

Proposal Writing Guide

This guide is designed to help U faculty and researchers develop competitive proposals for funding. Successful grant writing takes strategy, practice, patience, and persistence. Use these tips and techniques to boost your grant writing efforts and strengthen your proposals – both for immediate impact and long-term success. Tip: [Click here](#) and bookmark the link to always have access to the most up-to-date version of this guide (or visit cfr.utah.edu/for-faculty).

Questions/feedback? Contact Jenna Taylor, Director, Corporate & Foundation Relations, at jenna.taylor@utah.edu.

The Key to Writing Winning Proposals

The success of a proposal depends heavily on its ability to clearly explain the proposed work regardless of the reviewers' familiarity AND to persuasively convey the project's importance and impact in alignment with the funder's priorities. In short, success comes down to what you write and how you write it. For this, you first must understand who your audience is, what they **value**, and the objective of the text. Second, you must propose something of **value** in a way that is clear, concise, compelling, and organized. (Think: Scholarly pitch, not essay.)

»» Before You Start Writing

- Plan ahead and start early! Ideally, give yourself sufficient time to prepare a good application. You can start planning ahead by initially referring to the previous year's instructions since most do not change much year to year.
- Thoroughly read the application instructions and forms to confirm deadlines, eligibility, and requirements and to ensure your proposed project aligns with the intended purpose, applicable activities, and allowable expenses.
- For greater understanding, review the funder's website, mission, research agenda, webinars, FAQs, review process (and reviewers), and funded projects. Also, read funded proposals and talk to others who have been awarded.
- Create a proposal development timeline/task list to help you stay organized and on track to meet all university and funder requirements and deadlines.
- Before planning to submit to a federal funding opportunity, contact the program officer listed in the solicitation to confirm responsiveness to call.
- Before planning to submit to a foundation, contact the university [Office of Corporate & Foundation Relations \(CFR\)](#) (for national foundations) or your area Development Officer (for local foundations) for guidance and insights, including important information about the any special submission processes for U-affiliated applications and to ensure alignment with current university engagement strategies with that foundation.
- Notify your area Pre-Award Team or Grants & Contracts Officer and work with them on the budget, forms, compliance, etc. Contact them as soon as you plan to apply for something but no later than 2 weeks before the deadline. Be aware that certain proposals must be submitted for OSP review no later than 5 business days before the funder's deadline.
- Be advised, if the opportunity limits the number of applications from an organization, the university must first conduct an internal [Limited Submission Opportunity \(LSO\)](#) competition for it. If an LSO is not set up, notify the [VPR Office](#).

Other Useful Resources for Grant Writers

- [VPR Research Grant Resources](#)
- [U Health Grant Support Resources](#)
- [OSP Grant Life Cycle Resources](#)
- [Research Education \(RED\) Classes](#)
- [Large Infrastructure Funding Team \(LIFT\)](#)
- [VPR Research Writing & Editing Services](#)
- [RED NIH & NSF Grant Writing Training and Consultation](#)
- [CTSI NIH Peer Grant Review Program](#)
- [CTSI NIH R01 Grant Writing Group](#)
- [VP-NSF Grant Writing Cohort Program](#)
- [AVP-HSE Funded Grant Repository \(must request access from them, plus please contribute your funded proposal as well\)](#)
- [How Your Proposal Compares \(article\)](#)
- [Why Academics Have a Hard Time Writing Good Grant Proposals \(article\)](#)
- [The Craft of Writing Effectively video 1 and video 2 \(UChicago\)](#)

Strategies for Different Career Stages

Early-Career: Work to position yourself in your scholarly/research community via publications and presentations. Align your work with a funder's mission/research agenda. Team up with a senior scholar/researcher. Network and build relationships with potential collaborators. Serve on review panels. Be active in professional associations.

Established: Leverage your experience, partnerships, and achievements. Highlight your expertise, impact, and recognition through publications, awards, and grants. Emphasize how your work has advanced your field or had a significant impact outside academia, while demonstrating continued relevance and innovation.

