

Grant Writing Tips from a Funding Agency Perspective

The North Carolina Biotechnology Center's Science and Technology Development Program offers the following tips to assist grant seekers in preparing successful grant proposals for the Center's funding programs and other agencies.

Getting Started

- 1** Get to know the funding agency. Make sure your project fits its mission and the stated purpose of the funding program. If your project is not a good fit, your proposal has little chance of being funded.
- 2** Read the program guidelines thoroughly and carefully. Always keep a copy handy while you are preparing your proposal.
- 3** Most agencies encourage you to contact them to discuss your ideas. Make sure you have read the guidelines before making your call. Prepare a brief written summary of your project that you can send to the Program Manager.
- 4** Consult with the Sponsored Programs Office staff or an authorizing official at your organization as soon as you begin working on a proposal. This will save you a lot of headaches as the deadline approaches. Plus, they may also be able to offer additional advice that will improve your proposal and your chances for success.

Planning Your Project

- 5** Identify a clear problem or need that your project will address. Funding agencies look to you as their partner in finding solutions to important issues. A well-defined problem statement (the "why") is the foundation for your proposal and helps demonstrate that your project is a good fit for the funding program.
- 6** Plan your project first! Agencies fund projects, not ideas. Many grant seekers attempt to write and submit proposals based on preliminary ideas alone without spending sufficient time on documenting the problem, defining the objectives, and planning the activities. Researchers: develop a logical, detailed study design with relevant milestones.
- 7** The scope of your project should align with realistic goals. For example, you are not likely to find the cure for cancer with a single research project, but you may develop a better diagnostic tool or make progress toward a new treatment.
- 8** Don't confuse the "what" (the objectives) with the "how" (the plan). The objectives of your project are the measurable outcomes that will result from your activities. These are also referred to as the deliverables of a project or the specific aims of a research project.
- 9** Make sure to include the appropriate expertise on your team. If applicable, include collaborations and partnerships in your project plan. Your reviewers will expect to see that you are making effective use

of available resources. Letters of support should demonstrate the genuine enthusiasm of your supporters and document the commitment of your collaborators.

- 10** Don't avoid the obvious. If there are related issues or circumstances that can impact the success of your project, address them specifically in your proposal. For researchers, anticipate and acknowledge potential obstacles that might come up during your research. If you don't, the reviewers certainly will! Explain how you will address these issues during your project.
- 11** The evaluation section of a proposal is your plan for assessing the impact of your project. If you are having trouble writing your evaluation plan, take that as a clue to re-examine your objectives to make sure that they are specific and that the outcomes are measurable.
- 12** Your budget is a financial picture of the project plan. Reviewers will look for reasonable expenses that support the activities and personnel involved in the project. The "budget justification" is also an important part of your proposal. Provide the rationale for each line item in your budget and make sure it matches the budget form.
- 13** Think like a reviewer. What would you look for in an innovative idea and compelling proposal? What details would you need to know in order to evaluate whether a project has potential for success? What would annoy you if you had to read twenty proposals in one sitting?

Writing the Proposal

- 14** Follow the instructions! Each funding agency has its own specific requirements and guidelines. Pay attention to all sections of the proposal; together they paint a complete picture of your project. And don't forget: Agencies and reviewers take note of incomplete or sloppy proposals as an indication of the applicant's willingness and ability to conduct a successful project!
- 15** Get to the point. Make sure that the "why, what, and how" of your project is stated clearly and in a logical sequence. If you are struggling to write the proposal, remember tip #6: Plan your project first. A well-planned project will almost write itself.
- 16** Keep it simple. Write your proposal in clear, straightforward language, avoiding too many acronyms, jargon and unnecessary background information.
- 17** Make your proposal easy to read and easy to follow. Use headings, bullets and white space. Informative graphics can also be a welcomed change from text. Make sure to follow the instructions for font size and type, margins and page limits!
- 18** Seek feedback on your proposal from both your colleagues and others outside of your discipline. This is the best way to check whether you are communicating your ideas clearly and effectively. Also, ask for advice from successful grant writers.

It's a Process

- 19** Start early! Last minute proposals are stressful for everyone concerned and rarely produce quality work. The grant-seeking process takes time, practice, and patience.
- 20** Don't give up. Grant writing is an acquired skill. If your project is not funded, request feedback from the agency so that you can learn from the reviewer comments. Seek advice on grant writing techniques. Then try again!