Effective grant applications

Here are some tips for each section of your grant application.

Title

Give your research proposal title an 'edge' by referring to the most important aspect of the research.

> A new method for diagnosing disease X based on the interaction of gene product A and mechanism B

will have more impact than

> Understanding how gene product A affects mechanism B using methodology C

There is plenty of time to discuss methodology C in the proposal, but if you don't mention disease X in the title, you may not engage the interest of the reviewers. As far as possible, use plain-English terms for the scientific concepts in the title.

Summary

This is the first section the reviewers will see – describe clearly what is proposed and make them want to read more.

Using plain English, the summary should cover:

- the problem and its importance
- how your project addresses the problem; make sure that the reviewers can see that you have a good idea to base your work on
- how your project builds on your previous work
- what impact your project will have.

Make the first page of your application interesting and easy to read. Make sure that the reviewers can immediately see the importance of the project. Without clear evidence that the research is important and useful, it will not be funded. Pretend you are talking to someone you want to impress at a party. They ask 'so why is your work important?' Answer them clearly and enthusiastically.

Hypothesis and aims

State your hypothesis and aims clearly and succinctly. Do not confuse aims with methods. Your aims should be a statement of what you are trying to achieve, and not a summary of your methodology:

> We aim to characterise the first step of signalling pathway D.

not

> We aim to use molecular methods to determine the factors that drive the negative feedback loop that affects the downstream signalling of pathway D.

Do not write your aims and hypothesis as if you know what will happen:

> We aim to determine whether compound A is more effective than compound B in treating disease C.

not

> We will show that compound A is better than compound B in treating disease C.

Background

The background to your research includes:

- the problem that it addresses
- the other research that is being done in the field (including your own preliminary data)
- references.

Methods

Your research plan needs to be clearly described and justified. Dividing it into sections that match your aims can be useful, because it shows the assessors that you have planned the experiments to address your aims. Make sure to include how you will evaluate your results.

Researchers

The reviewers want to know that you have the skills, commitment and resources to carry out the proposal. They also want to know why it should be you and not somebody else – do you have a new idea or novel approach; have you already made advances in the field; are your team members leaders in the field; have you put together a unique collaboration; do you have unique equipment?

Budget

Present a reasoned and defensible budget, not a wish list. Describe why each item and staff member is necessary for the project. Don't include funding for 'miscellaneous' items.

Check the guidelines carefully – for example, do not ask for travel costs if the guidelines state that travel will not be funded.

Timeframe

Most granting bodies want to see a timeline of what you plan to achieve during each year of the proposed project. Make it reasonable, and ensure that it matches the time commitments from personnel.

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Outcomes and significance

Do not repeat the information you have already given about the importance of the proposal. Your description of the outcomes and significance of the research should cover:

- the specific outcomes of the project – the new knowledge, techniques or products you will produce
- the impact of your research – this may be scientific (advancing knowledge or technologies), economic, health related, social or environmental
- the size of the impact – for example, in terms of a dollar value or number of people affected, in an Australian context, if possible.

Final tips

When writing a grant application:

- follow the guidelines EXACTLY; noncompliant applications will not even be considered
- make your proposal interesting
- make your proposal easy to read – a dense writing style and incomprehensible jargon or poor grammar will not help your cause
- it is better to submit 1 strong grant application than many that do not make the cut.

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