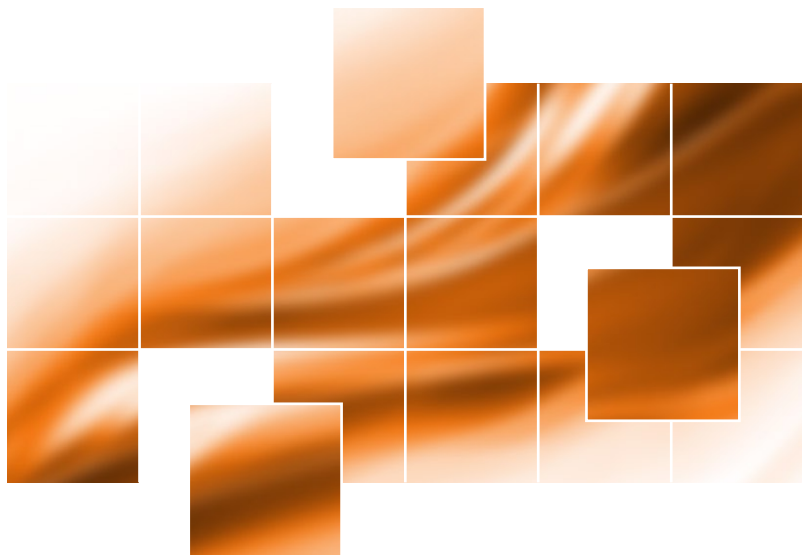


Part 2

A research manager's notebook

Open secrets about writing successful grant proposals

Notes for researchers and research managers



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Introduction

Writing a research grant proposal can be fun; that is, if you know what you're doing.



Words are like bullets. Aim well and you will hit your target cleanly. Say what you want to do simply and directly, and explain how your research will benefit the world.



Use your brain power. Find out all you can about potential donors and their research interests. Donors look to fund promising, novel ideas: ideas that make them understand the world in new ways; ideas that make them believe that the world can change for the better, and that by helping you, they can help to make change happen.



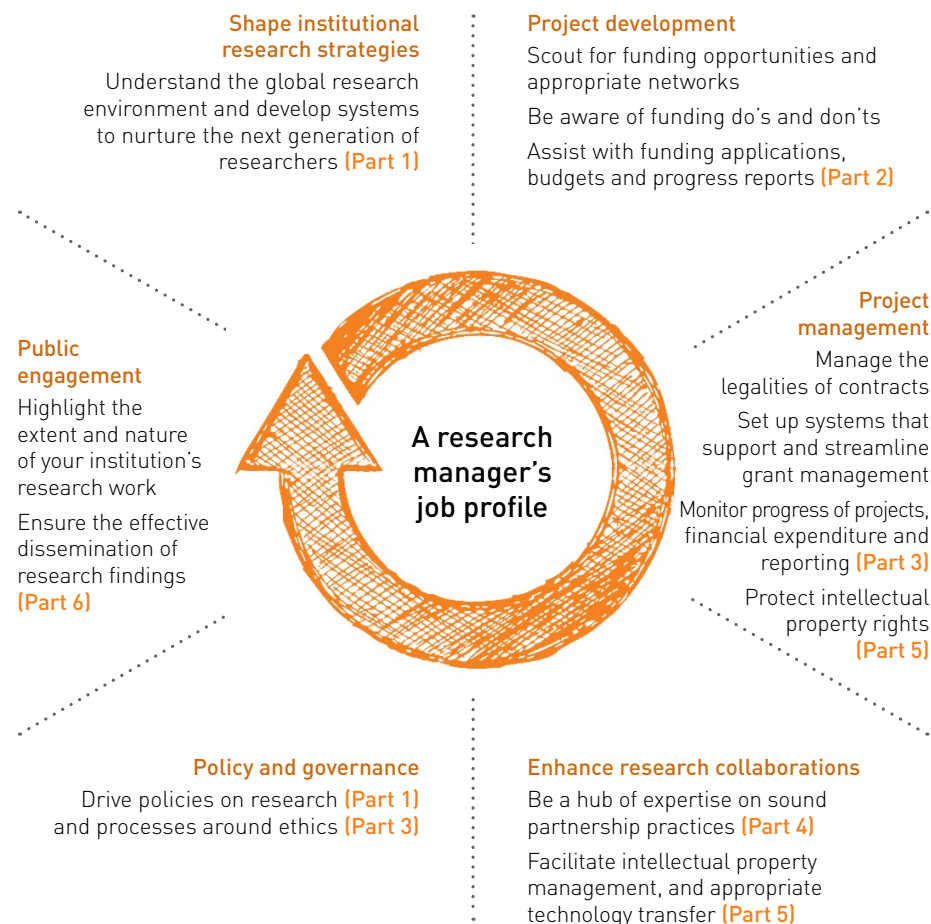
Bring a good attitude. Being passionate about your work and what you hope to achieve always helps, but remember that an expert will read your proposal. Look for what you can do that is unique in terms of opening up new knowledge, as opposed to conforming to what seems trendy, or repeating work that has already been done. Blend skill and focus to create a winning proposal.

This book is the second in a series of six in which research managers based mainly in Africa and the Caribbean share their insights and provide practical guidance. Writing research-grant proposals is an important part of being a researcher. There is simply no way of avoiding the fact that, initially, you have to put down your ideas and work out what you will need to do to complete your research. This task can't be done for you. But writing a good proposal requires in-depth understanding of your field, an ability to write simply and clearly, and an ability to persuade people. These are skills that anyone can learn. This part of the notebook contains hints and tips from successful researchers, research managers and funders. Read on to learn from them...

Remember, this is what research is: donors give you money so that you can put science to work to solve local and global problems.