4-Step Proposal Writing Process

Step	Key Activities
#1. Think & Write	Write an initial draft of your proposal, using the process of writing to clarify and organize your thoughts. Follow the application instructions and evaluation criteria closely. Tip: Many people stop here, but doing so can result in a weaker final submission.
#2. Rewrite & Refine	Strategically rewrite and refine your proposal keeping the readers (reviewers and funder) in mind. Aim to make it clear, concise, compelling, and organized. Ensure it fully addresses all instructions, criteria, and the goals of the funding call. Tip: Make it easy for the reviewers to evaluate your proposal in a positive manner.
#3. Review & Revise	Have it reviewed by others, then revise based on the feedback. Aim for at least 3 reviewers: (1) a trusted peer in your field to evaluate its merit; (2) a colleague from a different field to ensure clarity; and (3) an experienced grant writer to help refine the alignment with the funder's priorities and strengthen the proposal strategy and presentation. Tip: Schedule reviews in advance so they are on everyone's calendar.
#4. Rework & Resubmit	If your proposal is not funded, immediately request the reviewer comments (if available). Critically evaluate the feedback and thoughtfully incorporate it into your revised proposal for resubmission. Then repeat the steps above until funded. Tip: Stay positive! Don't be discouraged; consider the competition level and funding rate.

Revise, Resubmit, Repurpose

If your proposal is not funded, immediately **request the reviewer comments** (if available) and use that feedback to **revise your proposal** for resubmission. Tip: Reviewer comments won't catch every shortcoming, so use this opportunity to strengthen – not just revise – your proposal before the next submission.

- Read all reviewer comments thoroughly to understand the issues or concerns raised. Process the feedback constructively, focusing on ways to improve the proposal. The insights gleaned are often invaluable.
- Highlight the main points of criticism or areas where the reviewers identified gaps or weaknesses in your proposal. Look for common themes or repeated concerns across different reviewers.
- Prioritize areas for revision. Focus first on addressing the most critical areas that directly impacted the proposal's score. Clarify or expand upon anything the reviewers misunderstood or considered to be weak or insufficient.
- Tip: Share the reviewer comments with mentors, colleagues, and grant specialists to get their perspectives. Also, if available, ask the program officer to help you interpret the reviewer comments.

Then **resubmit in the next funding round**. With increasing competition, it's common for proposals to go through several iterations (and improvements) and require multiple submissions before receiving funding.

Also, **apply for other funding opportunities**. Reworking and repurposing proposals for multiple opportunities maximizes your efforts and increases your odds of success, especially for applications with similar requirements.

Tip: Serve on grant reviewer panels to gain insight into how proposals are evaluated and what makes them stand out.

Common Mistakes Applicants Make

- | | |
|---|---|
| ☐ Misalignment with funder priorities | ☐ Unclear or unfocused project goals |
| ☐ Failure to follow all instructions | ☐ Poorly designed or overly ambitious scope |
| ☐ Poor planning and rushed preparation | ☐ Insufficient evidence of qualifications or readiness |
| ☐ Lack of clarity; excessive jargon | ☐ Unrealistic or incomplete timeline or budget |
| ☐ Weak case for urgency or impact | ☐ Missing key collaborators or stakeholders |

Tip: Revisit the application instructions to confirm you've addressed all requirements. Your final proposal should be error-free, well-formatted, and clearly written – easy for reviewers to read, follow, and evaluate.

Tip: Collaborate with experts in areas where you lack experience. Strategic partners can complement your strengths and help make your application stronger and more competitive.

5 Qualities of Funded Projects

Funded proposals typically communicate these important aspects of the project clearly and persuasively in alignment with the funder's priorities. In contrast, unfunded proposals often fail to do so. Tip: Most funders value these qualities, even if they don't state them explicitly. (Source: Based on guidance from AVPR Jacob Jensen.)

1. Impactful: Make a strong case for the significance and potential impact of your proposed project or research.

- Explain how it valuably contributes to your field or area of practice – and why it matters. (Filling gaps is not sufficient; it must also be deemed valuable to do so.)
- Articulate its potential to solve an important problem, address a significant need, respond to unresolved issues, or advance knowledge.
- Consider impacts beyond academia, such as in industry, healthcare, education, technology, social services, business, government, the environment, or the arts.
- Tip: Identify and engage relevant collaborators, stakeholders, and populations.

"Demonstrate clear societal benefits that address an urgent problem in alignment with agency priorities. Lead with this information and you will capture the attention of skeptical reviewers and program officers," advises Jesse Morris, Director of Research Education at the U (2023).
www.research.utah.edu/features/u-researcher-tips-how-to-put-together-a-successful-grant-proposal

2. Innovative: Describe how your ideas, approaches, or methods are novel or how they are applied in new ways.

- Highlight how the proposed project builds on, challenges, or departs from existing work.
- Explain how it disrupts established paradigms or introduces new methodologies, technologies, or models.
- Emphasize the new directions, tools, or insights the project offers or the transformative ideas it explores.
- Tip: Establish how you (your team/organization) are well-suited and well-positioned to undertake this work.

