

→ *For fellowships and small-scale grants!*

# Proposal Writing Tips + Guide

- Top tips for crafting clear, compelling, competitive proposals
- How-To's for narratives and other major proposal components
- Resources to help navigate the proposal development process
- Grant writing resources available to U faculty and researchers

# Part 1: Proposal Writing Tips

This guide is intended for faculty and researchers developing proposals for fellowships and small-scale grants, though much of it applies broadly to other funding proposals. The guidance provided is general; use it as a flexible framework to develop a compelling, competitive proposal that aligns with the funder's requirements and priorities. Questions, comments, feedback? Contact Jenna Taylor, Director, Corporate & Foundation Relations, at [jenna.taylor@utah.edu](mailto:jenna.taylor@utah.edu).



## General Tips for Getting Started

- Plan ahead and start early! Most applications open 1-3+ months before their deadline, but you can start preparing early by referring to the previous year's instructions since most do not change much from year to year.
- Thoroughly read the funder's instructions to confirm deadlines, eligibility, and application requirements and to ensure your project aligns with the intended purpose, outcomes and outputs, and allowable activities and expenses.
- If you have questions about a funding opportunity, contact the funder's Program Officer. They are a great resource!
- If you are interested in submitting a proposal to a foundation, first consult your college's Development Team (for local foundations) or the [U's Corporate & Foundation Relations \(CFR\) Team](#) (for national foundations).
- If the funding opportunity restricts the number of applications an organization may submit, immediately notify the VPR's Office. The University must first conduct an internal [Limited Submission Opportunity \(LSO\)](#) competition for it.
- If you have questions about budgets, forms, compliance, approvals, or submission, contact your College Grants Officer.
- If applications from individuals are not accepted or if only organizations may apply, contact your College Grants Officer about the process for submitting in coordination with the university's Office of Sponsored Project's (OSP).
- If you are planning to take leave, start thinking about your strategy a year-and-a-half in advance. Talk to your department chair about how to proceed; this will best position them to support your proposals.
- If you are applying for fellowships, consult your college's Associate Dean for Research and College Grants Officer about the circumstances under which the college may top off award amounts to match salaries.



## How to Write Winning Proposals

The success of a proposal heavily depends on its ability to clearly explain the proposed work regardless of the reviewers' familiarity AND to persuasively convey the project's importance and impact. In short, success comes down to what you write and how you write it. For this you must understand who the reviewers are, what they value, and the function of the text. (Think: Scholarly marketing pitch, not essay.) Second, you must propose something of value in a way that is clear, concise, and compelling.

Proposal writing must be clear, concise, and organized. More importantly it must be persuasive. **Most importantly it must be valuable.** That is to say, it is crucial that your writing signals that you are proposing something of value to a particular community(ies) (i.e., your discipline, the broader scholarly community, and/or society at large) and that you are the right person to do the work—presented in a way that connects with and is compelling to the reviewers and is in alignment with the funder's requirements and priorities.

*"Demonstrate clear societal benefits that address an urgent problem in alignment with agency priorities. Lead with this information and you will capture the attention of skeptical reviewers and program officers," advises Jesse Morris, Director of Research Education at the U of U.*

<https://www.research.utah.edu/features/u-researcher-tips-how-to-put-together-a-successful-grant-proposal/>



## Strategies for Different Career Stages

Adapt your proposal writing approach to highlight your unique and evolving strengths as an applicant. Below are some strategies to help you craft a competitive proposal tailored for your career stage.

- As an **early-career scholar**, focus on demonstrating your potential if you do not yet have an extensive track record. Highlight your innovative ideas, new methodologies, or interdisciplinary approaches. Show how your fresh perspective addresses inadequately answered questions or challenges flawed conclusions in the field. Emphasize how the award/project will be a crucial step in your development and impact as a scholar.
- For **established scholars**, leverage your experience, credibility, and contributions. Showcase your impact through significant publications and awards, and how your work has been recognized by peers. Highlight how these accomplishments have advanced knowledge and influenced the field, while demonstrating continued relevance and innovation. Convey how your research has had an impact both within and beyond academia.



## The Big 5: What Successful Proposals Do Well

Funded proposals effectively communicate all the following major points—make sure yours does too. Conversely, unfunded proposals often miss these key elements. Below are some ideas for how you might address each one. While the purpose of each funding opportunity may differ greatly, these are general principles most funders value.