- Annemia van den Heever, Director of Research Development, Stellenbosch University

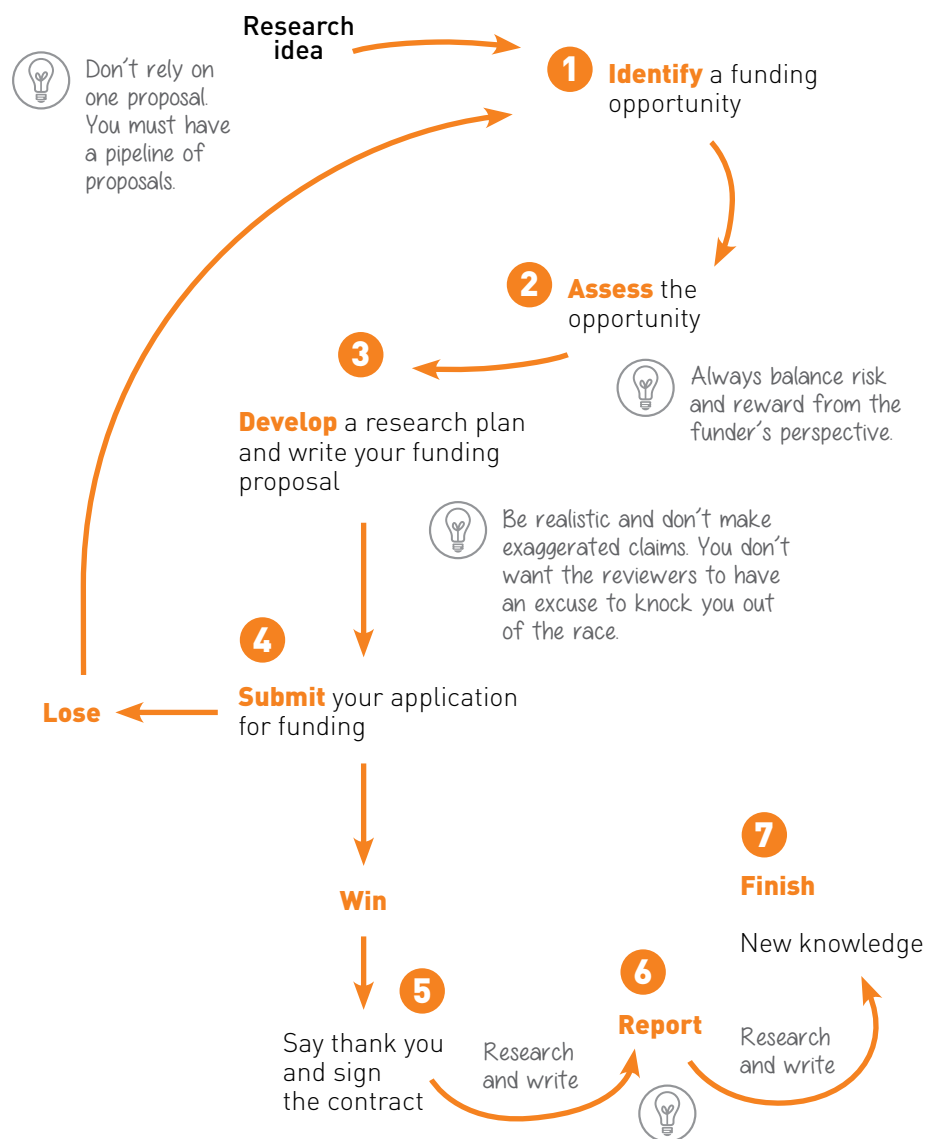
Research management: The skills in brief



©Research Africa

This diagram illustrates the core skills that research managers need, and shows which book in the series contains more information on each skill. (In designing this diagram, we also drew on the core-competency framework developed by the Association of Research Managers in the UK and the US Society for Research Administrators.)

The funding cycle for an emerging researcher



1 Identify a funding opportunity

- Use a funding database, such as *Research Professional*
- Consult the research management office at your institution
- Monitor the websites of potential donors and institutions
- Interact with colleagues both locally and globally on email, in seminars and conferences, and seek out opportunities for partnership
- Scan relevant journals and magazines
- Ask foreign embassies if they provide information on research funded by their countries

2 Assess the opportunities you find

- Filter research grants and eliminate any that don't really fit with your research priorities
- Where there is a good fit, find out more about the donor's objectives via their website
- Make a checklist of what the donor requires and another list of your needs; then compare the two lists and check if there is enough overlap
- Find out if the funder accepts unsolicited proposals, or responds only to applications they receive after issuing a specific call

3 Develop an appropriate application

- Write a rough draft of your proposal, including the problem/s you are addressing, your objective, your methodology or process, budget, likely impact, etc.
- Include only the information that the donor asks for
- Consult colleagues and mentors about your concept and budget, and the general feasibility of your research project, as well whether the application is well written
- Match your language to the language that the funder uses, then cut, prune and omit needless words; revise, revise, and revise the application again, improving it each time, until it is the best you can make it
- Have someone else check your spelling and grammar

4 Submit your application

- Submit the application using the means that the donor requests (online or hard copy)
- Never submit late without first checking if late applications will even be considered
- Inform anyone you have listed as a referee that you have included them
- Thank everyone who helped you

