Grant Writing Tips for Research Funding Applications in the Social Sciences and Humanities

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Today’s Outline

• The Insight Grant Panel
• Characteristics of Good Proposals
• Common Weaknesses
• The Writing Process
• Suggestions for Improving Your Writing
• Basic Elements of a SSHRC Application
• Strategies for Developing Good Proposals
  – R. Porter
The Panel
• IG Panelists
  ▪ Barb Hewitt – ORS SSHRC Research Grants Officer
    o PhD in Anthropology
    o Research area – biogeochemical analyses of human remains for mobility and health studies
  ▪ Elyssa Warkentin – SSH Research Facilitator
    o PhD in English Literature
    o Research area - Victorian literature and women’s writing
  ▪ Karen Schwartz – SSH Research Facilitator
    o PhD in Education
    o Research area – issues facing people with intellectual disabilities
• Deadlines for 2015
  - IG Panel Deadline: 08 Sep 2015
  - IG ORS Deadline: 28 Sep 2015
  - PDG Panel Deadline: 02 Nov 2015
  - PDG ORS Deadline: 16 Nov 2015
Characteristics of a Good Proposal
• Well organized
• Clear and concise
• Grabs the reader’s attention with enthusiasm
• Highlights the importance of the proposed research
• Convinces and persuades
• Shows (rather than tells)
• Has new insight(s) into important problems or issues
• Shows reviewers that the PI is aware of the field and knows it well
• Contributes in innovative ways
• Outlines a feasible plan for the work proposed
• Offers preliminary data (if/as required)
Common Weaknesses
• Poor identification of the issue
• Vague and/or unfocused
• Poor/lack of justification for the project
• Dense prose
• Method(s) inappropriate to address issue
• Unreasonable timeline
• Lack of clarity in how money will be spent
• The PI does not have adequate experience
• The PI lacks the necessary credibility in the field
• Lack of partners/appropriate partners
• Lack of connection and logical flow between sections of application
The Writing Process
Preliminary Steps

• Think carefully about the project you are proposing
  ▪ Why is it significant?
  ▪ What impact will it have?
  ▪ In what ways is it innovative?

• Note the importance of the summary to every grant application
• Create a timeline to track your progress
  ▪ Note ORS deadlines
  ▪ Note faculty deadlines
  ▪ (Take them seriously!)
  ▪ Begin writing multiple drafts
• Locate, print off and carefully review instructions/guidelines for your funding opportunity and follow the instructions to the letter
• Take special note of:
  ▪ Attachments
  ▪ Page/word/character limits
  ▪ Margins
  ▪ Font type/size
  ▪ Headings
  ▪ Evaluation criteria
Audience
• Think about your audience (the reviewers/assessors)
  ▪ They are volunteers
  ▪ They may not be experts in your area
  ▪ They have a lot to read in a short space of time
  ▪ They may be cranky – make their job easier!
• Your job is to **persuade** your audience
• Make them your advocate
• Grab their attention early and continue to engage them
• Craft your proposal so that it is a “joy to read”
Suggestions to Improve Writing
• BE CLEAR AND CONCISE
  ▪ Organize your ideas
  ▪ Use clear language (bigger words aren’t necessarily better) – your proposal must be easy to understand
  ▪ Do not use jargon and acronyms
  ○ If you **must** use acronyms, make sure your first reference spells it out in full
- Use active construction – put yourself and your team in the picture
- Avoid “empty” or meaningless phrasing
- Make every word count
- Length matters so don’t add extra words
  - Extra pages will be discarded before they reach the reviewers
- Watch for inconsistencies (format, style, content)
• Make it “readable” by:
  ▪ Creating white space
  ▪ Using headings
  ▪ Using **bold** type or *italics* for emphasis, but beware of overuse

• Consider using bullets

• A table or figure may be an effective way to present certain information
• Use the recognized citation style in your field (and not your own personal style!)
• Check and double check your reference list/bibliography
• Plan ahead and write multiple drafts
• It is easy to tell when something has been written in a hurry and/or cut and pasted from something else
• Ensure your finished product has no:
  ▪ Typos
  ▪ Spelling errors
  ▪ Grammatical errors
  ▪ Mathematical errors
  ▪ Duplication