3. Urgent: Make a compelling case for why this project matters *now* – to your own work, your field as a whole, a relevant sector, or broader society.

- Explain how it addresses a pressing issue, time-sensitive opportunity, emerging trend, or urgent need.
- Show how it builds on or responds to recent developments, breakthroughs, policy changes, or challenges.
- Situate the project within current cultural, social, intellectual, or sector-specific conversations.
- Tip: Convey how this funding opportunity is timely for your work/research/project – whether it enables a next phase, sustains momentum, or seizes a unique moment to make progress.

4. Aspirational: Show how the proposed project lays the groundwork for future work or broader impact.

- Present a clear vision for what comes next (for you, others, your field, a particular sector, or broader society), including how the work may grow, scale, or evolve over time.
- Describe what it will set in motion – whether advancing new lines of inquiry, generating knowledge, improving practice, or solving persistent problems.
- Emphasize how it could lead to partnerships outside of academia, important collaborations, new areas of study, or responses to emerging issues.
- Tip: Mention any plans for sustaining the project's impact beyond the funding period.

5. Fruitful: Describe what the project will produce and how you will share it with the audience(s) who can use it.

- Specify expected outputs – such as publications, presentations, reports, tools, curricula, or creative works.
- Identify your plans for reaching applicable academic *and* non-academic audiences through appropriate targeted channels (e.g., journals, conferences, workshops, events, media, and digital platforms).
- Explain how your dissemination strategy supports the goals of the project and increases its relevance, reach, and impact.
- Tip: Emphasize how the project output(s) may inform policy, practice, understanding, or future innovation.

Answer these questions about your project and back it up with strong evidence and justification.

Impactful: Why does this project matter, and what contribution will it make?

Innovative: What makes your approach or idea new, distinctive, or original?

Urgent: Why is now the right time to do this work, and what's at stake?

Aspirational: How will this project lead to future work or broader impact?

Fruitful: How will you reach the right audience to ensure it has an impact?

Top 10 Proposal Writing Tips

Keep in mind that reviewers generally have broad educated backgrounds and must evaluate numerous applications very quickly. So, your proposal needs to stand out and instill confidence. Tip: Write for the funder and to the reviewers.