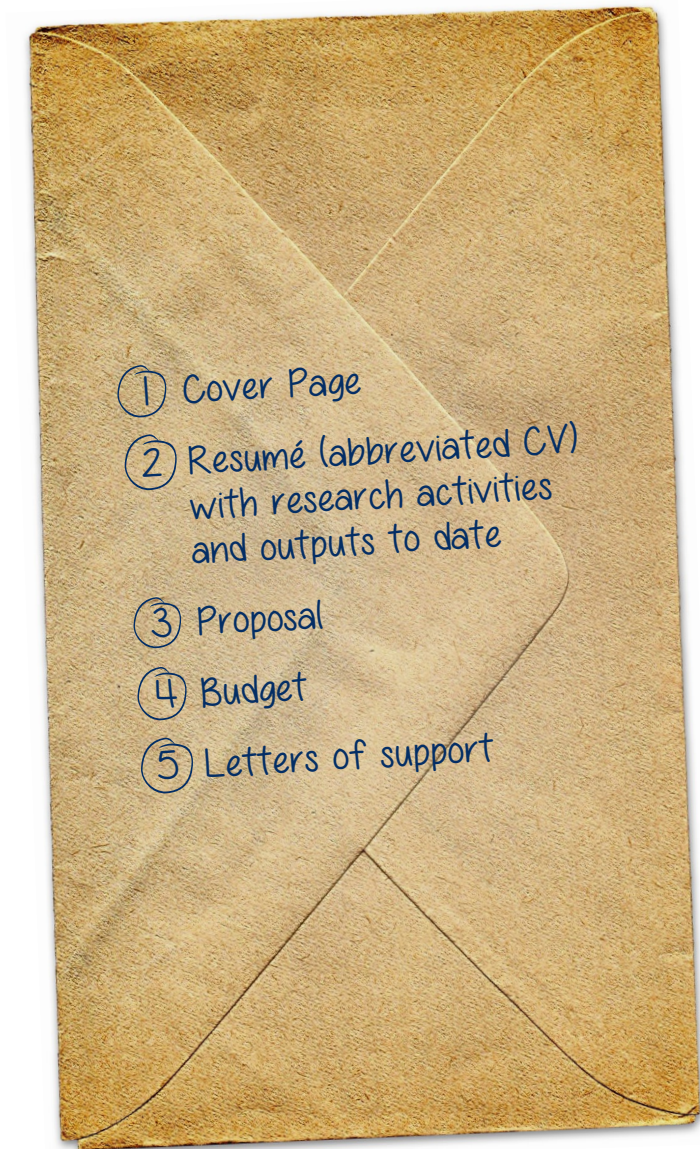
5 Follow up

- If you are successful, first thank the funder
- If you aren't successful, start again from point 1
- Reflect on the process and make sure you learn from what went well and what didn't go so well so that you can make sure that it all goes more smoothly next time

6 Research and write

- Conduct your research, and remember to include the writing of research reports in the schedule

An example of standard documents to include in an application



An overview of research funding: some useful background

Research needs funding. It needs other resources too, but without funding, research can't happen. Generally, governments are expected to fund research through universities and other research institutions, but the governments of many developing countries have too many other priorities and too few resources to fund research adequately. Even some middle-income countries, which have fairly well-funded institutions, cannot afford to fund all of the regional or cross-regional collaborations that are necessary when researchers attempt to address problems that exist at a global scale. So, researchers worldwide often have to seek research funding outside of their institutions, or outside of even their countries. And competition for such funding can be fierce.

Prior to the mid-2000s, funding agencies (also known as donors) tended to fund NGOs and development projects. Since then, donors have increasingly funded research institutions, or researchers who work with NGOs.

Different agencies tend to have different areas of focus, but collectively they tend to prioritise research related to problems that most of us would agree are important. These include poverty alleviation, climate change, sustainable agriculture, food security, clean energy and water, economic development, health, education at all levels, enhancing governance, peace and democracy, etc.

The direction that research is taking in the European context is to focus on the basic challenges: health, food, climate, water, marine resources. We need new and innovative solutions for this - it is no longer all about industrial development. There is a need at a global level to increase research and researchers. Ironically, producing more people for a 'smart' or 'knowledge economy' increases competition not equity. But hopefully, through competition, we will get excellence.

- Declan Raftery, Head of Research Support, Dublin City University

So where does donor money come from exactly?

Some of the world's richer nations, such as the USA, Canada and Germany, etc., have state-run agencies that fund international research. For example, the world's biggest funder of health research is the US government's National Institutes of Health.

However, most of the agencies that support research in the poorer nations are trusts and foundations established by large corporations or wealthy individuals. There are literally thousands of such organisations worldwide that fund research, some of which have massive annual budgets, and others that spend relatively small amounts in very focused and specific ways. Some large corporations give a percentage of their annual profits to foundations they establish. Other trusts and foundations are set up to manage a single lump sum, which they invest in various ways. They then use the capital earned from their investments to fund projects of their choice.

The Wellcome Trust, for example, is the world's second largest funder of health research. This trust was established in the UK in 1936 to administer the fortune of pharmaceutical magnate, Sir Henry Wellcome, and according to its website, currently spends about £600 million each year supporting 'the brightest minds in biomedical research and the medical humanities'. Similarly, Google.org and the Bill and Melinda Gates Foundation use profits earned via their businesses, which they have reinvested in stock markets or in other businesses, to fund research and other development-related projects. On a different scale, Oxford University, like most universities, has funds from which it is able to provide fellowships for eligible students from anywhere in the world.

The difference between a grant and a donation

Annamia van den Heever, Director of Research Development at Stellenbosch University in South Africa, describes a donation as 'disinterested benevolence' in response to a request. In other words, a donation is requested and the donor hands over some funding with no expectation of receiving anything in return, except, perhaps a brief report on how the money was spent.

Grants are very different. They have to be applied for, and all applications go through a strict and formal selection process to get approved. Most research funding is allocated via grants. Therefore, it is important to understand how grant-making processes work, and how to complete a successful research-grant proposal or application.