- 1. Impact:** Clearly articulate the value, significance, and contribution of the proposed work to your discipline, the broader scholarly community, and/or society overall. Highlight how the project solves a specific problem, addresses pressing needs or gaps, advances knowledge and understanding, and/or will have a meaningful impact.
  - Be advised that focusing on gaps in knowledge alone is not sufficient; more important is what valuable insights, advancements, or solutions will emerge from filling those gaps. Tip: In some scholarly communities, addressing an error may be considered more valuable than filling a gap.
  - If your work crosses disciplinary boundaries, emphasize how your project bridges gaps between fields or creates new intersections, contributing to multiple areas of study.
  - Clearly articulate how your research will have a broader impact beyond academia. Whether it is community engagement, policy influence, or public education, make it clear how your work will benefit the wider world.
- 2. Uniqueness:** Persuasively convey the distinctive nature of your research and establish why you are particularly suited to undertake it. Stress why the questions being raised have been inadequately answered to date, why existing conclusions may be flawed, or why a fresh perspective is needed. Emphasize how your work stands apart from existing research or how it pushes boundaries.
  - Highlight the innovative aspects of your project and how it will challenge, refine, or expand existing work in the field in ways that could reshape current understanding or spark new discussions.
  - Underscore what makes your approach or perspective unique. This could be a novel methodology, an interdisciplinary angle, or a fresh take on a well-explored topic.
  - Demonstrate how your background, experiences, and skills uniquely position you to tackle the proposed research questions or how your interdisciplinary approach offers fresh insights and solutions.
- 3. Urgency:** Emphasize how your research is positioned to address pressing questions, critical problems, or time-sensitive opportunities within the context of your specific field, the academic landscape, and/or global or societal trends. Stress why now is the ideal time for this project and why this particular fellowship/grant award is crucial.
  - Describe what makes your project particularly timely. Show how your research is poised to build on or respond to recent developments, breakthroughs, or challenges in your field.
  - Position your project within broader cultural, social, or intellectual trends, showing how your work engages with contemporary issues or contributes to ongoing debates.
  - Demonstrate how the fellowship/grant will help you build on successes and explore new frontiers. Or highlight how it will be a pivotal step in advancing the project or your career.
- 4. Aspiration:** Discuss how this project sets the stage for further inquiries or extensions of your research. Consider what your findings will foster, such as contributing new knowledge, solving long-standing issues, altering or enhancing theories, or initiating new investigations. Or highlight its potential to spawn interdisciplinary collaborations, open new areas of study, or address emerging issues.
  - Present a compelling and coherent research vision that extends beyond the specifics of the current project. Emphasize the long-term impact and potential future directions of your research.
  - Outline a clear, ambitious plan for the next phase of your research, demonstrating how the award will enable new directions, methodologies, or solutions to emerging challenges.
  - Highlight how the proposed project can lead to scalable or sustained impact. This could include expanding the research into a larger program, applying findings in different contexts, or setting the stage for future studies.
- 5. Fruitfulness:** Describe the expected outcomes/outputs of your project and how the results will be disseminated. Explain why these dissemination methods are suitable for the subject matter and target audience(s). Outline your plans for reaching academic and applicable non-academic audiences to ensure your work has a meaningful impact.
  - Specify the scholarly outputs, such as a book, journal articles, or a major study. Mention specific presses or journals that have expressed interest (demonstrating relevance and appeal) or that you will target and why.
  - Describe your plans for engaging audiences beyond academia, including policymakers, industry professionals, and the general public, through public talks, workshops, community events, or digital media.
  - Discuss how your findings might be used to improve practices, inform policy, or lead to innovations, emphasizing real-world applications and long-term societal benefits of your work.

**Tip:** Ensure you clearly answers these 5 important questions about your project.

- **Impact:** How does your project address an important problem or valuably contribute to the field?
- **Uniqueness:** What are you doing that is unique, original, or innovative?
- **Urgency:** What is pressing, timely, or relevant that it needs to be done now?
- **Aspiration:** What new questions or projects will this project spawn?
- **Fruitfulness:** Where will it end up to ensure it has a meaningful impact?



## Top 10 Proposal Writing Tips

Keep in mind that reviewers generally have a broad scholarly background and must evaluate numerous applications very quickly. So, you need to clearly present a project that stands out in terms of originality, significance, and potential impact; establishes your credibility and instills confidence in your ability to do the proposed work; and shows alignment with the funder's requirements and priorities. Tip: Know your audience (the reviewers), and write to and for them.

