A good idea is the core of a grant application…but it isn’t enough.

As funding is increasingly competitive, not only must the idea be innovative and capable of advancing the state of knowledge, but the proposal must be compelling and well-written.

Your idea alone does not merit funding. To merit funding, the idea must be closely aligned with the agency’s mission, strategic plan, and investment priorities.

Writing is a craft, not a science.
A manuscript submitted to a journal is a completed piece of work, suitable to be peer reviewed using well-defined criteria. Articles are subject to the norms and standards of the discipline. Does the piece adequately reflect the current thinking and is it critical to advancing knowledge of the field?

A research proposal is a plan of action and not an end product in itself. As such, it is the writer’s task to be convincing that the research is worthy AND that the applicant is best suited to do the work. Merit is based specifically on how well the project adheres to the stated goals and criteria of the funding sponsor.
DO YOU FISH WITH A SPEAR OR A NET?

The hardest and most time-consuming part of developing a proposal is finding the right funding tool!

**Spear:** Take careful aim at one specific target.

Look for funding agencies that fund *only* what you want/need. Search for an exact match to fund your project using your specifically stated goals.

**Net:** Throw ideas out there and see what you get.

Look at multiple funding agencies and sources. Modify your work as appropriate: your goals are broad enough to be modified to fit their goals.
CONSIDERATIONS FOR FRAMING YOUR RESEARCH SCOPE…

- What are your strengths and proven history?
- Can you provide strong evidence that you (and your team) are experienced, capable, and have the resources necessary for the work?
- Where are you best equipped to contribute to the overall advancement of science in your area of expertise?
- Where does your issue/problem fit in the big picture? Is it topical?
- Where does it fit in YOUR big picture?
REFINE YOUR FOCUS

- Can you reduce your research scope to one sentence?

- Can you think of three important/critical implications for this work?
Resources for discovering agency priorities

- Administrative agenda
- Agency/directorate sites (look beyond your obvious directorate/division)
- Investigate previous projects funded by the agency (read abstracts)
- Colleagues and professional associations
- Congressional appropriations
- MSU resources (Grants Resource Center, OSP, Office of Research)
- Contact program officers
- Use agency/sponsor guidance early and often

*SRA AL/MS chapter meeting July 21, 2017*
Federal grant programs have become a political means of directing social change.

- Do they want partnerships?
- Innovation?
- Advancement of knowledge?
- Pipeline for future?
- Specific outcomes?
- Preliminary data?

*Really do your homework here.*

You will need to know as much as you can about the agency to be successful with some of the persuasive techniques.
ANALYSIS OF THE FUNDING AGENCY

- Determines who is the audience (officers/reviewers) and characterizes their expertise and role in selection;
- Clarifies expectations for accessibility of information in the charge to reviewers;
- Helps to define what is a fundable idea and how it supports the agency’s research investment priorities.

A successful proposal allows the funding agency to form a partnership with the submitting institution and investigator that will help carry out the agency’s vision, mission, and strategic goals.
FEDERAL PRIORITIES

- Check GRC’s FY 17 Proposed Budget Guide
  http://www.aascu.org/GRC/MultiSection.aspx?id=17813

- Check executive and legislative sites for upcoming initiatives and legislation.
  https://www.whitehouse.gov/briefing-room/legislation

- Next Seminar Series Program on Federal Agency Updates:
  Thursday, Feb. 2, 2017 3:00 – 4:30 p.m. @ Bost
“It depends”

The best hook you can have is the one that is best aligned with the agency’s current priorities.
The Art of Persuasion

Persuasive writing is the use of logic, reason, and emotion to convince readers to join the writer in a certain point of view.

We are bombarded with persuasive writing everyday:

Advertisements
Editorials
Speeches
Cartoons/Memes
Social Media
Blogs
“Fake news”
So...beyond writing to meet stated requirements, we are trying to convince readers (in this case, reviewers) that our proposal is worthy of funding.
WRITING FOR REVIEWERS: KNOW YOUR AUDIENCE

You must match the problem at hand with the appropriate emotional cue. In the case of proposal writing, here’s what we know about our audience…

Reviewers are tasked with evaluating how well a proposal meets the agency’s mission and the established merit review criteria. Lucky for us, these expectations are not secret.

So, what do we know about the reviewer(s)?
• May or may not be subject-area expert
• Usually a volunteer
• Heavy work load
  Write for a reader who will likely be busy, rushed, and tired
  Place major points so they are easy to find (follow solicitation precisely)
EMOTIONAL APPEAL

Reviewers are people and people aren’t always logical. Persuasive techniques attempt to sway feelings or actions. Examples of this include:

- **Appeal by Association** – desire to belong, use of testimonial of expert, connects outcome to a positive image or idea
  
  Ex: Breakthroughs in composite materials place US manufacturers in a position to thrive in the global marketplace.