Finding out about research grants

The most effective way to search for research funding in Africa and the Caribbean is through *Research Professional*. As part of Research Ltd, *Research Professional* collates information from donors worldwide, and advertises over 12 000 funding opportunities each year. Researchers at subscribing institutions can streamline their search for funding, using filters and alerts to ensure that they are kept informed of all the grants that are made available in the fields they are working in. This has led to many successful grant applications, as funding opportunities 'find' you.

If your institution has a research-management office, helping researchers to identify likely funding opportunities is probably one of their roles. Ask them if they can offer you any guidance and help.

Journals and magazines specific to your discipline may contain notices about grant opportunities. Of course, you can also use a search engine, such as Google, but this does not offer a good filter for research funding, and will be time consuming.

In recent years, many funders have become increasingly keen to fund cross-disciplinary collaborations within universities, or interdisciplinary work between universities, as a way of enhancing the relevance and reach of the research they fund. So asking for recommendations and advice from peers and colleagues can be a good idea, but be aware that project teams tend to guard such information quite jealously.

The local embassies of high-income countries are also worth visiting; sometimes they run funding programmes or have information about donors in their own countries who are seeking to fund research in your area. If this is the case, ask the person who is responsible for this work at the embassy to add you to their mailing lists.

Given the trend that favours partnerships for research and funding, common objectives are important, and then funding acts as a kind of glue between partners.

- Declan Raftery, Head of Research Support, Dublin City University

National contact points and European Commission funding

The European Commission is one of the world's largest funders of research and innovation. The Commission puts out calls for proposals under specific programmes, such as the Seventh Framework Programme (FP7) (which ran from 2007 to 2013), and the Horizon 2020 initiative (which will run until 2020). Applying for these funds can be intricate and sometimes difficult. So the European Commission has encouraged countries to establish so-called national contact points, where researchers can find information, guidance and support related to their application. Some countries have several national contact points, and each one is responsible for a different discipline or field of study. They are appointed on the basis of having knowledge and experience of participating in EUC-funded research programmes, as well as an understanding of their country's research strengths in the disciplines for which they are responsible. The national contact points often have information about other funding opportunities too.

For a list of names of individuals and organisations who have agreed to act as national contact points for countries in Africa, the Caribbean and other developing countries, see *Community Research and Development Information Service* (CORDIS). This list should be regularly updated, but many countries maintain their own lists of national contact people, too. So if you don't find a helpful contact person via CORDIS, ask your colleagues if they know of other local contact people who might help you.

What to look out for in calls for research-grant proposals

The following examples show different types of information required by individual donors as well as the different ways you are asked to apply. Look out for how well the advertisements 'match' your work and check whether or not there are any restrictive criteria or a specific application form that you have to use.

The Wellcome Trust invites applications for its new investigator awards in medical history and humanities. These support world-class researchers who are no more than five years from appointment to their first academic position but can already show that they have the ability to innovate and drive advances in their field of study. Research in medical history and humanities should address the important questions at the interface of science, medicine and the wider humanities including the social sciences and the arts. Research questions must be historically grounded, but interaction with the wider medical humanities is encouraged.

Applicants must be based in the UK, Republic of Ireland or a low- or middle-income country, and should have an established academic post at an eligible higher education or research institution.

Funding is worth up to £200,000 over a maximum of five years to cover research expenses; travel, subsistence and funding for collaborative activities; capacity-building and public engagement initiatives, and research leave; and research, symposia and dissemination activities. The award does not include salary costs.

Closing date 06 Sep 13

Deadline information: Optional CV details check due 19 July; main application 6 September 2013. This call is repeated once a year.



Note the criteria attached to this application!

Note that the advert gives no detail on how to apply for this grant other than saying that 'applications are invited'.

First find out from the donor if there is an application form, or if a general grant proposal would be ok

Look out for the detailed instructions in the advertisement

Since only charitable institutions are eligible for this grant, you would have to partner with a local NGO to qualify

Each year the Royal Numismatic Society awards research grants from its various prize funds. The Price, Lowick, Kreitman, CNG, and Marshall funds are all administered in the same way. These are available to Fellows and non-Fellows alike, and the field of numismatic research which each fund encompasses is listed below. The grants are usually less than £1000, but larger grants will be considered. Awards are usually made in April or May of each year. It is important that the comments of referees are received before the deadline and it is the applicant's responsibility to ensure this.

There is one standard application form which should be used for all applications for RNS funds. All fields of this form should be completed and word limits should not be exceeded.

Completed application forms should be sent by 1 March each year to either: rns_secretary@hotmail.co.uk or RNS Research Grants, The Royal Numismatic Society, c/o The Department of Coins and Medals, British Museum, Great Russell Street, London WC1B 3DG.

Please note that applicants are responsible for ensuring that references reach the Society by the closing date. The awards should be announced within two months of the closing date.

The Harold Hyam Wingate Foundation invites applications for its developing countries grants. These grants give support to organisations working in developing countries for projects in the foundation's priority fields such as music and the arts. However, the foundation especially welcomes applications to address the particular problems of water supply. The foundation is willing to consider projects that may not qualify for public funding or attract other major funding bodies. Only charitable organisations are eligible.

Deadline information Deadlines on: 24 June 2013, 2 September 2013, 9 December 2013.

Award type Directed grants to institutions, research groups etc; Development (Africa/Caribbean)

Choosing the right funding partner

Funders fund well-planned projects that closely match their own values and objectives.



Once you have identified a likely research grant, the first step is to make sure that you and the funder are a good match. Mine the internet for information about the donor. Work out what the value of their grant is, and find out what kinds of research they have funded in the past. If possible, try to meet or find out about their local representative. If there isn't a local representative, find out who is responsible for managing research grants made by that funder to projects in your country or region (the information on page 12 about national contact points might be helpful here too).