- 1. Make it easy for reviewers.** Make it clear how your work aligns with the funding program. Tailor your proposal to the stated values, priorities, and criteria. Be deliberate in following the instructions. Tip: Use language directly pulled from the RFP to make it obvious you addressed all the requirements and to help guide and signpost to reviewers. Bonus Tip: [Use formatting](#) strategically and judiciously (e.g., sub-headers, bold, italics, bullets, tables, charts) to add emphasis and to improve document navigation. Also, if you use colors, ensure they have sufficient contrast to remain readable when printed in black and white.
- 2. Be clear, concise, and cohesive.** The best narratives are succinct and well organized while providing sufficient detail for the reviewers to understand the project. Lead with your main points (don't bury them) and ensure they are clear. Moreover, do not make reviewers hunt for key details or assume they will connect the dots. Given space limitations, prioritize information that best serves the proposal. Every sentence must add value. Tip: Clarity is key!
- 3. Be persuasive, assertive, and direct.** Unlike other types of academic writing, proposal narratives need to be persuasive, assertive, and direct. (Remember, it is not an essay.) Be bold in emphasizing the value of your project but do not say anything you cannot stand behind intellectually. A good proposal is explicit about the question or problem being addressed, why it is important and/or urgent, and why you are the right person to do it.
- 4. Write for a broad academic audience.** Present information so it is easy to understand and compelling regardless of the reviewers' familiarity. Use a writing style that is accessible to an educated lay audience while still being rigorous. Avoid overly dense or technical language that might obscure your main points. Minimize field-specific jargon and/or explain terms that might not be familiar to those outside your field. Introduce lesser-known subjects/topics and translate ideas for non-specialists. Doing so invites them into the narrative and shows your subject mastery.
- 5. Signal to experts in your field.** Demonstrate your expertise and credibility within your field by using the language and terminology of your scholarly community (show that you know the code). Strategically reference seminal works, key figures, and recent and relevant studies in your field to signify your knowledge of the field and current discourse. Be clear about the project's contribution to the field and present a well-developed theoretical framework.
- 6. Capture attention from the outset.** Start your narrative with an engaging hook—that is core to your project—to grab the reviewers' interest and fix their focus. The first 1-2 paragraphs (introduction) must be captivating and compelling! This is your opportunity to make a great first impression and give them a reason to engage further.
- 7. Convey the value of your project.** Give reviewers cause to think your proposed work is valuable by proving that it addresses a problem that *needs* to be solved. It must be something that a specific community wants to fix and/or understand better. Moreover, illustrate the benefits of addressing the problem for the community, or conversely, the costs of not addressing it. Tip: Frame it in terms of its relevance to the community, not just personal interest. Bonus Tip: Use words that indicate significance to show it is a problem the community cares about.
- 8. Construct a compelling problem.** Rather than merely presenting background information (which generalists may not understand and subject experts will already know), guide reviewers through the problem's construction by contextualizing it within existing literature and highlighting layers of complexity and inconsistency. Strategically position your work within the ongoing scholarly discourse by showing how it builds on, diverges from, or contributes to the field. Tip: Use a brief review of scholarship to enrich the problem, not just to provide background. Bonus Tip: Use words that signal tension, instability, or friction.
- 9. Anticipate and answer possible concerns.** Make it evident to reviewers that you are thinking critically about the project and address any potential issues based on your prior work. This approach not only establishes your credibility but also demonstrates your deep understanding of the project and your ability to execute it successfully.
- 10. Make it interesting and engaging.** Reviewers read lots of proposals, so make your writing interesting. Use examples to draw them in. Highlight the big questions. Let your passion for the topic shine through. Pique their curiosity with a surprising statistic, lesser-known fact, or other interesting data that supports the problem. Intrigue them with a novel yet robust approach or an unusual but valuable archive. Include meaningful images, diagrams, and charts.

*Tip: Use the PIE structure to create clear, persuasive paragraphs. Start with a main idea (Point), provide evidence or examples to support it (Illustration), and then explain how this evidence backs up the main idea (Explanation).*

**Examples of words that indicate significance for a community:**

*Broadly accepted, widely recognized, well-documented, highly regarded, substantially supported, extensively studied, broadly endorsed, commonly accepted, well established, frequently cited, consensus-driven.*

**Examples of words that signal tension, instability, or friction:**

*However, although, yet, nonetheless, but, despite, inconsistent, uncertain, problematic, anomaly, contradictory, paradoxical, conflict, unresolved, ambiguous, divergent, discrepant.*

# Part 2: Proposal Writing Guide

This guide is intended for faculty and researchers developing proposals for fellowships and small-scale grants, though much of it applies broadly to other funding proposals. The guidance provided is general; use it as a flexible framework to develop a compelling, competitive proposal that aligns with the funder's requirements and priorities. Questions, comments, feedback? Contact Jenna Taylor, Director, Corporate & Foundation Relations, at [jenna.taylor@utah.edu](mailto:jenna.taylor@utah.edu).



