a long, arduous process. Two reviewers isn't very much, but this is a huge logistical problem.”

MYLES BOYLAN
Program Officer at the National Science Foundation (NSF)
"Remember that most proposals are reviewed by multidisciplinary committees. A reviewer studying a proposal from another field expects the proposer to meet her halfway. After all, the reader probably accepted the committee appointment because of the excitement of surveying other people's ideas…

Continued >>>>
Her only reward is the chance that proposals will provide a lucidly-guided tour of various disciplines' research frontiers... You should avoid jargon as much as you can, and when technical language is really needed, restrict yourself to those new words and technical terms that truly lack equivalents in common language. Also, keep the spotlight on ideas.

Source: The Art of Writing Proposals: Some Candid Suggestions for Applicants by the Social Science Research Council
About Reviewers

• They share your enthusiasm and interest in the research idea.

• They review each proposal in detail.

• They’re all experts in your topic area.

• They’re all familiar with your research methodology.
Questions Every Reviewer Asks

- **EXPERIENCE**: Are you well-positioned to do this project?
- **FEASIBILITY**: Can you do this project in one year with the available resources?
- **WELL-PLANNED**: Is the project itself well-designed and well-planned?
- **DISTINCTIVE APPROACH**: Could just anyone do this your research project?
- **MISSION**: Will the successful completion of the project advance the agency mission?
- **URGENCY + RELEVANCE**: Does the project relate to pressing contemporary social concerns?
- **AMBASADOR**: Do you embody and share agency's goals?
WILL THE REVIEWER THINK

Your Idea Is Worth Spreading?

Reviewers are draw in by intriguing ideas or approaches woven into an integrated, convincing narrative about a project’s potential to advance the agency mission.

http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=RVDfWfUSBIM

June Cohen on What Makes A Great TED Talk (14:00)
“The proposals that are really effective are very integrated. The more you can integrate, the better you are.”

MYLES BOYLAN
Program Officer at the National Science Foundation (NSF)
Your proposal works as a whole and each element should tell one compelling story.

Each part of your proposal should tell one integrated story about you, your project, and advancing the agency mission.
Multiple Materials = 1 Integrated Story
“Frankly, I don't think the transcripts are very important. If you have a 3.4, 3.8, or 3.9 it doesn't really matter. The other evidence is more persuasive. The qualifications of applications is so far beyond basic that the research plan, personal statement, and letters of reference matter more.”

MYLES BOYLAN
Program Officer at the National Science Foundation (NSF)
**Reviewer Evaluation**

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**Dissertation Grant Rating Rubric**

**Section I: Qualifying Criteria**

Reviewers use the criteria below to rate proposals. Answers of “No” in this section may disqualify the application. Items that are “unclear or missing” must be resolved by AIR staff prior to funding but will not stop an application from being fully reviewed and considered.

| Overall, demonstrates a reasonable and defendable research methodology | No |
| Uses required dataset(s) or address NPEC focus: | Yes | Unclear/Missing | No |
| (check all that apply) | Yes | Unclear/Missing | No |
| Addresses the NPEC focus on Beyond Graduation Rates | Yes | Unclear/Missing | No |
| The selected data and variables are appropriate for the proposed research | Yes | Unclear/Missing | No |
| Proposes a “double” project within a one-year timeline | Yes | Unclear/Missing | No |
| Proposes an acceptable plan for disseminating results | Yes | Unclear/Missing | No |
Reviewer Evaluation

Section 3: Funding Recommendation
Should AIR fund this proposal?

- [x] Fund
- [ ] Fund with Minor Revisions
- [ ] Do Not Fund

Section 4: Comments
Reviewer Comments: Please provide specific, constructive comments to help the applicant improve the quality of the proposed research. These comments will be shared with the applicant in the notification letter.
Let’s Practice on a Sample Proposal

The Jack Kent Cooke Dissertation Fellowship Award supports advanced doctoral students who are completing dissertations that further the understanding of the educational pathways and experiences of high-achieving, low-income students.
If you have effectively written of your grant proposal, preparation of the rest of the proposal will flow more naturally.
FROM THE REVIEWER’S PERSPECTIVE

• The reviewer wants to be thorough, but also wants to move quickly and efficiently.