Simply completing grant application forms is often not enough. Obtaining a grant often depends on your reputation and the network of mentors and colleagues you have built up. Your institution's reputation also counts, so it is vital that you know your institution well – try to find out which funders have supported its research efforts in the past, and how that went.

The critical issue is not always the proposal.
The critical issue is your networks and connections.
Proposal writing comes at the end of a fundraising process, not the beginning. do your research, find the matches and the connections.

- Shelagh Gastrow, Executive Director, Inyathelo

Read the small print ... twice

Usually a call for research-grant applications comes with an application form. Before you begin filling in the form, read it and all correspondence that comes with it *extremely carefully*. As with any relationship, the devil is in the detail. Does the application form stipulate that the money is to be used only for data collection, and not for travel expenses? Does the form state that certain kinds of expenditure (such as the purchase of laboratory equipment or administrative salaries) will not be covered?

Now ask yourself: is this call for applications in line with the research project I have in mind? Will the funding help my research, and will my research help the funder?

Remember: a funder who puts out a call for research on *livestock in Kenya* is not going to be interested in a project that is researching livestock in *Namibia* or *sunflowers* in Kenya, no matter how well you write the proposal. The objective of your research must match the aims and objectives of the funder.

If you think you have found the perfect match, return to the application form.

Getting down to work

Don't write anything until you have read the form a few times and are sure that you know what you need to do. Remember that writing a research-grant proposal is an opportunity to show what you have to offer both the funder and society more generally.

Diarise the deadline

If you prioritise just one thing in the application process, let it be meeting the deadline. One of the most common reasons that applications fail is because they are not submitted on time. Submitting late is probably worse than not submitting at all; it creates an impression that you are unable to plan your work or prioritise your time; that you are unreliable and may not be worth supporting. So, before you do anything else, diarise the deadline and work backwards to calculate how much time you can spend on planning, writing, editing and having your application checked.

Make time to write

No successful research-grant proposal can be written in a day. Make sure you have plenty of time to gather your thoughts, collate all the information you need, and to write a clear and well-thought-out proposal. If you have never completed a funding application before, try to set aside about fourteen days over a period of about a month to pull all the necessary information together. If you are setting up a research consortium, with multiple research partners and several research sites, you may need more time. Either way, until you become highly experienced at writing such proposals, you will probably want to edit and change what you have written many times before you are satisfied that it is perfect.

Make a checklist of requirements

Make a list of all the forms and documents that need to be included in the final grant proposal package. Then tick them off when you have completed each one. Tick them off again as you put each one into the envelope you are going to send. If the application has to be submitted electronically, make a special folder for all the attachments that you are going to email or upload. Remember to keep a hard copy of the whole application for your own records.

Focus your proposal on what the funder is offering and never add information that the funder has specifically noted should not be included. Adding in extras could jeopardise your chances of winning the grant, especially if there are lots of other applications and the funder has too much to read and many options to choose between.

- Professor John Parkington, University of Cape Town

Play to your strengths

The reputation of your institution, as well as the qualifications and reputations of the individual researchers in your team, are really important. Make sure you obtain CVs from all members of your team, and are fully aware of their competencies and achievements so that you can summarise and highlight these if required to do so. Provide this information only if it has been specifically requested, and keep it short - about 150 words about each of the lead researchers in your team should be sufficient.

Even if you don't need to submit CVs with the grant application, having information about your research team is worthwhile for all sorts of reasons, and will come in handy later in the process.



Persuading your readers

Think about who is going to read your research-grant proposal. Usually, a team of specialists reads all the proposals, and relays their opinions to a selection committee. The specialists' recommendations help the committee to reach a decision.

Like most of us, these specialists and selection-committee members suffer from having too much information and too little time. The more concise and to the point you can be, the more likely it is that your whole application will be read. Make sure that you provide only the information that is asked for. Don't get carried away and start adding information that you happen to find interesting.

Write clear, short sentences. Ideally, limit yourself to one idea per sentence. Try to avoid using adjectives and adverbs, which tend to be seen as fluff and often add little to what you are trying to say.

Don't see writing proposals as a waste of your time. Refining your application will enhance your ability to excel at other writing tasks such as research reports, journal articles, chapters in books, etc.

Remember to give the funder exactly what they ask for in the application form. Don't be longwinded, and don't add in extras (especially long documents) that they haven't requested.



Speak their language

All funders have certain aims and values that reflect what they see as important, and indicate how they wish to make an impact on the world. Try to show how your work incorporates their own aims and values.

Look carefully at their websites, and any other information you can find about

them, and analyse the words they use. Some of the terminology and technical language in the application forms may be unfamiliar. With careful reading you can almost always work out what is required. Don't be too proud to circle (in pencil that you can rub out later) any words you don't know. Then look them up so that you are left with no doubt as to what each word in the application form means.

Note, also, that different funders use different words to mean the same thing. For example, instead of the word 'objective', funders might use words such as 'mission', 'research question', 'purpose', 'intention', 'goal', or 'target'. A good trick is to use the same words that the donor uses. However, make sure that you fully understand all the words you use. If you use technical terms out of context, the funders may think you don't know what you are talking about.

Here are some words that are used interchangeably in 'donorspeak':

- problem / need / context / issue / situation
- purpose / objective / mission / goal / outcome / vision / target
- activities / actions / project plan / research methods
- inputs / resources / finances / capital investment
- indirect costs / overhead costs / administrative costs / facility costs
- results / outputs / products
- impact / influence / uptake

Be clear about your objective and that which you want funded. Take time and make an effort. The more you plan, the better.