## Major Elements in the Narrative

While each funding opportunity is different, most proposal narratives require the following elements. Always follow the funder's instructions and address their criteria. Tip: Read examples of funded narratives to see how others have successfully done it. Tip: Make sure the narrative is self-contained; don't rely on reviewers referencing information in the appendices.

**Project Title:** For a strong grant proposal or fellowship title, focus on clarity and brevity. Clearly convey the project's main goal or impact, using keywords that resonate with the funder's priorities. Highlight the project's unique value or anticipated outcomes, and consider a two-part title (main title and subtitle) for added detail if needed. Aim to make the title informative yet concise—ideally 10-15 words or fewer.

**Introduction and Problem/Purpose Statement:** The most successful narratives begin by clearly illustrating the problem or question the project addresses, highlighting its urgency and significance to the current field and/or societal needs.

- Ensure the opening of your narrative is both engaging and compelling. Start with a hook that immediately draws the reviewers in and establishes the importance and relevance of your proposed project.
- Provide a brief overview of the project by highlighting its purpose, explaining the main ideas, and clearly stating its thesis or claims. To engage experts in your field, emphasize how it provides valuable insights into key issues. For those outside your field, touch upon its broader significance or the bigger issues it engages.

**Tip:** Given space limitations, focus on what's most valuable and present it to your best advantage. Don't overwhelm the reader with extraneous details or alienate them with densely worded language and no clear significance.

**Objectives and Significance:** Outline the objectives of your project; clearly define the specific goals or intended outcomes that you aim to achieve through your research or work. Articulate how your research will impact your discipline, the scholarly community, and/or society at large, emphasizing its timeliness, relevance, and potential for meaningful change or advancement. Situate your work within the broader field and show how it contributes to or challenges existing knowledge.

- Explain how your project is unique and positioned to make a significant contribution, highlighting the originality and promise of your idea/approach. Emphasize how your project will complement, challenge, or expand existing work, and what new understanding or benefits it will bring to the field.
- Construct a compelling argument for your project's significance by situating it within the larger scholarly discourse (through a brief literature review). Show—don't just tell—why it is important, to whom, and what impact it will have. Describe the key concepts—central ideas, theories, or frameworks that underpin the research or project—that will guide the investigation, theoretical models, or scholarly context within which the project is situated.
- Tip: For a dissertation revision, explain how your new project moves beyond your original dissertation, highlighting how it represents a substantial, significant, and valuable addition or advancement.

**Tip:** Illustrate what the problem is, why it is a problem, why it matters, and to whom. Instead of saying what your project is about, explain what it will argue or—better yet—what problem/question it will solve/answer.

OKAY: "This project is about..."

BETTER: "This project will argue..."

BEST: "This project will address ..."

**Project Description:** This encompasses Methodology/Activities, Project Timeline/Work Plan, and Researcher/Personnel (each is detailed below). In general, the Project Description should indicate the work to be undertaken, the methodologies to be employed, the schedule according to which the work will be carried out, and the roles and qualifications of the project personnel. A well-organized narrative helps reviewers understand the project's scope, timeline, and coherence, making the case for its feasibility and impact.

**Methodology/Activities:** Explain how your project addresses the problems or questions being examined and the theoretical framework that informs your work. Detail your methodologies/activities, emphasizing why they are well-suited to the project and likely to produce meaningful results. Highlight any innovative aspects of your approach.

(continued on next page)

- Describe your methodology—the overall strategy and specific approaches, techniques, or procedures that will be used to carry out the research or project. This includes the research/project design, data collection and analysis techniques, and any experimental frameworks. Demonstrate that the approach is well thought out, feasible, and appropriate. Address any anticipated challenges and explain how you plan to adapt if needed.
- Provide a clear overview of how the project is organized, encompassing its overall arc and structure (e.g., a chapter outline for a book). Highlight the specific part(s) you plan to focus on during the award period, if applicable. Also, outline any progress made to date, including successful preliminary research or pilot studies that have laid the groundwork for your project. Touch upon key parts that will be completed after the award period. This gives the reviewers a sense of the existing scaffolding and the overall trajectory for the project.

