

PROPOSAL WRITING: 10 Helpful Hints and Fatal Flaws

From National Science Foundation, Division of Undergraduate
Education, Directorate for Education and Human Resources

Adapted by the SUNY Oneonta Grants Development Office

Disclaimer

- “This material is adapted from proposal writing workshops given by NSF/DUE program officers. It reflects their own experiences and expertise and does not reflect official NSF policy. It does not constitute a recipe that guarantees a proposal will be funded.”

10 Helpful Hints

1. Read the program announcement
 - NSF has no hidden agendas. It's all there in the program announcement.
 - Talk with a program officer to make sure that your ideas fit in the program. If the program officer tells you that your ideas are too narrow or don't fit a program, look for other funding sources.
 - Make sure that your project is worthwhile, realistic, well planned and innovative.
2. Work on projects you care deeply about
 - Let your commitment come through in the proposal.
 - Make sure reviewers can understand the importance of this work to your institution and to others.
 - Caveat: Don't forget to listen to others!

Helpful Hints

3. Build on what others have done

- Like any research project, you must build on what others have done before you and then add to the base of knowledge.
- Don't reinvent the wheel.
- Read the literature, go to workshops, speak to others in the field.
- Be current.
- Discuss the value added by your project. What are you adding to the knowledge base?

4. Think globally, act locally and globally

- Your project must have more than just a local impact. It must impact more than just your students and your institution. How can others use and build on your work?
- If the project is good enough for you and your institution to use, explain why others should too.

Helpful Hints

5. Have measurable goals and objectives

- Enhancing student learning, improving undergraduate education, and other similar goals are lofty, but not measurable. Make sure that you have measurable goals and objectives.
- What will be delivered?
- What is needed to convince others that this works and is worth supporting or emulating?

6. Think teamwork

- Successful projects are team efforts, although individuals matter too. Your project team should be greater than the sum of its parts.
- You probably work in a department. Collaborative efforts are more likely to be successful than individual efforts.
- You must have support of administrators. Keep them involved, make them look good, give them credit and find out what they need to support you.
- Get a good group of internal and external advisers and an outside evaluator or evaluation team.

Helpful Hints

7. Use good management skills

- Have a realistic timeline and implementation schedule from the beginning and stick to it.
- Have milestones and specific deliverables (with dates).
- Use carrots when you can (but be prepared to use the stick when you must). Don't reward until people deliver.
- Assign responsibilities, but also give folks needed authority to do them, and then hold them accountable.

8. Evaluation is impact and effectiveness

- Qualitative and quantitative evaluations and statistics are key to successful measures of effectiveness.
- You do need numbers. How many students are impacted? How many faculty? How many students succeed in the next course?...
- You need evidence that your project is having an impact and that it is effective. How do you know the project is working and that it is worthwhile?
- Ask who needs to be convinced and what evidence they will accept.
- Outcomes and outputs are both important to report.
- You have to have objective evaluation.
- Build in evaluation from the beginning.

Helpful Hints

9. Spread the word

- Work with other faculty or collaborators and support them as they try to implement your materials, theories, practices, or innovations. Doing new things is not easy.
- Try to get a team of people who have used your materials to help spread the word.
- Work not only with your discipline, but also reach out to other disciplines.
- Have a proactive dissemination plan. A website is necessary, but not sufficient.

10. Pay back time

- Keep NSF or your funder informed. They have to reporting requirements too.
 - Send in your reports on time. Use the required format.
 - Send in “highlights,” information about awards, student impact, and pictures.
- Give credit to NSF or other funders, your administrators, your team members, your department, etc. Giving credit to others makes you look better and may help you get additional support later.
- Offer to be a reviewer and to help others.

FATAL FLAWS: 10 Ways to Write a Good Proposal that Won't Get Funded

1. Don't assume deadlines are not enforced.

INSTEAD:

- Work early with the Grants Development Office.
- Set your own final deadline at least one day ahead of the formal deadline to allow time to solve problems.
- Have a budget and near final draft of project description completed within five days of submission (to ensure adequate time for required internal approvals).

2. Don't assume page limits and font size restrictions are not enforced.

INSTEAD:

- Consult the program solicitation and the NSF Grant Proposal Guide (for NSF proposals) carefully.
- Proposals that exceed page or font sizes may be returned without review.

Fatal Flaws

3. Don't substitute flowery rhetoric for good examples.

INSTEAD:

- Avoid complaints about students, other departments, the administration, etc., and describe what you will do and why.
- Ground your project in the context of related efforts.
- Provide detailed examples of learning materials, if relevant.
- Specify who you will work with and why.
- State how you plan progress and student learning.
- Detail the tasks and timeline for completing activities.
- Specifically address intellectual merit and broader impacts and use the phrases explicitly in the project summary.

4. Don't forget to check your *speeling*, nor *you're grammer*.

INSTEAD:

- Check and double check; first impressions are important to reviewers.
- State your good ideas clearly. Ignore the bad ones.
- Have a trusted colleague who is not involved in the project read your drafts and final proposals.

Fatal Flaws

5. Don't assume the program guidelines have not changed.

INSTEAD:

- Read the current solicitation completely and carefully.
- Address each area outlined in the solicitation that is relevant to your project.
- Check the program solicitation carefully for any additional criteria.

6. Don't simply assert: "Evaluation will be ongoing and consist of a variety of methods."

INSTEAD:

- Plan for formative and summative evaluation.
- Include an evaluation plan with specific timelines and projected benchmarks.
- Engage an objective evaluator.

Fatal Flaws

7. Don't assume a project website is sufficient for dissemination.

INSTEAD:

- A website may be necessary, but plan for maintaining it over the long term.
- Engage beta test sites. “Early adopters” can serve as natural dissemination channels.
- Plan workshops and mini-courses; identify similar projects and propose sessions at regional and national meetings.

8. Don't assume your past accomplishments are well known; after all NSF may have funded them.

INSTEAD:

- Provide results from prior funding: including quantitative data and information on impact.
- Describe how new efforts build on previous work, and how it has contributed to the broader knowledge-base about educational improvement.
- Recognize that the review panelists are diverse and they may not be familiar with your institutional context.

Fatal Flaws

9. Don't provide a template letter of commitment for your (genuine) supporters to use. They will!

INSTEAD:

- Ask for original letters of support that detail what your collaborators will do and why involvement in your project will help them.
- Letters from administrators are stronger if they demonstrate real commitment, e.g., release time, faculty development funds, new course approvals, etc.

10. Inflate the budget to allow for negotiations.

INSTEAD:

- Make the budget reflect the work plan directly.
- Provide a budget explanation that ties your budget request to project personnel and activities.
- Make it clear who is responsible for what.
- Provide biographical sketches for all key personnel.

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