
Research Administration for Scientists

COMP 918

The Art of Grantsmanship

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Summary

“The Art of Grantsmanship”

By: Jacob Kraicer

- **“Grantsmanship is the art of acquiring peer-reviewed research funding.”**
- **“Good writing will not save bad ideas, but bad writing can kill good ones.”**
- **“Quality of science in applications 10% below cutoff for funding is not significantly different from that in the 10% just above the cutoff.”**

Summary

“The Art of Grantsmanship”

By: Jacob Kraicer

- **Read the agency guidelines/forms carefully.**
 - Does your research “fit”?
 - Is your budget within median funding level?
 - Is your research ready?
 - Published – your track record
 - Pilot studies – preliminary data/results

“Zen in the Art of Grantsmanship”

By: L. Wade Black

“When I’m on a grants panel, the first thing I look at is the ‘one paragraph’ summary of the project, then I look at the budget, then I look at the individual’s (organization’s) history. These three things strongly influence how I look at the rest of the proposal. They aren’t all I consider, but they’re very important!”

TNT



Tim's Ten No-Nonsense Tips for
Successful Proposal Writing

“Failing to Plan is Planning to Fail”

TNT 1: Think, plan, think again, then write a description of your project

- **Title and abstract**
 - **Set first impression**
 - **Used to route to appropriate reviewers**
 - **Write them last**

- **In abstract**
 - **Hypothesis (es) to be tested**
 - **Describe how the proposal is directly related to the agency's mission/objectives**
 - **Tell why the proposal is unique, important, significant and worth supporting**
 - **Briefly describe research plan**

- **Proposed research**
 - **Focused, original, novel, innovative and feasible**
 - **Balance (“sure” and “innovative/risky”)**
 - **State what is known, what is not known and why it is essential to find out**
 - **Preliminary data/studies**

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- **Research design and methods**
 - **Put aims in logical/sequential order**
 - **Brief rationale for each aim**
 - **Outline the design/method to accomplish each aim**
(Why was proposed approach chosen?)

 - **Provide tentative sequence/timeline for project**
(use diagrams or tables where appropriate)

 - **Document collaboration arrangements**
 - **Letters – confirming specific roles (PI/Institution)**
 - **Biographic sketches**

“A genius is a talented person who does his/her homework.”

Thomas Edison

TNT 2: Learn as much as you can about the agency, the program and the program officer.

- Search web sites, ask senior faculty, read
- Be sensitive to “Agency Culture”
 - Terminology
 - Accepted norms
 - Methods of communication
 - Different agencies interpret rules differently

TNT 2: Learn as much as you can about the agency, the program and the program officer.

- Communicate with Program Officer
 - Face-to-face is best (phone/e-mail is ok)
 - Always make an appointment
 - Many federal buildings locked
- Good way to start meeting
 - Describe your project
 - Ask if it fits within goals/budget of the program
 - If no, does it fit elsewhere?
 - Seek feedback
 - Integrate feedback into proposal

TNT 2: Learn as much as you can about the agency, the program and the program officer.

GOAL: Target your proposal to agency objectives and put your face on it!

“Goals are dreams with deadlines.”

Diana Scharf Hunt

TNT 3: Prepare a written proposal development timeline and follow it.

- Work backward from the required mail date
- Assume that things will go wrong
 - Key people go out of town
 - FastLane/Grants.gov gets clogged and slows down
 - So – Build time for the inevitable disasters into your timeline

TNT 3: Prepare and follow a written proposal development timeline.

- Set deadlines for each component (budget, narrative)
 - Assign responsibilities
 - Be specific (who, what, when?)
- Pay special attention to items needed from outside your group
 - Letters of support
 - Subcontractor information

TNT 3: Prepare and follow a written proposal development timeline.

- Information needed from subcontractor
 - “Intent to participate” letter (co-signed by PI and institution)
 - Work scope
 - Budget
 - Other (NICRA, current and pending support)
- Include subcontractor information in the package routed through your university

TNT 3: Prepare and follow a written proposal development timeline.

- Schedule on-campus review
 - Call ahead
 - Send complicated budgets for early review
 - Discuss any potential “pit-falls”
 - Are you in FastLane/Grants.gov?
 - Is cost-sharing documented?
 - Are there any non-standard university commitments?
- If you are new (or old and need it) ask for help.

“Everybody is ignorant only on different subjects.”

Will Rogers

Scientists are taught to “think outside the box.” Right?

TNT 4: When dealing with the mechanics of developing a proposal, “think inside the box.”

- Follow the rules for format, forms and presentation precisely
- If they ask for “project goals” don’t give them “research aims.”

“Think inside the box”

- Follow instructions exactly:
 - Page limit
 - Type size, font, spacing
 - Don't include appendices if not allowed
 - Avoid abbreviations, acronyms and jargon
 - Free of mechanical errors (spelling, typos, grammar)
 - **“If you can't get the spelling right, how are you expected to get the research right.”**
 - **“A sloppy application = a sloppy scientist!”**

“Think inside the box”

- Be creative with the science
- Be a “good bureaucrat” with the format of the proposal

“A man who qualifies himself well for his calling, never fails of employment.”

Thomas Jefferson

TNT 5: Agencies fund people, not just ideas.

- Of course the science is important, but ultimately people fund people they know and trust
- Key personnel section is vital
 - Highlight recent training/experience of team
 - Be honest, but this is not the place to be modest

*“I not only use all the brains I have,
but all I can borrow.”*

Woodrow Wilson

- If you are inexperienced, team up with more experienced faculty
 - Be Co-PI
- Work to develop dynamic collaborations
 - Warning – you may be a junior partner, but are still a partner, not an employee

TNT 5: Agencies fund people, not just ideas.

