

Grant Writing: Tips and Tricks for Successful Proposal Preparation

Faculty and Staff CETL Forum

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Part 1: Before You Begin to Write

- A. The starting point: Your Idea
- B. Identifying Sponsors
- C. Reviewers: Who reads your proposal?
- D. Getting ready to write: Best Practices



Part 1: Before You Begin to Write

A. The starting point: Your Idea

1. Define the problem or need that you want to address.
2. Collect and critically analyze relevant background information/needs assessment.
3. Generate a preliminary idea or activity that is pertinent to the problem or critical need you have identified.



Part 1: Before You Begin to Write

A. The starting point: Your Idea

4. Assess your idea's potential for success and modify it, if necessary.
 - a. critically assess your own ability to pursue the idea
 - b. critically assess your competition
 - c. critically assess your funding potential



Part 1: Before You Begin to Write

A. The starting point: Your Idea

5. Seek constructive criticism of your idea from knowledgeable colleagues.
6. Refine the idea or activity to maximize its potential for impact on your field.



Part 1: Before You Begin to Write

B. Identifying Sponsors

1. Know your field, follow the literature
2. Databases, email alerts, OSP
3. Hanover prospecting
4. Foundations and industry
5. Know your sponsor's mission



Part 1: Before You Begin to Write

C. Reviewers: Who reads your proposal?

1. What is the reviewer's level of expertise?
2. What is the reviewer's level of interest in your idea?
3. Why is the reviewer reading your proposal?
4. Will the reviewer be fair and impartial in assessing the merits of my proposal?

Common Reviewer Comments

- **‘Seemingly unaware of ‘state-of-the-art’**
 - Insufficient communication of literature review
 - If alternatives exist, acknowledge them *briefly*
- **‘Did not address reviewer comments’**
 - Resubmission ignores prior feedback
 - Must clearly address changes made, and those not made (and why)
- **‘Methods unclear’**
 - Not enough detail in HOW you will accomplish the aims proposed
 - Give reviewers confidence that you understand exactly what is required to carry out the project
- **‘Too ambitious’**
 - Scope too broad for the duration and/or budget requested
 - Consider ‘phase’ approach?; Is this the right funding opportunity for your work?



Part 1: Before You Begin to Write

D. Getting ready to write: Best Practices

1. RFP — electronic forms & instructions.
2. Choose format carefully.
3. Avoid excessively long/short paragraphs, judicious use of emphasized text, grammar and spelling.
4. Writing *successful* grants is a significant time-consuming activity. Plan ahead!



The Full Proposal

- A. Executive Summary/Overview
- B. Background/Needs Assessment
- C. Significance Paragraph
- D. Preliminary Studies/Previous Experience
- E. Projected Approach/Plan of Work
- F. Budget & Budget Justification
- G. Supporting documents
- H. Abstract and Title



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Part 2: Overview/Executive Summary

Referred to by various names:

NIH — Specific Aims

NSF — Beginning of Project Description

USDA — Beginning of Introduction

- Content**
- A. Introduction Paragraph
 - B. What is going to be done and by whom?
 - C. Specific Aims/Goals/Objectives
 - D. Payoff Paragraph



Part 2: Overview/Executive Summary

*...it is highly likely that, by the time the reviewers have finished reading this ~1-page section of your proposal, **they will have made an executive decision** about whether or not this is an interesting or novel idea, as well as whether this is a proposal that will be **enjoyable or painful to read.***



Part 2: Overview/Executive Summary

A. Introduction Paragraph

1. Opening sentence(s)
2. Important knowns
3. The Gap

Tip: Linkage of individual components within the Overview/Executive Summary section and elimination of extraneous detail are key to leading your reviewers to a position of advocacy.