• Your introduction is the most likely section to be read, rather than scanned or skipped.

• The reviewer, often comes to a conclusion about you, the importance of your ideas, and the clarity of your thinking after reading only your first page.
The First Paragraph

- This is your chance to grab the reviewer's attention – *use it!*
- The first paragraph will likely determine whether a reviewer reads your proposal with interest or decides to skim it!
- Overstate, rather than understate, your point or question. You can add the conditions and caveats later!
- It’s a one-way, one-shot communication, so clarity is absolutely essential.
• There’s a lot to integrate into the first sentence. It should:
  – demonstrate relevance to agency mission
  – highlight distinctives of your proposal
  – capture the reviewers imagination, and invites
The first few sentences should state the critical need, i.e. there is a significant issue of concern that the funding agency will address by funding your proposal.
The First Paragraph
START WITH THE “CRITICAL NEED”

• Critical need sentences:
  – **MUST**: include *keywords* that identify what your proposal is about immediately
  – **MUST**: immediately relate to the *mission of the agency*, establish relevance to mission of the agency
  – **MUST NOT**: reiterate knowledge that is obvious to a reviewer
“About 5.5 million children in this country have at least one parent who is an undocumented immigrant.”
“About 5.5 million children in this country have at least one parent who is an undocumented immigrant.”

“Almost half of the 800,000 children of undocumented immigrants transitioning from elementary to junior high each year quickly fall behind because they lack the reading skills necessary to complete their education.”
The First Paragraph

THEN HIGHLIGHT THE “ESSENTIAL KNOWNS”

I

- At this point write for the non-expert

II

- Educate the reviewer with important “knowns” about your topic
  - just enough background to grasp the significance of your proposed study
  - just enough background so it's clear how your work is applicable to the wider world
The First Paragraph

THEN HIGHLIGHT THE “CRITICAL GAPS”

- Highlight gaps that are holding back significant progress
- Emphasize why your project addresses the gaps while advancing the funding agency’s mission
You only get one chance to make a first impression, so send out **two or three different versions** of your opening paragraph to colleagues and friends.

What aspects of *each version* help others understand – get excited about – your proposed project?
The Second Paragraph

YOU HAVE A SOLUTION

- Specific statement of the **objective** for your proposed project
- Make it **impossible** to miss your **research questions** and subquestions
- Make clear linkages to why your proposal **addresses** the critical need identified in the first paragraph and why **you** are well-positioned to address it with this research project.
The goal of this research project is to ensure that all children of undocumented immigrants succeed in reaching sufficient reading proficiency.
SAMPLE PROPOSAL
“The goal of this research project is to ensure that all children of undocumented immigrants succeed in reaching sufficient reading proficiency.”

REVISED EXAMPLE
“My long term goal is to determine the key factors and contexts that predict successful transitions to junior high, in order to advocate for state and local district policies and programs that ensure children of undocumented immigrants achieve their full academic potential.”
SAMPLE PROPOSAL

“My objective is to look and see what the effects of this after-school reading program has on the preparedness of elementary-aged students for junior high.”
edit ruthlessly!

PROJECT OBJECTIVE

SAMPLE PROPOSAL
“My objective is to look and see what the effects of this after-school reading program has on the preparedness of elementary-aged students for junior high.”

REVISED EXAMPLE
“My objective for this project is to determine the key factors and contexts that enable children of undocumented immigrants to develop reading proficiencies to successfully navigate their transition to junior high.”
edit ruthlessly!

**RESEARCH QUESTION**

“In addition to my pilot data and my multilingual background, I have actively engaged in after-school reading programs in the district for the past five years. During this time, I have established strong working relationships with school administrators, teachers, parents, and other after-school reading program volunteers.”

If possible, clearly state why you are distinctly positioned – and well-prepared – to conduct the proposed research project!
PAGE ONE  STRUCTURE

The Third Paragraph

SIGNIFICANCE

• Don’t assume your project's significance will be evident to the reviewer.

• Be explicit about its importance:
  – one sentence statement of the significance from the agency's perspective
  – crisp, credible, specific impacts
• Remember, this isn’t just “any significance”, it's the *significance to the agency, i.e. what will the agency reviewers think is important about your research project?*

• No funding agency has an infinite amount of resources, so they only fund projects they deem to be of **high significance.**
The Third Paragraph

**SIGNIFICANCE**

• You need a simple, direct sentence on why your research project is significant.

