The "secrets" of writing a successful research grant proposal
The basics

1. To major types of funding for university research in Europe:
   a) Government appropriations/block grant/”basismidler”
   b) External funding

**Block grant/”basismidler”**
- Directly from government;
- Normally primarily allocated based on historical levels;
- May be used at the institution’s discretion, within limits of law;
- Is used for basic infrastructure, but also for matching or co-funding of external funds.

**External funding**
- From various sources, including government, industry, private foundations;
- Includes contracts and donations;
- Allocated according to various criteria, usually quality and/or strategic priorities;
- Rarely for infrastructure...
Trends in research funding

- Funds for research have *increased* in past decades;
- Structure of funding undergoes drastic changes:
  - More funds channelled through *competitive allocation* (“external funding”); “strategic” and “excellence” programs;
  - Trend towards *bigger, but fewer grants*;
  - Relatively *smaller block grants*;
- More *autonomy* for universities, but also demands for *accountability*;

*Summary*: complexity of funding structure increases, leading to substantially more complex application processes.

...positive or negative...?
Fundraising
One word, many meanings

1. In American and British (and Swedish) usage, “fundraising” refers to “philantropic fundraising”;
2. In Denmark, “fundraising” has come to mean “support for funding” in a very broad sense;
3. At universities, two kinds of “fundraising”:
   a) *Philantropic fundraising* – gifts and donations;
   b) *Grants offices* – proposals, grants, contracts, strategies; research support
4. What does research support/grants office do...?
What does a Research Support Office do, really?

☑ Support scientists, research groups, and administrators with, among other…

… finding funding opportunities,

… non-scientific parts of proposals,

… education and information,

… analyses and advice,

… networking with funders.
Research support office for SDU’s Faculties of Science, Health Sciences, and The Region of Southern Denmark
ResearchProfessional
SDU’s tool for finding funding

Research News and Funding data

University of Southern Denmark
has a subscription to

ResearchProfessional
The leading source of research news and funding opportunities for researchers

Register for free and:
- Save time with customised searches
- Receive tailored news to your inbox
- Access Research Fortnight and the archive
- Bookmark items for later reference
- Forward information to colleagues
- Get 24/7 worldwide access

On campus? Go to www.ResearchProfessional.com and click ‘Self registration’

Not on campus? Contact your institutional administrator at coll@sdu.dk to request an account.

Questions? Contact your administrator, Christian Clausen, on coll@sdu.dk with any queries.


ResearchProfessional Broadcast Demonstrations – see website!
ResearchProfessional
SDU’s tool for finding funding

- To browse or search for funding, access the database through "Campus access" (please note; you need to connect to the internet through SDU, OUH or the Region; this option is not available e.g. when travelling or from home).
- If you wish to set up funding alerts, save searches or use any of the other individualized features, you need to set up a user account; please use the Self registration link (middle box on welcome page).
Path of the proposal
Standard process at funding organization

1. Proposals are received and sorted
2. Eligibility check, evaluation of potential conflicts of interest
3. Proposal evaluation/peer review
   Review panel reads all proposals/reviews during 1-2 weeks.
   (Consultation/orientation with applicant)
   Each proposal is presented by a primary reviewer and discussed in review panel.
4. Final ranking, based on the panel’s deliberation
5. Funding decision
6. Applicants are notified
What is your USP?
(Unique Selling Point)

5 key questions about your proposal:

1. ”Why bother”? What problem are you addressing?
2. Why is it important to this funding source?
3. Know your competition: Has anything similar been done?
4. Why now? What would happen if it is not done now?
5. Why you? Are you the best to do this work?

Providing reviewers with the answers to these questions will significantly increase your chances of success!
Key success factors

1. A good project
   - Remember the USP...?

2. Publications
   - International peer-reviewed scientific journals
     *Identify the the highest-ranked journal that you think may publish your paper; then try with the next higher-ranked journal.*
   - Get your papers cited by others
     *Identify the international journals that publish on the topic of your paper and get many citations/score high bibliometric points.*

3. Visibility and networks
   - Attend meetings; be active and visible
     *Identify the key national and international actors within your field; find the projects and networks they are active within and get yourself involved.*
Write your proposal for the reviewer!

- **What do your proposal look like to a reviewer that ...**

  ... needs to evaluate many – perhaps as many as 50-100 proposals in a short time, maybe 2 weeks?

  ... may *not* be an expert in your particular field?