- **Emotional Appeal** – examples include techniques to induce pity and/or fear, or use of flattery
  
  Ex: K-12 educators today face challenges never before been in the classroom.

- **Loaded Language** – use of words and phrasing with either strong positive or negative connotations
  
  Ex: The outlook for a child born into poverty today is dismal.
WRITING PERSUASIVELY

For the purposes of proposal writing, we want to focus on:

- Alarm
- Mystique
- Prestige
- Safety
- Power
- Innovation
- Passion
EMOTIONAL TRIGGERS

- **Alert** – creates urgency in areas of critical need and induces a fear of losing something or “missing out.”
- **Mystique** – arouses curiosity using unanswered questions. “What is possible?”
- **Passion** – ignites sensory pleasure or experience; expressive (think: arts and social sciences)
- **Power** – exercises authority and control; demonstrates leverage
- **Prestige** – signals hierarchy, achievement, and rank; stokes competitiveness
- **Innovation** – defies absolutes; rebellion. Shattering norms

*Remember to select the most appropriate cue for the problem, for the goals of the funder, and for the capacity of the applicant.*
HOW TO BE PERSUASIVE IN EACH PROPOSAL COMPONENT

- Title
- Introduction
- Problem Statement/ Significance
- Capacity (institutional and personnel) Methods/research plan (including timeline)
- Budget
- Evaluation
- References
- Abstract
RESEARCH PLAN/ PROJECT NARRATIVE

- Innovative concept
- Converted to measurable objectives
- Clearly and succinctly written proposal
- MATCHED TO THE FUNDING AGENCY’S GOALS
- Significant impact
- Transportable model
- Broader impact
- Sustainable after funding ends
INTRODUCTION

• Avoid a generic introduction. Introduce the problem immediately.

• Description of the organization(s) seeking the grant and its eligibility to apply for the grant

• Demonstrate that the goals of the organization are in alignment with the goals and purpose of the funding agency (mission statement)

• Description of the organization’s familiarity with the problem and experience with similar programs/projects
A common mistake in writing proposals is to spend the first critical paragraphs explaining to the reviewer something that he surely already knows and probably has read in all the proposals leading up to yours.

To develop an exciting introduction, you need to identify the kernel of your great idea. How is your idea different from what others will propose? Why is it innovative and exciting?

It is important to demonstrate to the funder that you understand the significance of the topic area and the motivation for the program, but it’s not necessary to discuss those things in the first couple of paragraphs.
PROBLEM STATEMENT

Addresses specific need or reason for study. Using persuasive writing tools, can you concisely answer:

1. The problem is the gap between what is the current state and the ideal.
2. Who or what is affected? How are they affected and to what extent? What is the magnitude?
3. What is the significance? Why does it matter? What happens if no one acts? What is the urgency? And why now?
4. What are the causes? What is the evidence of the cause? Be careful with causal vs. correlational relationships.

You must extend your argument to discuss the likely impact your research will have in advancing the field and creating new knowledge, both in your research area and possibly in other research fields as well.
PROBLEM STATEMENT / SIGNIFICANCE

- Provide examples of how the problem aligns with the funder’s and applicant’s mission (MSU).
- Focus on the beneficiaries, not the applicant organization.
- Document the problem in the community (geographical, cultural, or other context).
- Involve people who are affected by the issue.
- Match the organization’s capacity to the problem.
CAPACITY

- Talk only about what you have done, not will do.
- Human resources (are qualifications matched to the role?) Is appropriate effort assigned? Don’t forget administrative support if needed/allowed. If you have Post-docs/grad, etc., demonstrate why you are a good mentor? Are there other stakeholders such as industry or community beneficiaries? Advisory panel? Consultants? Evaluator? Collaborators?
- Facilities and other resources: includes literal office/class/lab space, supplies, laboratories, supplies (technology)
- Institutional support infrastructure (environment) –accounting, project management capacity, departmental, college, institutional support and that of collaborators
- Define expertise and quality of resources

You must convince reviewers you have the capacity to perform, and the institutional infrastructure and commitment to support your project.
METHODS / APPROACH / WORK PLAN

- Tie your goals and objectives directly to your need/problem statement. Are they SMART goals?
- Allow plenty of time to accomplish the objectives.
- Figure out how you will measure the change projected in each objective. If there is no way to measure an objective, it’s not measurable and should be rewritten.
- Focus on innovation and be specific.
- What are limitations, potential challenges, strategies for overcoming those?
- Carefully match activities to stated objectives and goals.
The budget is the fiscal expression of the project. It is every bit as important as the narrative/project design and methodology.

Reviewers are looking to see that you understand what it takes to complete the scope of your work.

A competitive budget is one that requests the amount needed to complete the proposed project – no more, no less – and that is based on real costs.

Less is not always more!
Funding agencies stress the importance of proper assessment of the achievement of project goals and objectives – Are you (and to what extent are you) doing what you said you would do?