• Have someone else proofread your work

• Invite colleagues and/or research facilitator to review/comment/edit
Basic Elements of a SSHRC Proposal
Detailed Description

• First paragraph – create roadmap for the reader
  ▪ Issue/problem your proposed work will address
  ▪ Overall purpose (can be broader than proposed project)
  ▪ Specific objectives
    o Clear and measurable
• Literature review/context
  ▪ Build a persuasive and logical case for funding
  ▪ Show how your topic has been addressed thus far
  ▪ Support the rationale for significance of your work
  ▪ Illustrate the relevance of the proposed work to the field
  ▪ Identify and describe the theoretical foundations of and methods for the proposed work
• Significance/Impact/Contribution
  - Include it at the end
  - Provides a strong conclusion to a detailed description
  - Show – don’t tell
Knowledge Mobilization

• Use active voice
• Have a detailed plan
• Be as specific as possible
• Organize the plan
  ▪ Who are your stakeholder groups?
  ▪ What information do you want to share with each of them?
  ▪ How will you share it?
Outcomes & Benefits

• “The intellectual, cultural, societal and economic contributions of social sciences and humanities research”
• Outcomes and benefits are specific
• What knowledge will your work contribute that did not exist before?
Student Training

• Use active voice
• Make yourself part of the mentoring process
• Incorporate SSHRC’s new Guidelines for Effective Research Training:
  ▪ Build both academic (research and teaching) competencies and general professional skills, including knowledge mobilization, that would be transferable to a variety of settings
Include international and/or intersectoral opportunities whenever possible and applicable

Include specific, effective mentoring and institutional support

Summary

• The first impression you make on reviewers
• The one section all committee members will read and/or refresh their memories before reaching consensus on scoring your application
• Successful grant writers sometimes start with the summary (as a scaffold) and then go back and revise as the proposal takes shape
• Use plain language and make it compelling
• Avoid cutting and pasting text from your detailed description: readers encountering the text again in the detailed description may read less closely
Summary Format

• First 1-3 sentences: provide background in a way that hooks your reader

• Clear statement of objectives: bulleted list, can be directly copied from DD (objectives ONLY)

• Brief description of the project: activities, and why are you the right person/team to do it?

• What will be the benefit and impact, within and beyond the academic community?
Tying It Together

• The goal is to present a cohesive document where all the sections of the proposal fit together and support each other
  ▪ Why does this topic matter?
  ▪ What don’t we know?
  ▪ How have others in the field approached similar problems?
  ▪ Why are the methodology and methods (including data sources, data collection and analysis methods) you have chosen appropriate to meet your objectives?
  ▪ Why is this significant?
The Realities of Success

• Few researchers are successful at SSHRC the first time
• The key is to be persistent and re-submit
• Every time you resubmit, your chance of success increases
• Resubmissions should be re-worked in substantives way to be improved – small changes may not be enough
Strategies to Develop Good Proposals – By Robert Porter
Crafting a Sales Pitch – 3 Steps

1. Set the Stage – Lay Out the Problem
   - Get reviewers interested right from the beginning (grab their attention)
   - Show the problem is important needs solving urgently
   - Point out how current knowledge is insufficient to respond and why
   - Explain the benefits of solving the problem
2. State the Theme – Your Solution

- Summarize the idea behind your proposed research
  - Consider using an active voice here to introduce yourself into the project
- Describe the rationale (remember – this is a persuasive argument)
3. Create a Vision ("So What")

- Respond to the "so what" question to show impact, significance, benefit to the field
- What does the world look like with the identified problem solved?

Writing Successful Grants*

In 25 words or less:

1. What are you passionate about?
2. What is the problem and why is it important? What sources or kinds of data can you use to validate the importance of your proposed project?
3. How is existing knowledge or practice inadequate?
4. Why is your idea better?
5. How is it new, unique, different?
6. What will it contribute?
Answer each question in 25 words or less.

* Used with permission of the author, Robert Porter
Questions?
References


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REBEL ADVENTURER TRAILBLAZER
INNOVATOR CHALLENGER REBEL VISIONARY
REBEL PIONEER CREATOR EXPLORER TRAILBLAZER INNOVATOR
ADVENTURER EXPLORER ADVENTURER TRAILBLAZER REBEL PIONEER CREATOR EXPLORER TRAILBLAZER INNOVATOR
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