  ... very likely is a human being?
Preparations I

The basics

- Before anything else: *understand* the funding organization’s basic requirements and conditions (read the call/guidelines!):
  - Is my type of research supported?
  - Am I qualified to apply?
  - What types of grants are available?
  - Are there any conditions and/or restrictions?
  - Which kinds of costs may be covered?
  - What is the normal grant size?

- Give yourself **time**! Do not wait until the last minute; haste *never*, *ever* improved a proposal…
Preparations 2

The **FORMAL** requirements

- **Read the guidelines!**
  What attachments should be included? What are the requirements for the project description, CV, and other enclosures?

- **Follow the guidelines!**
  Do not be sloppy with, or ignore *formal requirements*! Funders are becoming increasingly strict in this sense

- **Find and read the evaluation criteria!**
  Are the evaluation guidelines and forms accessible? Failing to address even a single criterion may lead to rejection.
Preparations 3

Practical suggestions

- Again; read the guidelines and follow them!
- Make sure you are using the current version of the guidelines, not previous years’;
- Be cost-aware! Start developing the budget early (or at least, do not do the budget last);
- Use the call text/evaluation criteria and make a check list;
- Learn your word processor’s typography and style templates and use them to lay out the text.
Preparations 4

Style suggestions

- Know your *audience* and adjust your style accordingly;
- Make an effort to be as *concrete* as possible;
- Do not make *unwarranted* or *potentially offensive claims* ("our lab is the best in the country");
- Reverse the scientific style and *begin with the conclusions*.

*Audience = the people who will *evaluate* and *decide* the fate of your proposal.*
Preparations 5

Language suggestions

- Make an effort to use positive language; weigh each word carefully:
  
  Why use: ...may...  
  ...problem...  
  ...we believe...  
  ...we think...

  ...when you could write:  
  ...has the potential to...  
  ...challenge...  
  ...we are confident that...  
  ...our results indicate...

- Whenever you use an adjective assessing yourself or your own research, carefully consider if it is really necessary;
- Avoid jargon (or at least use with discrimination);
- Never, ever complain or make excuses.
A standard generic proposal layout

• **Summary:** Often comes first in the proposal, but must be written last! Must be independent from rest of proposal. *Do not ignore the popular summary!*

• **Hypothesis, objective:** Be clear and concise.

• **Background:** State-of-the-art, define missing knowledge. How does your project fit in the bigger picture? Why is it important?

• **Plan of work, methods, organization:** Consequent and motivated.

• **Budget:** Specify and justify all costs; relate to project plan.

• **Merits:** CV; conditions (who does what, equipment, etc.)

- Include...
  
  ... **preliminary results** (but be wary…!)
  
  ... **motivation:** Stress your project’s significance for this funding org.
What does the proposal’s parts do?

Introduction/summary

Should ideally be max. one half page long.

The only part that should be included even if the proposal guidelines do not require it.

Purpose: Should summarize the entire project in a few sentences and actively catch the attention and interest of the reader. Begin with a brief and concise statement of what the entire project is expected to do and/or achieve.

Common mistakes:

- Begins with a background or motivation;
- States what the applicant wishes to study, not what he/she intends to do or achieve;
- Omits what the applicant intends to do or achieve.
What does the proposal’s parts do?

**Background**

**Purpose:** Demonstrate that the applicant is familiar with the field of research in question, particularly the research frontiers; demonstrate familiarity with current issues in national and international literature; and – very important – identify the knowledge gaps. Crucial part of the problem formulation for the project/proposal.

**Common mistakes:**
- Background is *too long, too basic*, and/or too tedious (one of the most common errors in proposals!);
- *too specialized* for the audience;
- lacks or have inadequate *references*;
- *poorly structured*, lacks narrative thread.
What does the proposal’s parts do?

**Project plan, Material and Methods**

**Purpose:** To convince that the project is *realistically feasible*, by providing information about access to, and experience with, *equipment and methods*; provide a feasible *implementation plan/schedule*; if motivated, describe a solid project *organization*.

**Common mistakes:**

- *Imbalance* in method description – too little/too much detail;
- Over-optimistic or unrealistic *goals*;
- No *project/time/implementation plan*;
- Project is big or complex enough to warrant management, but no description or *organization plan* is provided.
What does the proposal’s parts do?

CV and List of Publications

**Purpose:** To demonstrate that the applicant is *capable*, and has the *adequate background*, to perform the proposed research.