**Project Timeline/Work Plan:** Describe the steps you will take to achieve your objectives, ensuring that the plan is well-organized, feasible, and clearly presented. This entails the overall plan for how the research will be conducted over time, the sequence of activities or phases, and how you will manage the process. Outline the approximate timeline for completing the project, including key milestones and deliverables, specifying which parts will be supported before, during, and after the award period.

- **Tip:** If a separate Work Plan document is required, use it to provide additional (more logistical) details that will benefit reviewers (avoid duplicating too much information from the Narrative). (Refer to the next page of this guide.)

**Researcher/Personnel:** Provide details about the key individual(s) involved in the project and explain how their expertise, roles, and responsibilities contribute to its success. This builds confidence among reviewers that the researcher or project team is qualified for the work and can successfully complete the project.

- For individual researchers, highlight your relevant expertise and achievements to demonstrate why you are qualified for the project—do not rely on reviewers to extract this information from your resume. Reference your accomplishments and explain how they uniquely position you to tackle the research problem. When discussing other scholarship, confidently emphasize what you bring to the field. Detail the specific skills, training, and preparation that make you well-suited for the work, including language proficiency, technical skills, fieldwork experience, etc. If your project explores a new research direction, describe the steps you have taken to orient yourself in the field. If the area of inquiry is new to you, explain your reasons for working in it and your qualifications to do so. If the project is interdisciplinary, outline the relevant training or experience that equips you for the work. **Tip:** If you find it challenging to write about yourself, pretend you are writing about someone else who you admire.
- For project teams, summarize the qualifications, experience, and relevant skills of the members to establish the credibility and competence of the team to carry out the proposed work. Demonstrate that the skills and expertise of the personnel align with the project's needs, reinforcing that the team is well-equipped to execute the proposed methods and achieve the desired outcomes. Clearly define the specific roles and responsibilities of each member, showing how their contributions are essential to achieving the project's objectives and clarifying how the team will work together effectively. **Tip:** Provide evidence of previous successful collaborations among team members. If applicable, identify any additional expertise that will be brought in or project roles that will be filled (e.g., consultants, collaborators, research assistants) and explain how these individuals will fill gaps in the team's capabilities.

**Final Product/Deliverables/Outcomes:** Briefly outline what will result from the project if it is funded and your plan to ensure it reaches the intended audience(s) for meaningful impact.

- Clearly define the concrete outputs of the project. This could be publications (e.g., articles, books), reports, datasets, digital resources, educational materials, or any other tangible deliverables that will be created and shared. **Tip:** If you have discussed the project with presses, mention any contracts or expressed interest. Or reach out to publishers to gauge interest. **Bonus Tip:** Contact [University Author Services](#) to learn more about potential presses and audiences.
- Outline your strategy for disseminating the final product/findings to the target audience or broader community. Explain why your chosen methods are well-suited to the subject matter and audience(s). This could involve publishing findings in journals, presenting at conferences, hosting workshops, creating public resources, or engaging stakeholders on digital platforms. These efforts show that you are considering how your work can reach a broader audience—including policymakers, industry professionals, and the public—and have a meaningful impact beyond academia.
- Mention any plans for sustaining the project's impact beyond the funding period. This could include future research, ongoing programs, or long-term benefits to the field or community.

**Tip:** Guide readers through your line of thinking by doing the following:

- Start paragraphs with a clear topic sentence that states the main idea.
- Arrange ideas in a logical sequence (e.g., chronological order, cause & effect).
- Use transitions (e.g., for example, however, therefore) to connect ideas.
- Signpost key points using headings and summary statements.
- Keep terminology consistent throughout to avoid confusion.
- Maintain parallel structure when presenting related ideas or lists.
- Ensure each sentence logically follows from the previous one.
- Repeat key phrases purposefully to reinforce important concepts.



## Other Common Components of Proposals

Different applications have different document requirements. Below are some common ones for fellowships and small-scale grants. Always refer to the instructions for specific requirements and prepare documents in accordance with the funder's guidelines. Tip: Treat all the components of the application as a cohesive, unified package.