- Russel Ally, Ford Foundation

Formulate a clear objective

Your objective is the first thing that a funder is going to read when considering an application. Therefore make sure that you conceptualise the problem you want to address and the objective of your research carefully and write this very clearly. Ideally, aim to capture your objective in one sentence. Never use more than three sentences or a short paragraph. One way to achieve this is to use SMART objectives, which will help to make your aims competitive, eye-catching and to the point. SMART objectives are objectives that are:

- **Specific** (detailed, pointed and not vague)
- **Measurable** (you can track its progress and measure how close you are to your goal)
- **Attainable** (the goal is reachable and circumstances exist for you to achieve it)
- **Realistic** (what you want to achieve is not a dream, you have calculated the time and effort involved and are clear about your intentions and your capacity)
- **Time bound** (there are deadlines, in particular a date to start and a date for completion)

To write a SMART objective takes time and much rewriting. Each time you rewrite, try to be more specific, more concise, until the words are crystal clear.

It could happen to you...

It is easy to see why the following objective passes the SMART test, and why the proposal earned \$225 000 from the Global Agricultural Foundation* in 2012.

The problem: Agriculture is the backbone of Country X's economy and it is central to the government's development strategy, but although the agricultural sector employs more than 75% of the country's workforce, and accounts both directly and indirectly for approximately 51% of Country X's gross domestic product, little is known about the scale of livestock farming, livestock diversity or the distribution of livestock farms.

The objective: 'A team of eight researchers at the Livestock Research Unit of the Agricultural College of Country X will research the types and extent of livestock farming in the country. A comprehensive report will be published and an online database and website will be created. The project will be presented in its entirety four years after the start of the project at the sub-Saharan Agricultural Summit in Botswana in November of 2016.'

Note how directly the objective responds to the problem and how **S**pecific, **M**easurable, **A**ttainable, **R**ealistic and **T**ime-bound this objective is.

* The name of this organisation has been changed.

Base your action plans and outcomes on your objective

As soon as you have a SMART objective, your plan of action will probably flow from it quite logically. And once your plan is clear, the writing of the proposal should fall into place fairly easily too. In the plan, summarise the actions you will take to reach your objective, and list the people who will be involved in each part of the process. Any outputs or tangible products that will result from the research are an important part of the plan, and should be mentioned in your objective.

Calculate the costs

Once the actions and outputs are listed, you can work out how much the research will cost. Putting a budget together can be intimidating if you have never done one before, but budgeting is not a mystery – it is a skill that is relatively easy to learn.

Application forms often include a budget template to guide you. But, if not, familiarise yourself with your research institution's own budgeting processes, and use these to guide you instead. If there is no research-management office that can help, try to find someone in your institution's administration or finance department who can assist. See also the publication by ESSENCE on Health Research, *Five Keys to Improving Research Costing in Low-and Middle-Income Countries*, which is available online, and contains lots of advice and useful case studies.

Be guided by the value of the grant for which you are applying, and be realistic about what you ask for. If the grant excludes equipment, make sure that you don't include equipment costs in your budget.

Indirect costs, overhead costs or facility costs and administrative costs, are terms that funders use interchangeably. They refer to costs that can be linked to several projects simultaneously, and cannot be readily identified as being incurred solely as a result of a single project or activity. Make sure you know whether the grant you are seeking covers such costs and, if so, work out how to calculate them. The *Five Keys to Improving Research Costing in Low-and Middle-Income Countries* contains quite a bit of information about this.

Cost properly, don't cut corners or inflate costs, and don't forget to include the indirect costs.
- Shelagh Gastrow, Executive Director, Inyathelo

Explain the potential impact

To explain the impact of your work is to answer the question: how different will the world be if this research is carried out?

Impact is about measuring the significance of your research findings (outcomes), and working out how you will make your findings known (via outputs). In other words, if you can measure how widely researchers or policymakers in various economic, social, environmental, educational, policy or research arenas *respond to your outcomes and/or cite your outputs*, you will be able provide evidence of impact.

One helpful way of understanding the difference between impact and outcome is to consider the process of policy development. A policy document is an *output*, but the adoption of a policy can have a long-term *impact* and change behaviours.

Impact is difficult to measure as it can take a long time for the impact of an intervention to be felt. Because of this, some funders, but certainly not all, have stopped asking for impact measures to be included in funding applications. One mistake researchers make is to state the impact of research projects in terms that are too broad to be measurable. For example, one applicant claimed that the impact of a specific health intervention would result in 'a healthy community, free from infectious diseases'. Can you see how huge this claim is?

It may be useful to make the distinction between *qualitative* and *quantitative* assessments of impact. A *qualitative* assessment of impact includes a *description of specific outcomes* and changes that may occur as a result of the research taking place, and the findings being disseminated. A *quantitative* assessment of impact may be based on one or more *measures of outcomes* and outputs. For example, citation indexes and document-download statistics provide quantitative ways of measuring research impact. The website [Beyond Impact: Measuring Research, Making a Difference](#) offers some useful online resources related to this.

Include a summary

If your research-grant proposal is a long document, say more than six pages, include a very short summary of your research project on the first page. The summary should give a brief outline of your objective, planned outputs and the impact that your research will have. Make sure that the summary takes up less than a page.

Be prepared to submit ongoing reports

Grant money is often paid out in tranches over a period of time, say every six months over the life of the project, or on completion of certain project milestones. In almost all cases, reports have to be handed in according to agreed deadlines before funders can release the next tranche of funding.

Reporting must be taken seriously. It annoys funders to be ignored on this level. Read your contract, know your obligations and tell the funder about your breakthroughs or set-backs.

- Tsakane Bok, Funding Director,
Finnish Embassy to South Africa

Remember that funders also have networks, and they share information with one another. Make sure that you manage your reputation well when it comes to writing reports. If you fail to send in the necessary feedback, or if you compile them carelessly, you may lose out when it comes to your next funding application. Your institution's reputation may suffer, and you may even put your colleagues' future research projects at risk.