1. Opening sentence(s)

- Should be written in a way that it will immediately catch the attention of the reviewers
- Provide sufficient information such that reviewers will understand what the proposal is about — **keywords**
- Convey why this proposal should be of interest to the funding agency — **agency mission, objectives**



2. Important Knowns

- The most important info reviewers need to know in order to understand why your project needs to be done.
- Begin with older but seminal observations ('the forest') and continue until you reach the current status of the field ('the tree')
- Should flow logically, one into the next



3. The Gap

- What essential pieces are missing — the Gap?
- The Gap is holding back your field or creating a problem or critical need.
- The Gap, as you define it here, should be exactly what you intend to address in your grant proposal.
- The Gap should flow obviously from the “Important Knowns.”



Part 2: Overview/Executive Summary

B. Paragraph 2: What is going to be done and by whom?

4. Your long-term goal
5. Objective of *this* proposal
6. Hypothesis-driven vs. statement-of-need
7. Statement of rationale
8. Why you? Why UNC?



4. Long-term Goals

- What is your long-term professional (career) goal?
- What is the continuum of activities that you intend to follow over the course of your career?
- What is the niche that you have either carved out or want to carve out in which you are planning to become an expert?



5. Objective of *This* Proposal

- Define exactly what your specific objective for this proposal will be.
- What is the next (or first) step that you plan to take along the continuum of your long-term career goal?
- Attainment of the objective *must* fill the gap in knowledge or solve the problem or issue that you identified in the first paragraph.



5. Objective of *This* Proposal

(continued)

- Avoid placing emphasis on the methodology
 - e.g. ‘...to use my bicycle to ride to the grocery store to purchase a loaf of bread.’
 - actual objective is the purchase of the bread
- Remember to keep the linkage between sections tight: make it clear that the objective is one step along the continuum of activities projected by your long-term goals.



5. Objective of *This* Proposal

Tip: To better link your long-term goal, objective, and (if needed) central hypothesis is to avoid the temptation of interposing explanatory info — extraneous details — between them. These components should be as closely juxtaposed as possible so there is a seamless flow of logic from one to the next.



6. Hypothesis

- Statement of need-driven proposals need not include an hypothesis.
- Hypotheses should be objectively testable and cannot project a predetermined conclusion.
- Objective and hypothesis should be linked: the objective is obtained by testing the central hypothesis.



7. Statement of Rationale

- Describes exactly why you want to carry out the activities proposed.
- What will become possible after the proposed studies are completed
- Linkage between the gap and what will become possible is critical.
- Rationale should be appealing to (the mission of) the funding agency.



8. Why you? Why UNC?

- Introduce key important facts that make you uniquely qualified to address the issue or solve the problem.
- You and your team have the competitive edge to do the project.
- Working environment and institution are highly conducive for success.



Part 2: Overview/Executive Summary

C. Specific Aims/Goals/Objectives Paragraph

9. Specific activities to be undertaken to achieve the objective of the proposal



9. Specific Aims/Goals/Objectives

- Detailed steps that you will take during the course of the project to test the hypothesis or address the critical need and achieve the overall objective.
- Brief, informative, attention-getting headlines.
- Two to three specific aims are ideal.
- Should logically flow from first to second, second to third, etc.



9. Specific Aims/Goals/Objectives

(continued)

- It is *not* necessary (or even advisable) to provide a lot of detail in the Specific Aims.

- **Suggested format:**

Specific Aim/Goal #1: ***Written in boldface italics.*** Amplifying statement (working hypothesis or informative descriptor as appropriate).

Specific Aim/Goal #2: ***Written in boldface italics.*** Amplifying statement (working hypothesis or informative descriptor as appropriate).



9. Specific Aims/Goals/Objectives

- Example(s)
 - **Objective #1: *Implement a secondary major option in Languages and Cultures for Professional Programs within the Department of Foreign Languages and Literature.*** <<amplifying statement>>
 - **Objective #2: *Create stronger bridges between courses in Foreign Languages and Literature that already have a professional focus and those courses that have an area studies focus.*** <<amplifying statement>>



Part 2: Overview/Executive Summary

D. Payoff Paragraph

10. Innovation

11. Expected outcomes

12. Impact



10. Innovation

- Why is the proposed work potentially novel, innovative, or unique?
- Being “the first...” is not always an appropriate argument.
- Not always true and/or necessary: meritorious projects are not necessarily novel or innovative.
- Optional, depending on your project.



