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How Your Grant Proposal Compares

By David A. Stone

Sure, good ideas are an essential ingredient of any external grant proposal, but however necessary, they're not enough to ensure you'll get the money. To stand a fighting chance, the ideas in your project must be both good and well positioned relative to other grant proposals.

All good ideas are to some extent well positioned already—that is, they deal with a real, demonstrable problem; they are informed by concepts that have been tried before; and they reflect alignment with what has worked in the past and divergence from what has failed. But beyond the idea itself, there are a number of other ways in which your proposal must be positioned, relative to other ideas, in order to win the approval of reviewers.

Reviewers are always faced with more good ideas than they have the resources to support. In ranking proposals, reviewers are forced to look past the idea itself for evidence of how likely it is that the project will produce an outcome (data, publications, new technology) that has merit in itself and/or could lead to future development or change. That's why the ideas that are best positioned are the most likely to be supported. So how do you position your idea most effectively?

Context is everything. The ideas that win grant money are those that are most well positioned in the literature. All successful grant proposals must demonstrate how their central idea arises from and speaks to ideas and efforts that have come before.

In a strong proposal, the research idea is first located within specific scientific, policy-related, or disciplinary literature in a way that frames the problem or opportunity that can be addressed. You must very specifically describe the research that has led to the present situation. Most often that situation is described as a gap that exists in our knowledge—one that your idea intends to try to fill—or a moment in the discipline that invites a leap of exploration toward an identifiable and promising new direction that you intend to take.

A good literature-review section reads like a detective novel. It keeps reviewers interested and leads them to a moment that screams, "and so, obviously, the most important thing to do next is this ... and that's precisely what we intend to do."

Know the big players. In one sense, the best-positioned grant proposals are those written by the key players whose research findings, strategies, publications, and other dissemination efforts allow them to be the framers of the nature and scope of the problem, and to be recognized by their peers as key contributors to its solution. Their grant proposals authoritatively stake out the contours of the problem and offer what are recognized by reviewers as the most likely solutions.

Key players are also able to show that they have been wise and productive stewards of grant money in the past, and so are likely good bets for the future. Finally, they, and members of their research teams, often find themselves in discussions with grants agencies about future agency plans and priorities, and tend to serve those agencies as members of review committees.

But well-positioned proposals can also be written by lesser-known scholars who have placed themselves within the orbit of the central players. Second-tier players are part of the conversations about the nature and scope of the problem and about the universe of promising approaches to its solution. As such, they are able to frame their ideas from a firsthand understanding of the state of the field. They may also be in a position to have one or more of the key players in the field participate in a significant way (as key personnel or as a consultant) in their proposal.

One step removed are those researchers in a third group who haven't worked with the key players. But these third-tier scholars can position their grant ideas well by doing their homework and framing their ideas in relation to the work being done by cutting-edge researchers.

Proposals that fail to show awareness of the work of major players or research groups do so at their peril. If you ask yourself whether you know who the key players are in a given area of investigation and the answer is no, that is a sign to reconsider preparing a proposal until you have improved your networking and furthered your review of the literature.

Have a good track record. A well-positioned proposal has a principal investigator (PI) and a research team with a strong track record of attracting money from recognized and prestigious sources; of using those grants to produce findings with recognized impacts;

of getting published in well-regarded journals; and of demonstrating frequent subsequent citation of their work. A well-written proposal makes the strong positioning of the PI and the research team clear to members of the review committee.

If you're a rookie PI, the challenge is to position yourself so that you are seen as capable of carrying out externally supported research. Perhaps the most expeditious means to that end is to first serve as a co-investigator or key member of a more-established PI's project.

In seeking your own grant money, though, as a less-experienced investigator, you need to highlight whatever research experience you do have. Make clear that you are familiar with the range of issues—scientific, technical, practical, programmatic, professional, and administrative—that are likely to arise. It is also important to choose co-investigators, team members, and consultants who can earn the confidence of agencies and reviewers.

PI's with long and successful track records also tend to be in regular contact with their key sources of support. They have an intimate working knowledge of an agency's or a foundation's strategic plan, current goals, and key targets. Such PI's are able to align their proposals with the grantor's current interests and budgetary capabilities.

New and less experienced investigators need to do their homework on that front. Review any and all publicly available documents provided by the grant agency, including mission statements, strategic-planning reports, statements of current goals, and information on previously financed projects. Once you've digested all of that, start talking with agency personnel or program officers.

Integrate teaching and service into research proposals.

The reach of well-positioned proposals extends beyond the scientific exercise itself. The clear expectation among grant agencies, large and small, is that research projects make an impact on the world around them. Two ways in which that can be demonstrated in a proposal are to reference integration of the project with teaching and service. The National Science Foundation, for example, requires that proposals demonstrate the ways in which students will be involved in and learn from research projects. It also anticipates that work done in the lab will find its way back to the classroom; the more explicit attention you give that transmission in the text of your proposal, the better.

Well-positioned proposals are those that have thought through, within the design of the research, how it can be integrated with teaching, whether course-based, field-based, or mentorship. Poorly

positioned proposals ignore this extra dimension, or treat it as a last minute add-on.

In many instances, proposals can better position their ideas by integrating service elements into them. Whether the work is in education, social sciences, natural sciences, engineering, or health, the translational capacity of research ideas and research groups has become a highly sought-after trait. Proposals that demonstrate that they are moving from real-world problems encountered in the field into the controlled worlds of experiment, observation, and analysis are well positioned. Proposals that demonstrate that their research findings can be quickly and easily moved into practice are also valued. And proposals that show how to move the latest findings out of controlled, experimental settings and into the worlds of the classroom, home, community, or environment are the hottest of commodities.

Disseminate your ideas. Well-positioned proposals demonstrate how the important findings will make their way out into the world. Of course that means publishing results in top journals. But beyond publishing, researchers can position their proposals by demonstrating that they are plugged in to groups, organizations, societies, or other conduits through which the findings will reach audiences who have some capacity to do something with them. A project is even better positioned if it can demonstrate that much of its impetus stems from ongoing, productive relationships with groups dealing with the very problems that the proposed study would explore.

In the end, the ideas that are most likely to win grant money are those that develop organically out of, and through, solid positioning in all the ways I've described. This is not something that can be added on at the writing stage, and no amount of grantsmanship can make up for a lack of solid positioning. For new investigators, these aspects of positioning may seem like yet another addition to the already daunting process of securing an external grant. In fact, each of these elements can and should be pursued as virtues unto themselves, and as steps that support scholarship, teaching, and service. They are all dimensions of involving and immersing yourself in your discipline long before you choose to seek a grant.

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