On writing

There is just no way around it: being an effective researcher includes mastering the skill of writing. Plans, proposals, papers and books all require you to write.

Writing shouldn't be seen just as something you do at the final stages, or only as a way of explaining what research you have done. Writing can be a way of refining your thinking. It can help you to develop, clarify and test your ideas. Basically, writing should be done from the beginning of a research project.

- Brian Martin, University of Wollongong, Australia

Most of us tend to 'binge write' in big blocks of time when our deadlines are nearly upon us, but many experts suggest that writing is a bit like fitness, the more you write the fitter you become. When writing a research-grant proposal you will need this writing fitness. So it can be good to get into a habit of writing 15 to 30 minutes every day. Keep the time short enough so that making time to write doesn't seem daunting. You'll be surprised how easy writing begins to seem, how polished your writing becomes, and how many more creative ideas come your way. Just remember that writing for yourself and writing for an external audience are very different things.

You need to be able to express yourself to readers in a simple, accurate and interesting way. The content, format, sentence structure, vocabulary, language, punctuation and spelling all leave a lasting impression on the reader.

- Robin Drennan, Director of Research Development,
University of the Witwatersrand, South Africa

Remember you have to entice your readers into reading your entire document. You have to capture their attention and keep their interest throughout. A good proposal, like most good writing, is interesting, clear and persuasive.

Writing a winning proposal is done one word at a time. Some you will delete, some will stick. Slowly the proposal will grow until you have something you can be proud of.

Seven steps to writing a winning proposal

All winning proposals have three things in common:
a good idea; a good fit and a good plan:

A good idea has elements of novelty and creativity, is significant for a field of study or has useful applications or potential impact.

A good fit means understanding that funders give money to satisfy their own needs, so make sure your research will help further the funder's goals.

A good plan needs to take account of time, resources, expertise and skills in a logical manner.

- Rob Drennan, Director of Research Development,
University of the Witwatersrand

- 1 **Start with the problem** and explain how your research is going to be able to contribute towards resolving it. Provide the context (background) in which the problem exists in three sentences or less. Be realistic; don't be tempted to choose huge problems that you have no control over. Even if you do want to change the whole world, you have to start somewhere, and work one step at a time.
- 2 **State your objective**, that is, how the work you plan to do will address the problem you identified. Now make sure the objective is a SMART one. Be specific about what do you plan to do, as well as how, when, where, etc. List the outputs that you plan to generate. These are tangible products, such as a research paper, a laboratory report, a new drug, or a collection of artefacts – something that has a material form, that you can touch, and show to others.

- 3 **Clarify your methodology**; this will be discipline specific, but make sure your methodology is theoretically sound and appropriate to the problem you are trying to tackle.
- 4 **Work out who needs to be involved and what they will do** to make your objective a reality. This is a good place to include a simple Gantt chart.
- 5 **Calculate what the research will cost**: include all the time and the resources you need to complete the work.
- 6 **Describe the impact** your project will have. Say how you are going to monitor the work you are doing and what influence your research is going to have, locally or globally, and how you are going to share your results with others.
- 7 **Submit on time**, and in the way that the donor has stipulated. If the donor requires a hard copy, hire a courier to take it from your door to the donor's door. If the donor asks for an electronic copy only, do not bother them with a hard copy; send the application via email. If the donor requires the application to be filled in online, make sure you know how to do this long before the deadline arrives. Do what the donor stipulates.

To sum up

State the problem

It is important that this is written in an exciting way. The opening lines must capture the reader's imagination as this will be the first thing they read.

1

State your objective

Research-grant proposals often talk about an overall aim with many objectives. It is in this section that you list your proposed outputs. If one of your outputs is to publish your research, name the journals you plan to submit to otherwise it looks as if you haven't planned ahead.

2

Clarify your methodology

Generally, methodology is discipline specific and more significant for research related to the social sciences. Briefly justify your choice of methodology in relation to appropriate theory, but don't get long-winded. Remember the reviewers are experts in your field so you need to inform them, not educate them.

3

Work plan

Link this to your objective and demonstrate the feasibility of your project. Describe who will do what, when, and with what resources. Use a simple Gantt chart to show your schedule.

4

Budget

Create a budget by analysing the individual tasks needed to complete each objective. Proposal budgets directly reflect the depth of project planning and speak to the credibility of the researchers. Separate your budget into clear line items such as salaries, operating costs, capital costs, and indirect costs.

5

Consider your impact

Unless the funder states that this is not necessary, outline what you expect the results of your research to be and state how you will measure whether or not they are achieved.

6

Submit on time

Enough said already 😊.

7

This could be you...

A good tool for planning a project and for writing a proposal is Logical Framework Analysis, and many funders encourage applicants to use this approach. For more information, see the [*Guide to the Logical Framework Approach*](#), which was developed by the EU, SIDA and others, and is available online.

If you are good at creating clear diagrams, consider creating an infographic to give funders a visual overview of how you see your research project. On the next page is an example of a diagram developed by Research Africa.

Theory of Change

Impact Level:

Impact is only evident after a long time

Pathways to Impact

- ① Research uptake
- ② Policy implemented
- ③ Evaluation of uptake and implementation begins

Outcome Level:

Outcome mapping helps clarify what is to be accomplished, with whom, and how. An outcome is measured in terms of behavioural change.