• Write this *sentence in italics* – it's one of the most important sentences in your proposal.

• A strong significance statement will *distinguish your proposal*, so it “stands out” from the rest.
edit ruthlessly!

SIGNIFICANCE

SAMPLE PROPOSAL

“This study will improve our understanding of the effects of educational programs and family circumstances on the reading preparedness of children of undocumented immigrants as they transition from elementary to junior high school.”
edit ruthlessly!

SIGNIFICANCE

SAMPLE PROPOSAL

“This study will improve our understanding of the effects of educational programs and family circumstances on the reading preparedness of children of undocumented immigrants as they transition from elementary to junior high school.”

REVISED EXAMPLE

“This study will identify the key factors and contexts that will allow over 400,000 children, whose parents have limited educational opportunities, to overcome these challenging circumstances and excel academically.”
The Third Paragraph

CRISP, CREDIBLE, SPECIFIC IMPACTS

I

• Inform reviewers exactly what they can expect from the *successful completion* of your project.

II

• Identify the specific results you will report.

III

• Assume your project is “wildly successful.” *What happens next? Who's going to care? Who do you want to take notice?*
The Third Paragraph

CRISP, CREDIBLE, SPECIFIC IMPACTS

• Provide **specific examples** of how the completion of your project will contribute to scholarship, educational practice, or public policy.

• **Go beyond** the standard publication, report, or conference presentation—especially think about stakeholders and forms of dissemination that are important to funding agency.
• List conferences, agencies, publications, colleagues who will be informed of the results.

• Name the *stakeholders* you will address or connect with to share your findings, e.g. government agencies? non-profits? academic? communities? What practical artifact of your project will you share with them?
The Third Paragraph

CRISP, CREDIBLE, SPECIFIC IMPACTS

• Avoid generalities:

...study the effects of...
...explore the reasons for...
...better understand why...
...to improve understanding of...
...to focus on the basis for...
...to research the cause of...
“I sat on the social sciences review board this year. The intellectual merit so high in so many cases, that the broader impacts turned out to be pretty important… So what can graduate students really say about broader impacts of their work? You need to think about that.”

MYLES BOYLAN
Program Officer at the National Science Foundation (NSF)
edit ruthlessly!
CRISP, CREDIBLE, SPECIFIC IMPACTS

SAMPLE PROPOSAL
“This research study will not only advance our knowledge about this under-researched population of students, it will inform state and federal policymakers as they write legislation affecting children of undocumented immigrants.”
edit ruthlessly!

CRISP, CREDIBLE, SPECIFIC IMPACTS

SAMPLE PROPOSAL

“This research study will not only advance our knowledge about this under-researched population of students, it will inform state and federal policymakers as they write legislation affecting children of undocumented immigrants.”

REVISED EXAMPLE (RELEVANCE TO AGENCY)

“This study will identify the key factors and contexts that allow children, whose parents have limited educational opportunities, to overcome these challenging socioeconomic circumstances and excel academically.”
REVISED EXAMPLE (RELEVANCE TO STAKEHOLDERS)

“In addition to presenting at national academic conferences, I will submit a 5-page summary report highlighting the projects’ major findings and policy recommendations to key stakeholder groups. Both State Representative Mark Meadows and Jerlean E. Daniel, Executive Director of the National Association for the Education of Young Children, have expressed interest in the findings of my study (see attachments).”
The first person to review your proposal could be using a ruler to measure it! You don't want to get this message:

“Your application has been examined by review staff from [agency] and was judged nonconforming for the following reason: (1) Your application does not conform to the instructions for format as stated in Part II of the [grant application instructions] in that grant applications have conventional border margins of 1.0 inch.”

Remember, the default for left/right margins in Microsoft Word is 1.25” – not the 1” margins most agencies require!
START STRONG

• Position your idea so it has a clear advantage.

• Make your point immediately, crisply, and forcefully.
• Don’t start with something a reviewer for the agency probably already knows!

• Teach them something new, if they learn something really important, that feels urgent, they will want to pass it on.