Describe methods of evaluation, processes, tools, limitations. Why did you choose these?

Provide both formative (process) and summative performance and evaluation measures.

Evaluation is part of required project and performance reporting for most awards.

Evaluation measures should be linked directly to project goals and objectives for consistency.
Dissemination describes a plan for sharing results of the project. What will be reported and in what form(s) will outcomes be shared? Typically required of research projects.

To what extent is the project replicable or transferable in similar populations/environments (broader impact)? Why does this matter to the agency? How can results be shared that best benefit the agency’s agenda?

How will the project be sustained at the end of the project period? Funders want to know in very concrete ways that their investment will continue to make an impact. What steps are you taking to ensure sustainability?
You must know (and effectively demonstrate knowledge of) the current state of the problem to be studied.

If review panel is known and includes relevant scholars, they should be included.

Be sure to call attention to collaborative publications involving project personnel – which demonstrates further knowledge AND evidence of established collaborations (especially those previously funded by the sponsor)
ABSTRACT

- You must craft a persuasive argument presenting the merit, significance, rigor, and relevance of your research that makes the reviewers want to fund it;
- The reviewer will probably read this section first to gain an overview of the proposed project.
- Usually written last in order to convey a comprehensive and enthusiastic picture of objectives and purposes of the project and how they will be achieved.
- Use funding agency’s language whenever possible and follow any special formatting requirements
- Leave them wanting more!
WAYS TO WOW

- Evaluation results/service outcomes
- Growth of services
- Success stories
- Significant awards
- Proven expertise
- Strong community support
- One-of-a-kind services
- Cutting edge approach
Think back to your one-sentence research focus area.

Using the “Ways to Wow,” share with a neighbor something impressive about your work or your/MSU’s capacity to do the work.
TOOLS OF THE TRADE
THE VALUE OF SPECIFICITY

Write with specificity.

• Specificity grounds the research vision and goals in the key performance details unique to your research objectives, and thereby illuminates the importance of your research for reviewers

• The basic role of specifics in the research narrative is to make your research vision and goals believable, convincing, and memorable to reviewers. Specifics will convince reviewers of your capacity to perform, of the reasonableness of your research plan and objectives, and of the promise that your research will advance the field or the strategic mission of a funding agency in some important way.

• Better to overshoot the details in the first drafts than have to elaborate in later iterations.
PAINT THE PICTURE

• Specifics are proof that you know something about achieving your research goal

• Who or what will change?

• How many?

• How much change will take place?

• What type of change?

• When?
STYLISTIC TOOLS TO ENGAGE YOUR AUDIENCE

- Reveal significance early and avoid generic introductions! – 1st impressions matter!
- Repetition (make your point in several ways…data, anecdotal, reference, etc.)
- Reasons why (So what? Most people just want a reason to agree with you)
- Consistency (convince the reader early to agree with a general statement most agree with)
- Social proof (use your references!)
- Comparisons (similes and metaphors)
- Qualify your audience (ego)
- Offer a glimpse into the future
KEEP IT EXCITING

- Address potential obstacles head on. Suggest strategies for overcoming barriers
- Vary sentence structure.
- Avoid jargon-laden or heavily scientific phrasing.
- The Rule of 3
- Funneling
- Present the next steps – demonstrate vision
- Use storytelling (if appropriate to agency)
VISUAL APPEAL

- Headers are your friend
- Use visuals (tables, charts, figures) to illustrate *important* points
  - Label and title each table/chart or figure
  - Place visual after introduced in text
  - Size appropriately—large visuals suggest you don’t have much to say
  - Consider limitations on reviews (black and white, size, etc.)
MAKE IT HAPPEN

- Set up your environment for productivity
- Accountability
- Proofread. Sloppy work = sloppy grant management
MAKING IT HAPPEN

THE NEUROBIOLOGY OF WRITING

HOW IT'S SUPPOSED TO WORK:

- CONTROL HANDS
  - Temporal Lobes
    - Motor cortex
- TRANSMIT COMMAND
  - Brain stem
- ACTIVATE MUSCLES
  - Motor neuron
- PROCESS LANGUAGE
  - Flexor digitorum
- EXECUTE COMMAND
  - Prefrontal cortex
- SUCCESS!
  - Words
- TYPE

HOW IT USUALLY WORKS:

- CONFUSION
  - Prefrontal cortex
- INSECURITY
  - Limbic System
- NO MOTIVATION
  - Anterior cingulate cortex
- FEAR
  - Amygdala
- PANIC
  - Sympathetic System
- HESITATION
  - Inferior frontal gyrus

WWW.PHDCOMICS.COM
“Work is either fun or drudgery. It depends on your attitude. I like fun.”

- COLLEEN C. BARRETT
References:


Gray, Tara, “Publish and Flourish” (2007)

The Grantsmanship Center