**Letter of Inquiry/Letter Intent (LOI):** In some cases, foundations require interested applicants to first submit a Letter of Inquiry/Letter Intent (LOI). It is typically a short document that provides an overview of the project for which you are seeking funding. The purpose is to offer preliminary information, enabling the foundation to decide whether to invite a full application for potential funding. [Click here for a general outline to help you structure your LOI](#) (if the foundation does not provide instructions). Tip: If you are interested in submitting a proposal to a foundation, first consult your college's Development Team (for local foundations) or the [U's Corporate & Foundation Relations \(CFR\) Team](#) (for national foundations); they can provide invaluable insights about the foundation's relationship with our institution.

**Abstract/Project Summary:** The Abstract/Project Summary is a concise overview of your project. It is often your first impression on reviewers and an opportunity to convey the stakes of your work. Clearly state the core research question or objective, summarize the approach or methodology, and highlight the significance and potential impact of your work. It should be compelling, demonstrating both the relevance of the project to the field and its broader contributions. Tip: Do not leave writing it to the last minute, and do not just copy-paste the text from your narrative. For inspiration, [check out abstracts of funded fellowships on the ACLS website](#).

**Work Plan/Project Timeline:** The Work Plan/Project Timeline provides a detailed outline or schedule of the tasks you will undertake for the project. It should give reviewers a clear sense of what you will be doing, when, and where. The plan should be ambitious but realistic. A well-developed plan shows reviewers that you have a concrete, actionable approach, instilling confidence in your ability to successfully complete the work. Tip: Present your timeline in table or chart format. [Click here to see examples of work plans in table format](#). [Click here for a video on proposal formatting tips](#).

- Outline the specific tasks you plan to accomplish during the award period (for example, broken in increments of three months or fewer) designating start and end dates. If some of the work for the project has already been completed, indicate the current state of the project and identify what has already been done. If the project will not be completed within the funded period, provide an estimated timeframe for its completion.
- The work plan should align with the major activities described in your narrative and reflect the project timeline. It can be beneficial to highlight how the proposed work builds on any work that has already been accomplished. It can also be helpful to give reviewers a preview of the major steps to be completed after the award period, demonstrating the overall trajectory of the project and how the proposed work fits into the larger timeline.
- Be specific in describing your project activities. If applicable, include details about where you will conduct the work; and if you will be in multiple locations, specify the time you will spend in each. Describe the research materials you will use and any arrangements made for accessing essential archives, collections, or institutions.
- Tip: If you have extra space, include additional logistical details that will be useful to reviewers. For example, if you propose an ambitious writing schedule, provide information about your established writing methods that have led to the successful publication of other works. If your project involves collaboration with other scholars or organizations, briefly describe those arrangements. If your dissemination plans were not fully detailed in the narrative, provide specifics, such as the name and date of a particular conference where you plan to present.

**Bibliography/Works Cited:** The Bibliography/Works Cited lists the works of other scholars that are directly relevant to the project. Reviewers use it to assess your engagement with, and orientation within, the existing scholarship, as well as to evaluate the depth and relevance of the sources informing your proposed research. It is essential to curate this list carefully, highlighting the most important and influential works that underpin the project. (FYI, the reviewers will know the list is not comprehensive given the page limits.) Moreover, use the bibliography strategically to position yourself within the ongoing scholarly discourse by showing how your work builds on, diverges from, or contributes to existing literature. By carefully selecting primary and secondary sources that are most relevant to your project's focus, you demonstrate your intellectual rigor and the innovative potential of your proposed research. This approach underscores your awareness of the field and your strategic plan for contributing to it, making a strong case for the originality and relevance of your work. [Click here for more tips for creating a bibliography/works cited](#).

**Publications List:** The Publications List—either as a standalone document or as part of an abbreviated CV/resume—includes a detailed and curated selection of your scholarly work that highlights your relevant research contributions. Reviewers use it to evaluate how well your scholarly background aligns with the project's goals, assess the impact and relevance of your contributions to the field, and gauge your potential for future scholarly productivity. By highlighting your key contributions demonstrating the impact of your work, the publications list affirms your experience and productivity, which are crucial in competitive funding applications. Additionally, by carefully selecting publications that

are most relevant to the project's focus, you illustrate how your work aligns with the funding program's objectives, demonstrating why you are an ideal candidate for the award. [Click here for more tips for creating a publications list.](#)