• The key to success is to engender enthusiasm in the reviewer, who then becomes an advocate for your work!
• Persuade the reviewer that your topic is not just timely in and of itself; research on this topic is an opportunity for insight into some larger, more abiding problem in your field.
NOW IT’S TIME TO ruthlessly edit
THE REST OF OUR SAMPLE PROPOSAL

Navigating The Transition: Evaluating Programs Designed To Enhance Reading Proficiency of Elementary-Aged Children of Undocumented Immigrants

About 5.5 million children in this country have at least one parent who is an undocumented immigrant. Research suggests a majority of these students now make the transition from elementary to junior high school without the ability to read proficiently. Legislative responses to the growing population of undocumented immigrant children, however, often creates tensions between policymakers, educators, and the public, leading to unfocused policies and ineffective interventions. Kansas, for example, recently eliminated food stamps for hundreds of low-income U.S. children whose parents are undocumented immigrants (Bauer, 2012). Additionally, the number of Hispanic children attending Alabama’s public school dropped noticeably once school officials were required to check the immigration status of newly enrolled students and their parents (Griffing, 2011).

Poor literacy rates among children of undocumented immigrants means an increasing number of students are being left behind (Smith, 1999). These children’s parents, often out of
LITERATURE REVIEW

• Present your idea in a *maximally understandable* way.

• The flow of the logic must be compelling, clear, simply, easy-to-follow.

• Present a *sharply focused* view of the specific bodies of knowledge to which successful completion of your research project will contribute.
LITERATURE REVIEW

WELL-ORGANIZED

• What organization will be the absolute *clearest* to someone who has not been immersed in this project as long as you have?
LITERATURE REVIEW

INFORMATIVE, SELECTIVE, AND CRITICAL, NOT EXHAUSTIVE

- Educate the reviewer with important “knowns” about your topic.
- Provide a concise, but critical review of relevant literature.
- Demonstrate you have done your homework necessary to undertake your project.
LITERATURE REVIEW
INFORMATIVE, SELECTIVE, AND CRITICAL, NOT EXHAUSTIVE

• Make the case that your topic will be continuing to attract the interest of scholars.

• Demonstrate awareness of alternative viewpoints and argue your position in such a way that it addresses the field broadly.
LITERATURE REVIEW

PURPOSEFUL USE OF CITATIONS

• Avoid direct quotations, and consign colleagues to parentheses at the end when possible

• Cite contributions of possible reviewers, if known

• Cite own work if published in reputable journals

• Back up claims only with high-quality citations; absolutely no outdated or incomplete citations
LITERATURE REVIEW
READABLE BY GENERALISTS AND SPECIALISTS

• While you write the first paragraph with an eye toward the *non-expert*, the literature review should be written so it is readable by both generalists and specialists.

• Avoid jargon and unnecessary technical terms.

• Use diagrams or flow charts to conceptualize complex relationships.
• The methods section is *never glamorous*, but it is *revealing*; it reveals *how carefully you have planned your research project*. 

*Research Plan*
Reviewers will closely examine all of the details related to data collection to determine:

– the *quality* of the research to be performed

– your *organizational ability*
• The first paragraph should immediately orient the reviewer to your plan and approach:
  – immediately state whether your study is quantitative, qualitative or mixed methods
  – explicitly state the type of design, e.g. description, correlational, quasi-experimental, or experimental
  – identify the main parameters of the study, e.g. all dependent and independent variables
Research Plan

• Describe, as specifically as possible, all components of the research design.

• Remember you have **one year** to complete your plan. The agency wants to make sure you will **really be done in one year**!

• Proposals fail when they leave reviewers wondering **what the applicant actually will do**.
Final decisions about what proposals to fund often come down to whether the reviewers believe the research project is well-planned and feasible and whether the applicant is well-qualified to do the project.
• Be precise; use specific numbers and timeframes.

• Use diagrams, pictures, or flow charts to explain procedures, especially complicated ones.

• For field work, don’t be vague about details – demonstrate that you have the relationships in place with specific supporting evidence.

• Relate goals to one another, but avoid having goals *solely dependent* on the success of another goal.
A well-crafted research plan is not just a timeline of tasks; it is an argument why your approach is best approach to address the critical need identified in your first paragraph.
• Make it clear, accurate, and succinct. It’s the very first thing most reviewers see. Make a good impression. Your title should:
  – resonate with the mission of agency, and titles of what they've funded in the past
  – implicitly demonstrate the clear advantage of your idea and approach

• Write the title last, along with the abstract.
Brainstorm *at least three alternative titles* no matter how much you love the original title you came up with.