1. **Optimize for the reviewers.** Make it obvious your project aligns with the funder's priorities and use their wording to reinforce responsiveness. Ensure your proposal systematically addresses all evaluation criteria and application requirements. Be deliberate in following the instructions and use them as the framework for organizing the proposal. Structure the content so reviewers can find everything they need easily. Use clear sections, labels, and subheadings. Tip: Use bold (judiciously) to emphasize key points. Also, allow for white space.
2. **Write for a broad audience.** Present information so it is easy to understand and compelling regardless of the reviewers' familiarity with the topic. Use a writing style that is accessible to an educated lay audience while maintaining scholarly rigor. Avoid overly dense or technical language that might obscure your message. Minimize jargon and explain what you mean. Introduce lesser-known topics, translate complex ideas, and make connections for non-specialists. Tip: Doing so invites them into the text and demonstrates your subject mastery.
3. **Signal to experts in the field.** Signal your expertise by adeptly using the language and terminology of your scholarly or research community. Reference seminal works, key figures, and recent, relevant studies to show your command of the field and its current discourse. Further demonstrate your credibility by clearly articulating your project's contribution, its intellectual merit, and a well-structured approach. Tip: Show that you know the code.
4. **Be clear, concise, organized.** The best narratives are clear, concise, and well organized. Make sure yours is easy to read and follow. Lead with your main points (don't bury them) and make them straightforward. Do not make the reviewers hunt for key details or assume they will connect the dots. Given space limitations, prioritize details that best serve the proposal. Use tables and bulleted lists to enhance presentation. Tip: Every sentence must add value.
5. **Be persuasive, bold, confident.** A strong proposal is explicit about the problem being addressed, why it is important and urgent, and why you are the right person to do it. Be bold in highlighting the value of your project but do not say anything you cannot stand behind. Confidently emphasize what you bring to the project/field. Use a writing style that is persuasive and direct. Use strong action verbs and minimize passive tense. Tip: Don't use "hope" or "may".
6. **Make it engaging and enthusing.** Reviewers have to read a lot of proposals, so make yours engaging while still being rigorous. Use storytelling or interesting details to draw them in. Inform and inspire with compelling evidence data, case studies, and examples. Include meaningful visuals, diagrams, and charts. Strive for your proposal to resonate with the reviewers. Tip: The goal isn't to tell them everything you think, it's to change the way *they* think and to convince them to champion your proposal for funding above all the others in the pile.
7. **Capture interest from the start.** Start your narrative with an engaging hook (something central to the project) to capture the reviewers' attention and pique their interest. The first 1-2 paragraphs and the abstract must be compelling and establish the value of your project. Don't leave it to the last minute to write the introduction and abstract. Tip: This is your chance to make a great first impression and give the reviewers a reason to engage further.
8. **Anticipate possible concerns.** Show the reviewers that the project is well thought out, feasible, and appropriate. Make it evident that you are thinking critically about it and acknowledge any potential limitations. Address anticipated challenges and explain how you plan to adapt if needed. Tip: This reinforces your credibility and demonstrates your deep understanding and readiness to execute the project successfully.
9. **Construct a compelling problem.** Guide reviewers through the thoughtful construction of the problem (what it is and why it is an issue). Strategically position your project by showing how it builds on, challenges, or diverges from existing work. Use a brief review of the literature to enrich the problem by contextualizing it within the ongoing discourse and highlighting layers of complexity or inconsistency – rather than just presenting background information that generalists may not understand, and experts will already know. Tip: Use words that signal tension, instability, or friction so reviewers feel there is a problem (e.g., however, although, nonetheless, despite, inconsistent, problematic, paradoxical, and ambiguous).
10. **Convey the value of the project.** Give reviewers strong justification for why the project matters. Show that your proposed work addresses something a specific community(ies) (e.g., your field, a sector, or a population) wants to solve, fix, or better understand (not just you). Illustrate the benefits of addressing the problem for that community, or conversely, the costs of not addressing it. Show – don't just tell – why it is important, to whom, and what impact it will have. Tip: Use terms that indicate it is important and relevant to a community (e.g., generally understood, widely debated, broadly recognized, commonly accepted, extensively studied, frequently cited, and well established".

Tip: Instead of saying what your project is about, explain what it will argue, or better yet illustrate what problem/question it will solve/answer.

- BAD: "I am interested in..."
- OKAY: "This project is about..."
- GOOD: "This project will argue..."
- BEST: "This project will address ..."



Bonus: Sample Word Lists

Tension, Instability, Friction = Problem

Examples of words that signal tension, instability, or friction so readers *feel* that there is a problem:

- | | | | | |
|---------------|-------------------|-----------------|---------------|-----------------|
| • however | • even though | • discrepant | • unstable | • disagreement |
| • although | • while | • paradoxical | • uneven | • disconnect |
| • yet | • notwithstanding | • contradictory | • limited | • uncertainty |
| • nonetheless | • inconsistent | • divergent | • contentious | • paradox |
| • but | • uncertain | • contested | • anomaly | • inconsistency |
| • despite | • problematic | • fragmented | • conflict | • contradiction |
| • in contrast | • ambiguous | • inconclusive | • tension | • misalignment |
| • conversely | • unresolved | • conflicted | • ambiguity | • challenge |

Example Sentences:

1. "Several interventions have shown promise; **however**, their long-term impact remains unclear."
2. "**Although** the concept has been studied extensively, key mechanisms are still not well understood."
3. "These findings are encouraging; **nonetheless**, they raise new questions about scalability."
4. "The program was well designed, **but** its implementation revealed significant logistical barriers."
5. "Despite advances in methodology, the field lacks consensus on key metrics."
6. "**In contrast** to earlier studies, recent findings suggest a more nuanced relationship."
7. "**Conversely**, interventions without stakeholder input have failed to produce lasting change."
8. "**Even though** there is growing support for this strategy, rigorous evaluation is still lacking."