**Abbreviated CV/Resume:** An Abbreviated CV/Resume is a condensed version of your curriculum vitae that highlights your qualifications, experiences, and achievements most relevant for the application. With page limits in mind, focus on items most important to your proposed project and that best showcases your strengths and competencies. Use a compact format to maximize space. If you have extra space, consider including additional information that will be helpful for reviewers, such as a brief professional bio at the top or quotes from book reviews and other accolades. Standard abbreviated cv/resume sections include: (1) current and past positions; (2) education, with degrees, dates awarded, and titles of theses or dissertations; (3) awards and honors, with dates; (4) publications, providing full citations for publications and presentations; and (5) other relevant professional activities, including any foreign language proficiency. Note: If the application requires a professional bio instead, [click here for tips for creating a professional bio.](#)

**Personal Statement:** A Personal Statement is an important component of some fellowship applications, offering a snapshot of who you are as a scholar and researcher. It helps reviewers see the person behind the proposal and understand the passion and commitment driving your work. A strong personal statement connects your past experiences, current research, and future goals, crafting a compelling narrative that shows how your scholarly interests intersect with personal motivations. Highlight how your achievements have shaped your approach, how your current work builds on those experiences, and how the fellowship will help you explore new directions or methodologies. This provides a clear vision for your future research trajectory, demonstrating your potential for growth and impact. Thoughtful reflection and creativity are required to effectively tell your story, so seek feedback from colleagues and mentors to gain valuable insights on presenting your unique strengths. [Click here for more tips for creating a personal statement.](#) Note: If the application requires a career narrative instead, [click here for tips for creating a career narrative.](#)

**Letters of Reference:** Some fellowship applications allow for the inclusion of Letters of Reference. Letters should convey confidence in your potential to excel if awarded and highlight your qualifications in alignment with the funding program. The most compelling letters come from experts in the field who are familiar with your project and can speak directly to how it aligns with the funding program's criteria, beyond just highlighting the quality of the applicant. Ideally, seek recommenders from outside your institution to demonstrate your network and show how your work is taken up by others in your field. Discuss your application with your letter writers well in advance; provide them with a copy of your proposal, CV, and any specific points you would like them to address. This ensures their letters align with your proposal and reinforce the claims you make. The letters should focus on the current project and attest to the thoughtfulness and importance of your work, providing additional perspectives on its contribution and potential impact. Please note, depending on the nature of the fellowship, it is not necessarily always useful for them to cover the entire scope of your career or previous projects. [Click here for a sample outline for a fellowship letter of reference.](#)

**Letters of Support:** If the application requires letters of support or commitment from project partners, check out [OSP's letters of support guidance.](#) Also, [click here for a sample outline for a project partner letter of support.](#)

**Budget and Budget Justification Narrative:** The Budget is often a standard form or spreadsheet. The Budget Justification Narrative explains, in text format, what the numbers on the budget sheet are intended to cover but in more detail. For questions about budgets and how funding awards work, contact your College Grants Officer. Also, consult the application instructions for information about allowable costs and funding restrictions.

- Fellowships usually do not require a budget. They generally act as salary replacement and support work on a project for a certain amount of time. The funds are usually used for the recipients' compensation, travel, and other costs related to the proposed work.
- Grants require a budget aligned to the proposed work plan that is reasonable and in adherence to the funder's guidelines. Major expense areas typically include personnel, consultants and subcontractors, equipment, supplies, travel costs, participant support costs, other project-specific costs, institutional F&A (indirect costs). Be aware that some grants require in-kind or matching funds.

**Application Forms:** For questions about application forms, online user accounts, and institutional approvals, contact your College Grants Officer. Reach out to them as soon as possible, but no later than two weeks before the funder's deadline. Be aware that certain grant applications must go through the university's Office of Sponsored Projects (OSP) for review before submission to the funder; in such cases, the application must be submitted to OSP at least 5 business days before the funder's deadline. Also, be aware that some online application portals can be finicky, so aim to submit your application to the funder at least two days before the deadline to avoid any technical issues. Finally, send a copy of your submitted proposal to your College Grants Officer to have it recorded in the University's system.



# Part 3: Proposal Writing Process

This guidance is intended for faculty and researchers developing proposals for fellowships and small-scale grants, though much of it applies broadly to other funding proposals. The information provided is general, so always follow the specific instructions and address the criteria in the RFP. Use this advice as a flexible framework to shape a compelling, competitive proposal that aligns with the funder's requirements and priorities.



## 4-Step Process for Writing Proposals

Follow these steps to develop a strong, competitive proposal. Tip: Seek feedback from mentors and colleagues—particularly those who successfully navigated this process—and incorporate their insights to strengthen your proposal.