Ask a *diverse* group of friends and colleagues for feedback.
the abstract

• Capture reviewers’ attention and imagination with your very first sentence.

• Present a concise picture of your research plan – communicate a clear idea and the clear advantage of your particular project.

• Write it in plain language. Make it absolutely clear to any reviewer reading it, regardless of his/her specific expertise. Reviewers cannot ask you what “that phrase” means.
Helpful Tips

Draft an abstract, and *ignore the length* to start with, then go back decide what to cut-out or rephrase.
Most grant proposals are about 8 pages – that’s short! There’s time for only one big idea!

Applicants tend to want to get across multiple ideas, so they rush through ideas superficially, or leave important things out.

The more you can focus the better
good style

• Use clear language; a lucid style; and ruthlessly eliminate “extra” words.

• Use vivid verbs, avoid too many adjectives.

• Write simple and direct sentences; avoid complicated ones.

• Use repetition and parallel construction; do not substitute synonyms for repeated terms.
STUFF TO AVOID

• Avoid technical vocabulary unless it makes an important distinction.

• Avoid jargon. If you use it, define it – explicitly, implicitly, or by context and example – the very first time the term is used in your proposal.

• Avoid introducing “too many” variables.

• Avoid associating action verbs with inanimate objects, i.e., “your study” does not actually do anything, you do!
STUFF TO AVOID

• Avoid “weak verbs” (e.g. is, am, are, was, were, have, has, had, be, being, becomes, feels, looks, seems, sounds, etc.). Weak verbs make your writing boring and wordy; replace them with strong action verbs.

• Avoid clichés, e.g. “the proposed state-of-the-art study is expected to advance the field significantly.”
REVIEW YOUR PROPOSAL AND PAINSTAKINGLY
FINE TUNE EACH SENTENCE

“THE BELCHER DIAGNOSTIC TEST”

Edit each sentence for words that:

✓ need to be cut
✓ need to be added
✓ need to be changed

Apply “quick fixes” to weak phrases.

[SEE HANDOUT FOR DETAILED INSTRUCTIONS]
THEN STEP BACK AND DO A REVERSE OUTLINE

A reverse outline will reveal the structure – and thus the structural problems – of your proposal.

- go *paragraph-by-paragraph* and put the main idea of each paragraph in one bullet point
- arrange the bullet points in an outline
- analyze the outline; assess *key words, logical flow, and proportion* devoted to each idea
- create a new, revised outline
- use revised outline to reorganize proposal
FINALLY, REVIEW THE PROPOSAL FOR

Clear structure

Clear writing organizes the proposal so that each section contributes to a broader argument. Good structure includes:

✔ an early overview of the proposal’s basic structure and content
✔ short introductory and concluding statements at the beginning and end of each section
✔ headings, and subheadings that distinguish main points from supporting statements
Spelling and grammatical errors will sink an otherwise competitive proposal.

Make sure there are ABSOLUTELY no typos, spelling, or grammatical errors.
Successful Proposals

- use headings of the RFP
- fresh, original ideas
- succinct, focused project plans
- realistic amount of work
- sufficient detail

- evidence knowledge of subject
- demonstrate experience in methodology
- clear scholarly trajectory of applicant
- high impact
Unsuccessful Proposals

- propose work already done by others
- organized in reader-unfriendly way
- contain long paragraphs, run-on sentences
- unclear work plan
- unrealistic amount of work proposed
- unrealistic budget
- lacks evidence of applicant’s experience
- violates RFP format requirements
If you do get “rejected” know this...

“There is a variance in the review process. If you don't get it the first time, it does not mean you won't get it a second time.”

Myles Boylan
Program Officer at the National Science Foundation (NSF)
Strategies For Preparing A Competitive Proposal

• **TALK** about your proposal to others, don't just write about it – you might just be surprised what you say!

• **READ** examples of successful proposals, examples are more instructive than rules.

• **RESEARCH** the agency + review criteria inside and out *before* you start writing.
Strategies For Preparing A Competitive Proposal

GET “FEED FORWARD” TOWARDS THE BEGINNING

• Get critical feedback from knowledgeable colleagues before you write your proposal.