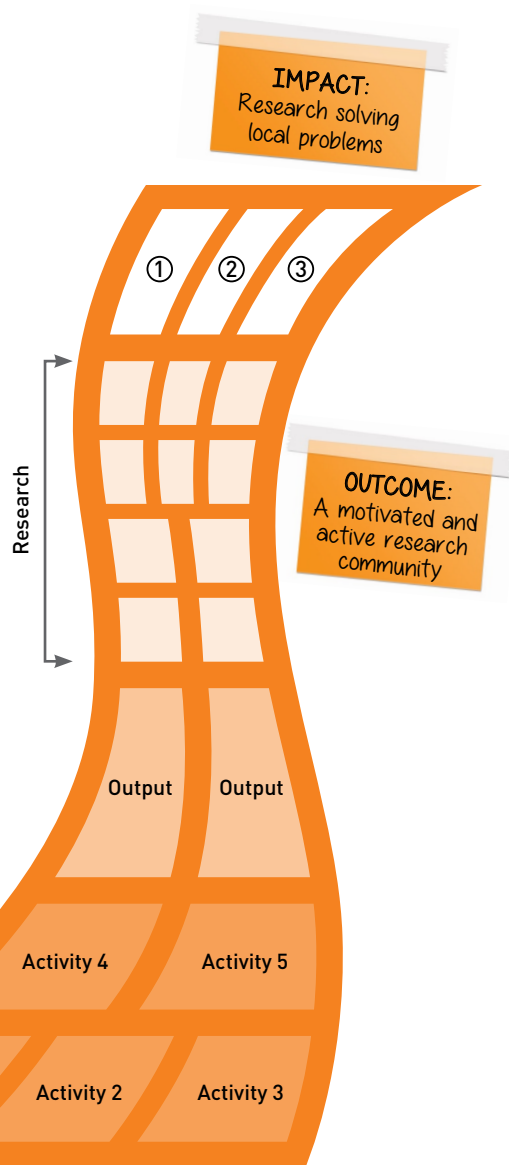
Output Level:

Outputs are tangible products

Approaches

Problem level

PROBLEM: A moribund research community



Tips from the funders

Based on interviews with funders and listening to their conference presentations, here are some key points of advice directly from them.

- Funders don't see researchers, or their institutions, as beggars, so don't act like one.
- Funding organisations have their own strategic objectives. They have annual budgets for grants that they have to allocate, and they are most likely to spend their budgets on well-planned proposals that match their strategic objectives.
- Be open: state upfront whether or not you have additional funds from another source.
- Make sure that you have mechanisms for monitoring and evaluating your project in place, right from the start.
- Funders want to be able to trust you; they expect you to tell the truth, and to do your best to keep all your promises. However, if you run into problems, share important developments and communicate regularly. Remember that the funder is as invested as you are in the project, and they would much rather know the truth than not hear from you. Never ever hide away or avoid your funder, even if you have really bad news for them.
- Funders value organisations with proper systems and controls.
- Read your contract and know your obligations.
- Position yourself and your work carefully. Visibility is important, and so is leadership. Make sure that you plan a dissemination strategy for your research findings.
- Submit your application on time, giving the donor exactly the information asked for and no more.
- Your first task after receiving confirmation that you have won a grant is to say thank you. After that, be sure to acknowledge the support of your donor in all your outputs.
- In a face-to-face conversation with your donor, don't hog the conversation; listen to what the donor has to say.

The five most common mistakes grant applicants make: this couldn't be you, could it?

1. Failing to read the small print

One of the most common mistakes is not reading the application forms properly, says Ninette Mouton, research-grant manager at the University of Pretoria in South Africa. This leads researchers to apply for funds for aspects of research that are not covered by a particular grant. She advises researchers to write a list of points that the funders want, and another list of items not covered under the grant. Then check if your needs match up with those of the funder.

2. Fear of e-filing

Nthabiseng Motloi, research manager at the University of South Africa, says many researchers struggle with electronic submissions, which have become the norm nowadays. Some funder websites are not user-friendly, and technical errors can occur. 'Researchers get disappointed when the systems crash,' she says. 'Leave time for this part of the process: don't try to e-file your document at the last minute, and check if the research-management office at your institution offers e-filing support,' she adds.

3. Last-minute applications

'Some academics relax until just before the deadline. Then they get into a panic and this is when they make mistakes,' says another research officer. Taking time to prepare and write applications is key. Making sure you have enough time to send completed applications to friends or colleagues to proofread is also a great idea.

4. Confusion over costing

Bavesh Kana, a researcher at the University of Witwatersrand, in South Africa, notes that the financial aspects of a proposal can be particularly tricky. Proposals can be rejected if applicants don't understand terms such as 'direct and indirect costs,' he says. If you aren't certain about how to compile a budget, make sure you get help from someone who is.

5. Failing to ask questions

Some application guidelines are ambiguous and difficult to interpret even after the most meticulous reading. Jannan Dietrich, a researcher at the Perinatal-HIV Research Unit of the University of Witwatersrand, says that when this happens, researchers should contact the funders and ask them to clarify matters. 'Researchers have to build good relationships with funding agencies so as to get instant support when any queries arise,' she says.

Useful resources

Beyond Impact.org *Beyond Impact: Measuring Research, Making a Difference*. Available online, at <http://beyond-impact.org/>

Bill and Melinda Gates Foundation <http://www.gatesfoundation.org>

Collins Dictionary. Available online, at <http://www.collinsdictionary.com/>

Community Research and Development Information Service (CORDIS). Available online at <http://tinyurl.com/c9mhdh5>

ESSENCE on Health Research (2012) *Five Keys to Improving Research Costing in Low- and Middle-Income Countries*. Available online, at <http://tinyurl.com/bpej5h4>

EU, SIDA and the government of Serbia (2011) *Guide to the Logical Framework Approach*. Available online, at <http://tinyurl.com/cc5yyck>

Google.org <http://www.google.org>

National Institutes of Health – grants pages <http://tinyurl.com/d82qzry>

Oxford University – Grants pages <http://tinyurl.com/cocfo7g>

Research Professional. Available online at <http://www.researchresearch.com>

Wellcome Trust <http://www.wellcome.ac.uk>

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