- Work to become better known
 - Professional organizations
 - Publications in journals
 - Serve as proposal reviewer
 - Become known by the people doing the “cutting edge” research
 - Letters of support
 - Future collaborators – subcontracting opportunities

TNT 5: Agencies fund people, not just ideas.

- Develop a reputation for doing what you said you would do
 - Periodic and final reports
- But also with the conduct of your research
 - Example: Senior faculty – completed research obligation without funding before submitting next proposal

TNT 5: Agencies fund people, not just ideas.

Don't let this be said of you:

“The President has kept all of the promises he intended to keep.”

Clinton aide George Stephanopolous

“He can compress the most words into the smallest idea of any man I know.”

Abraham Lincoln

TNT 6: Quality Trumps Quantity Every Time

- Don't attach “filler information” not relevant to evaluation criteria
 - Remember, some poor reviewer has to wade through it and
 - Many agencies now allow reviewers the option of not looking at information in appendices

TNT 6: Quality Trumps Quantity Every Time

- Always consider the reviewer
 - Assume reviewer is in a somewhat related field, not an expert directly in your area
 - Often unpaid
 - Reviews are over and above normal job duties
 - Reviews done in “bits-and-pieces” (evenings, weekends, etc.)
 - Put yourself in the role of the reviewer
 - Make his/her job easier
 - Information should be where it is expected to be and in the expected format

*“Too much of a good thing
is wonderful.”*

Mae West

(Except with proposal budgets)

TNT 7: Budget should be the “right size”, neither too large nor too small.

- Agencies/Program officers want to use their funds wisely
- Budget novices may ask for:
 - Too little – believing that they have a better chance to be funded or
 - Too much – anticipating cuts by “padding”
- Both can (and often do) backfire!

TNT 7: Budget should be the “right size”, neither too large nor too small.

- Reviewers expect realistic, well-documented budgets that relate directly to the “scope of work”
- Common mistake: many PI’s don’t pay enough attention to the budget justification!
 - Allocable – related to the project and necessary to accomplish the work scope
 - Allowable – permitted under the various rules governing this award

TNT 7: Budget should be the “right size”, neither too large nor too small.

- Reviewers should never have to ask:
 - Why are there five graduate students? What will they be doing?
 - Why is the EE’s effort 20%?
 - How does the travel budget relate to the project?
 - What will they do with all that equipment?
- It’s the PI’s responsibility to answer the allocability question for all budget items and the place for doing so is the budget justification!

TNT 7: Budget should be the “right size”, neither too large nor too small.

- If the agency agrees to fund your project at a reduced level:
 - The scope of work should be adjusted or
 - Either voluntary cost-sharing or clearly defined “other contributions” should be documented
- To do otherwise casts doubt on the accuracy/integrity of your original budget!

*“The greatest of all faults is to be
conscious of none.”*

Thomas Carlyle

TNT 8: Criticism from the right sources can be helpful.

- Get colleagues to review and critique your proposal before it is submitted
 - Build-in time for this on your proposal development timeline
 - Value it but
 - **“Run it through your sifter”**
 - Decide whether/how to incorporate it

TNT 8: Criticism from the right sources can be helpful.

- Build positive relationships with departmental/university research administration staff
- Rely upon them to “catch” problems with
 - Forms
 - Formats
 - Allowability of cost
 - Budget accuracy

“A good plan executed right now is far better than a perfect plan executed next week.”

George S. Patton

TNT 9: When the time comes to “push the button”, don’t be afraid even if the proposal isn’t perfect.

- If you wait to have children till you can afford them, you’ll never have them
- Likewise, if you wait till a proposal is perfect, you’ll never submit one
- **And, if you never submit one – you dramatically reduce your chances of getting one funded!**

TNT 9: When the time comes to “push the button”, don’t be afraid even if the proposal isn’t perfect.

- **“Don’t push the river. It will flow by itself.”**
 - Be patient, many funding agencies take about six months to complete process
 - It is considered inappropriate to contact the program officer while a proposal is under review
 - However, if the time for decisions listed in the program announcement has passed, it is acceptable to inquire to see if the timeline for review has been revised

TNT 9: When the time comes to “push the button”, don’t be afraid even if the proposal isn’t perfect.

- Successful proposals usually get a call from the program officer
- Rejections usually come by snail mail or e-mail

*“Failure is the opportunity to begin again,
more intelligently.”*

Henry Ford

**TNT 10: Treat every rejected proposal as an
opportunity to learn.**

- Many good, fundable proposals are not funded because the agency ran out of money – not because it was a poor proposal
- Request a copy of the reviewers comments (and numeric score where applicable)

TNT 10: Treat every rejected proposal as an opportunity to learn.

- Accept the comments as valuable input
 - The reviewer may not have understood your point.
 - Whose job is it to make them understand?
 - Obviously it's yours!
 - How can you more clearly communicate your message?
 - The reviewer may have found “holes” in your presentation - plug them!

TNT 10: Treat every rejected proposal as an opportunity to learn.

Remember

Proposal writing is an iterative process.

Many successful proposals were not funded on their first submission!

“Life is like riding a bicycle. You don’t fall off unless you stop pedaling.”

Claude Pepper

Don’t give up! Proposal writing is a learned skill.