• Give them your PAGE ONE to comment on. Early “feed forward” will help you:
  – gain insights on changing research
  – ensure your idea is original
  – refine and optimize your idea
Strategies For Preparing A Competitive Proposal

**GET FEEDBACK TOWARDS THE END**

- It is essential to get critical feedback from knowledgeable colleagues *before you submit* your proposal.

- If your colleagues find something unclear, do not argue with them. They are right – by definition, the proposal is unclear.
Strategies For Preparing A Competitive Proposal

MAKE TIME TO WRITE, YOU’LL NEVER “FIND” IT

• Set *realistic* goals for yourself.

• Lack of success in the grant process stems from lack of commitment to make the time necessary to write a truly competitive proposal.
Personal Statement

• Funding agencies invest in *people* – and people’s *future*, not just “proposals” or “ideas”.

• Are they fully convinced that you and your research will represent the agency well?
Personal Statement

MAKE IT PERSONAL

• Your idea or project may have a personal story or element behind it. Reading an applicant’s personal statement is the primary way reviewers relate to the applicant.

• Describe how this line of research interest emerged within your experience, if appropriate.

• Write something only you could write. Share poignant personal experiences.
Personal Statement

BUT REMEMBER, IT’S NOT JUST PERSONAL

• Applicant’s qualifications and environments in which the proposed work will be carried out are weighted heavily in determining the relative merits of a grant proposal.

• Thus, be sure to include
  – qualifications, prior accomplishments
  – future plans, scholarly trajectory, career goals
Personal Statement

BUT REMEMBER, IT’S NOT JUST PERSONAL

• Qualifications, prior accomplishments:
  – your research is **INTEGRATED** with your doctoral education and experiences
  – you are **WELL-PREPARED** to do proposed work
  – you are in an **ENVIRONMENT** conducive to your project’s success
  – you have well-developed forms of **SOCIAL SUPPORT** from faculty and other scholars in your field
Personal Statement

BUT REMEMBER, IT’S NOT JUST PERSONAL

• Future plans, scholarly trajectory, career goals:
  
  – State your **LONG-TERM** professional goals related to proposed study. State your how you see this line of work evolving over your career. Remember, agencies are investing in your future; they want you to *succeed* if they fund you.

  – Explain how this one **SHORT-TERM** project will contribute to – or catalyze – your long-term professional goals.
“Don’t just say ‘I’m going to be a researcher.’ Usually that's not competitive – if you're not a genius.”

Myles Boylan
Program Officer at the National Science Foundation (NSF)
BUDGET

• Include a reasonable and accurate budget that meets the sponsor's requirements.

• Clearly explain all of the costs of the research project (e.g., travel, equipment, supplies, etc.)

• Offer a budget narrative/justification, if requested.
• Well-planned budgets reflect *carefully thought-out* projects.

• Budgets are *road maps* showing how your project will be implemented and managed.

• Most funding organizations require that a proposed budget be based upon a *good faith estimate* of the anticipated costs.
4 things to keep in mind when preparing a budget:

- **NECESSARY?** Is it required to successfully complete the project?
- **ALLOWABLE?** Is it permitted within the application guidelines or has it been explicitly approved by the funding agency?
- **REASONABLE?** Does the amount reflect a prudent estimate of the costs?
- **COMPLETE?** Make sure all expenses are included.
• Before you submit, ensure your budget is:
  – based on *real costs* – not too high or too low
  – carefully *aligned* with the proposed activities
  – fully *justified* with sufficient detail and explanation
  – sufficient for the successful completion of the project – *reviewers know what things cost!*
When writing letters of recommendation, your references should:

– indicate their department and institution, how long they have known you, and in what capacity

– on the basis of their knowledge of your past and current research experience and activities, comment on your potential to conduct original research and succeed post-graduation
Letters of Recommendation

• When writing letters of recommendation, your references should:
  – compare you with other successful graduate students at the institution
  – comment on the broader impacts of supporting you, including your leadership potential in your chosen field
IRRESISTIBLE IDEA!
CLEAR IDEA + OBVIOUS RELATIVE ADVANTAGE
edit ruthlessly!

style