11. Expected Outcomes

- What is expected from the successful completion of the project?
- Should collectively validate the central hypothesis or critical need.
- Should attain the originally stated objective(s) of the proposal (break down by #).
- Accompany each with a precise, substantive statement of why that expected outcome is important.



12. Impact

- Generally convey why your expected outcomes will have a positive impact once knowledge is applied or need is filled.
- Should relate to both your field and the funding agency's mission.



Next Steps

Expanding your Executive Summary outline

1. Consider how all of the elements relate to each other. Logically and well?
2. Does your long-term goal encompass the knowledge gap?



Next Steps: The Full Proposal

- A. Executive Summary/Overview
- B. Background/Needs Assessment
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OSP Pre-Award Process

Notice of Intent (NOI)

- **NOI** web form available on OSP's website - never too early to get on our calendar!
- 'Heads up' to unit and college leaders
- OSP Grant & Contract Admin (GCA) will reach out to discuss RFP, timeline, etc.
- Helps OSP determine if other offices need to be engaged (e.g.: Development; Foundation)

UNC's internal docs

- Financial Conflict of Interest (**FCOI**) - 1 per named researcher
- Proposal Review & Endorsement Form (**PREF**) - initiated by GCA once budget is finalized; requires signature of PI, Co-PIs (if any), unit leader(s,) college dean, AVP Research
- These must be completed and submitted internally before proposal is submitted externally (Per Board Policy; OSP policies)

Submission to Sponsor

- OSP is the office authorized to submit proposals on behalf of UNC; AVP Research has the delegated signature authority for proposal documents requiring an actual signature with submission.
- Do not sign anything without working through OSP
- If a sponsor requires PI to apply directly (e.g. via membership portal) but the award is expected to be made to UNC, same pre-award rules apply

Hanover Research Support

- Hanover Research → external consulting firm providing a suite of grant writing solutions
- Indicate your interest in support in NOI form, or contact OSP directly:
Cira.Mathis@unco.edu

Funder Prospecting

- Match research interests to potential sponsors
- Yields detailed, written report
- ~ 2 week process

Proposal Production

- Full proposal production support for large/complex endeavors
- *Minimum* 12 weeks lead time, potentially more depending on the funding opportunity

Proposal Review

- Grant writing expert consultant critique of narrative
- Yields annotated narrative plus debrief phone call
- ~3 week process; get in the queue early!

Other Tips...(applicable to *proposals and manuscripts!*)

- **Write *before* you have to**

- Robert Boice, Professor of Psychology at SUNY Stony Brook, author of numerous books on faculty development and scholarly writing; **Importance of writing daily** (Boice, 1989):
 - Group 1 ('control') - only wrote occasionally in big blocks of time; averaged 17 pages in 1 year
 - Group 2 - wrote daily, kept a daily record; averaged 64 pages in 1 year
 - Group 3 - kept daily record, accountable to someone weekly: averaged 157 pages in 1 year
- *'Without records and someone to share them with it is too easy to convince yourself that you will write "tomorrow." But "tomorrow" never comes-or at least it doesn't come very often.'*

- **Name potential reviewers** (*if allowed/requested by sponsor*)

- Should know your research area well but not be in direct conflict/competition
- Cannot be someone with whom you have a conflict of interest (e.g.: collaborator)

- **Serve as a reviewer**

- Critiquing others' work provides you a different view; builds reputation/network

- **Give yourself extra time**

- Writing is just one piece of the process. Give yourself plenty of room to get it done right, without rushing.

GOOD LUCK!



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