Importance & Relevance to a Community

Example of terms that indicate to readers that the problem is important and relevant to a community (not just to you):

- | | | |
|------------------------|---------------------------|----------------------------------|
| • widely debated | • generally understood | • widely seen as |
| • highly regarded | • commonly accepted | • increasingly prioritized by... |
| • well documented | • substantially supported | • of growing concern for... |
| • frequently cited | • widely acknowledged | • sustained attention from... |
| • broadly recognized | • routinely emphasized | • long acknowledged by... |
| • generally considered | • consistently identified | • gaining traction among... |
| • extensively studied | • broadly endorsed | • major concern within... |
| • well established | • consensus-driven | • ongoing challenge for... |

Example Phrases:

1. "...is **broadly considered** essential to advancing [goal/outcome]"
2. "...has **long been acknowledged** as a critical barrier in [area]"
3. "...is **widely seen** as a foundational issue in [discipline/sector]"
4. "...is **consistently identified** as a priority across the field"
5. "...reflects a **consensus-driven** response to ongoing concerns"
6. "...is **substantially supported** by recent real-world events"
7. "...has emerged as a **major concern within** [community]"
8. "...represents an **ongoing challenge for** [population/domain]"
9. "...has garnered **sustained attention from** [practitioners]"



Bonus: Proposal Development Timeline

Proposal writing is more than just writing – it requires planning, coordinating, communicating, and managing tasks and timelines. Create a proposal development timeline or task list to help you stay organized and on track to meet all university and funder requirements and deadlines. The example below outlines key steps for preparing and submitting a basic grant proposal once the application has officially opened, assuming a two-month window to complete everything. Tip: Start early and plan ahead! This timeline does not include the time or effort required to develop the project idea itself – just the process of writing and assembling the application materials.

Action Item	Completion Date
☐ Notify your Pre-Award Team/Grants & Contracts Officer and (if applicable) CFR Office.	Right Away
☐ Review the application instructions, forms, review criteria, and funder resources.	Right Away
☐ Strategize your proposal plan, connect with partners, and begin outlining the budget.	Right Away
☐ Schedule internal proposal reviews in advance. Also, give letter writers a heads-up.	Right Away
☐ Draft narrative and other key sections, carefully following the application instructions.	7+ weeks before deadline
☐ Rewrite and refine proposal documents (keeping the reviewers and funder in mind).	6 weeks before deadline
☐ Get the proposal documents (especially the narrative) reviewed by other people.	5 weeks before deadline
☐ Prepare any supplementary materials (e.g., data mgmt. plans, biosketches, facilities).	5 weeks before deadline
☐ Revise the proposal documents based on feedback. Also, collect letters of support.	3 weeks before deadline
☐ Finalize the complete proposal, including proofreading, formatting, and consistency checks. (Revisit the instructions to confirm all requirements have been met.)	2 weeks before deadline
☐ Upload all documents into the online application system and submit to OSP for review.	1 week before deadline
☐ Receive OSP approval or address any feedback or required corrections.	3 days before deadline
☐ Submit the full proposal to the funder.	2 days before deadline
☐ Official Grant Application Due Date	Funder's deadline

Tip: It is strongly advised that you submit proposals to funders at least 2 full days before the official deadline to avoid (or account for) potential technical issues during the submission process.



Your Partner for Foundation Funding Success

Looking for foundation funding to support your research, scholarship, projects, and programs? The Office of Corporate and Foundation Relations (CFR) helps faculty, researchers, and administrators across campus engage with national and international corporate and private philanthropic organizations. We offer strategic guidance on funder alignment, help identify funding opportunities, advise on engagement strategies, and support the development of competitive proposals (including draft reviews). Sign up for our newsletter at cfr.utah.edu to stay informed about funding calls, trainings, and more—or email us to schedule a meeting!

Foster Foundation Relations

Get strategic advice for engaging with foundations and preparing for exploratory meetings and campus visits—so you make a strong impression. Invite CFR to join your funder meetings to show institutional backing for your project. Receive tailored support for post-award reporting and stewardship.

Develop Competitive Proposals

Get expert guidance on positioning your research to align with funder priorities and translating your ideas into fundable projects. Receive constructive feedback to improve proposal clarity, focus, and competitiveness before submission. Get assistance interpreting guidelines and navigating submissions.

Find Funding Opportunities

Discover opportunities that align with your research and project goals. Get help assessing and prioritizing the most promising options before investing your time further. Gain important insights into foundation priorities, funding history and trends, and university connections—giving you a competitive edge.

Leverage University Resources

Make full use of available expertise and support to strengthen your proposals and increase your chances of success. Plus, get guidance to ensure alignment with the university's engagement strategy for certain foundations and compliance with funder and institutional requirements.

Reach out early—whether you're exploring ideas or preparing a proposal. We're here to help you succeed!

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Examples of Recent National Foundation Funding @ the U