**Common mistakes:**

- *Too much* information is provided (only information pertinent to the applicant’s career should be included; do not list every talk at the local elementary school or that you are coaching a 7th division soccer club);

- *Too little* information is provided (why is there an unaccounted for gap of 3 years in the applicant’s CV; prison term, mental asylum, worked for Al-Qaeda...?);

- Poorly *organized*. 
What does the proposal’s parts do? **Budget**

**Purpose:** To provide the funder with a specified, justified, and realistic basis to guide the determination of the size of the grant. Providing a budget justification is almost always a good idea.

**Common mistakes:**
- Unclear or no clear *connection* between budget items and proposed research;
- Unrealistic *amounts*;
- *Unallowable* costs included;
- *Overhead* guidelines or rules not followed.
Budget justification

- A budget justification is practically always a good idea.
- Brief explanation of how costs are calculated or estimated.
- **Examples:**
  - “Salary costs are calculated using SDU annual standard rate for associate professors; amounts include legally required fringe benefits…”
  - “Lab costs include: purchasing costs for cell culturing, including antibodies; media, growth factors; tissue culture plastic; pipettes; other glassware; and lab supplies necessary to perform the experiments.”
To sum up:
Make a good first impression!

The objective and scope of the proposal should be absolutely clear already from the very first page!

- Informative, effective title (if an acronym is required, or a good idea, use e.g. http://acronymcreator.net);
- Summary including all important aspects;
- Immediately state, very concretely, what you wish to accomplish.
- Disposition: structure and headings that make navigating the document easy and effortless – use pagination and indexed headings;
- Stay within page or character limits; do not kern or adjust text to squeeze in just a little bit more – less is more;
- Use the right level of detail (the reviewer may not be an expert);
- Explain all acronyms, abbreviations and special terms that are not commonly known.
Headings with index numbers.

Introduction written so that mere mortals may understand. Summarize content of section.

Subsequent paragraphs; here you can gradually go deeper and write for the initiated expert.
Making an impression: designed cover pages

THE HUMAN REGENERATIVE MAP

Investigators

Jonas Fjodor, Coordinator
Knut Skarstein, Deputy coordinator
Peter Aner
Hedi Oresk
Goran Persson

Genomics goes wild
Equipment for next generation sequencing to the Linnaeus grant Uppsala Centre for Evolution and Genomics

Hans Ellegren and colleagues
Uppsala university
Making an impression: a less flamboyant, but effective, way.

PROJECT SUMMARY

The objective of this project is to address these problems by assessing cities in Asia that need to adopt BRT-NMT systems and lack of political will for creating sustainable public transport systems. The proposed transport system would make use of existing proven technologies such as Rapid Bus Transport (BRT) systems and Neighbourhood Non-Motorized Transport (NMT) system. The project will be carried out in five urban areas, where the methodology and approach is tested as part of the process to develop BRT-NMT systems.

PROJECT DELTA

The project will implement policies, plans, and technical advice for developing and improving the BRT-NMT systems. The proposed transport system is expected to be implemented first in the selected urban areas, followed by a broader scale and later at a regional level.

The objectives of this project are to provide sustainable, affordable and accessible public transport for the BRT-NMT system and to support stakeholders and policy-makers in developing countries to adopt BRT-NMT systems.
Before you submit

- Do not forget to use your word processor’s *spelling* and grammar control;
- Let *someone else* read the proposal;
- Use the call for proposals, guidelines and evaluation criteria as a *checklist*;
- Check that *all formal requirements* are met!
Common errors in proposals I
Examples from real life (DFF)

- Project description does not comply with formal requirements;
- Application is chaotic and ill-organized (finished in haste);
- Project description is a summary of a number of projects rather than a concrete project plan;
- Project description focuses too much on background, and too little on the actual project;
- Project description is written for too narrow an audience and cannot be understood by reviewers from other disciplines;
- Knowledge of current state of research not demonstrated;

(continues on next slide...)
Common errors in proposals 2
Examples from real life (DFF)

- The applicant or applicant group lacks required expertise;
- Lacking in ethical requirements (human subjects, animals);
- Budget not clear or incomplete (level of detail, justification of costs, salaried staff not specified, etc);
- Co-funding is not specified;
- Required signatures or stamps are missing;
- CV and list of publications is poorly organized/too long and/or does not fulfil formal requirements
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