Milestone	Objective
<b>Step #1: Think &amp; Write</b>	Write an initial draft of your proposal, using the writing process to organize your thoughts. Follow the application instructions and reviewer criteria closely. Tip: Refer to samples of funded proposals to see how others have successfully addressed the same guidelines.
<b>Step #2: Rewrite &amp; Refine</b>	After creating a solid draft, strategically rewrite and refine it to ensure it is concise, compelling, and well-structured for reviewers, clearly addressing the funder's instructions, criteria, and priorities. Tip: Revisit the RFP to confirm you have met all the requirements.
<b>Step #3: Review &amp; Revise</b>	Once your proposal is ready, have it reviewed by others, then revise based on their feedback. Aim for three reviewers: (1) a trusted peer in your field to evaluate its merit, (2) a colleague from a different field to ensure clarity, and (3) an experienced grant writer to refine strategy and presentation. Tip: Schedule these reviews in advance to ensure they are on both your and their calendars.
<b>Step #4: Rework &amp; Resubmit</b>	[after you have submitted it to the competition] If your proposal is not funded, request the reviewer comments. Critically evaluate their feedback and thoughtfully incorporate it into your revised proposal for resubmission. Then, repeat the steps above. Tip: Stay positive!



## What's Next? Revise, Resubmit, Repurpose

If your proposal is not funded, don't be discouraged (consider the level of competition and funding rates). Immediately **request the reviewer comments** and use that feedback to **revise your proposal for resubmission**.

- Read all reviewer comments thoroughly to understand the issues or concerns raised. Process the feedback constructively, focusing on ways to improve the proposal. The insights gleaned are often invaluable.
- Highlight the main points of criticism or areas where the reviewers identified gaps or weaknesses in your proposal. Look for common themes or repeated concerns across different reviewers.
- Prioritize areas for revision. Focus first on addressing the most critical areas that directly impacted the proposal's score. Clarify or expand upon anything the reviewers misunderstood or considered to be weak or insufficient.
- Lastly, share the reviewer comments with colleagues for their perspectives on how to address the concerns. Also, if available, ask the Program Officer to help you interpret the reviewer comments and think of ways to address issues.

Then **resubmit to the funding opportunity** with confidence and optimism. As competition for funding increases, it is expected that applicants may need to submit proposals multiple times before being successful. Remember, many winning proposals have gone through several iterations before securing funding.

Also, **apply to other grants and fellowships**. Submitting to multiple funding opportunities increases your chances of success. Proposals can usually be easily reworked for different competitions, especially those with similar requirements. Tip: Long abstracts or proposals submitted to conferences and workshops can also often be adapted for funding applications. Repurposing proposals for multiple opportunities is a great strategy to maximize your efforts.



## Example Proposal Development Timeline

The following example timeline outlines key steps for preparing and submitting a basic fellowship application. Tailor it for the specific competition to which you are applying and use it to help you stay organized and ensure you meet all university and funder deadlines and requirements. Tip: Plan ahead and start early!

Action Item	Completion Date <i>(estimated)</i>
Review application instructions and funded samples on funder's website.	Right Away
Create proposal development and submission checklist/task list and timeline.	Right Away
Contact the funder's Program Officer, your Chair, and College Grants Officer (OSP).	Right Away
Schedule external reviews in advance. Give heads-up to letter writers.	Right Away
Draft narrative, work plan, and personal statement following application instructions.	7+ weeks before deadline
Rewrite and refine proposal documents (keeping the readers/reviewers in mind).	6 weeks before deadline
Prepare bibliography, publications list, abbreviated CV, etc.	5 weeks before deadline
Get proposal documents reviewed by 1-3 people.	4 weeks before deadline
Develop budget (if applicable). Set up user account in online application portal.	4 weeks before deadline
Revise proposal documents based on feedback. Write abstract. Receive letters.	3 weeks before deadline
Finalize full proposal, including final editing, proofreading, and formatting.	2 weeks before deadline
Submit everything for OSP/CFR review, as applicable.	1 week before deadline
Upload everything into online application and submit.	2 days before deadline
Send copy of final proposal to College Grants Officer (or CFR) for university records.	Same Day
Application Deadline.	Funder's Deadline



## Common Errors Applicants Make

- (1) Ignoring the guidelines.
- (2) Not making the case for significance.
- (3) Focusing solely on gaps in scholarship.
- (4) Employing fuzzy methodology.
- (5) Having an incomplete work plan.
- (6) Using jargon excessively.
- (7) Listing unhelpful references.
- (8) Not planning ahead.
- (9) Not being clear or engaging.

Tip: Follow all the funder's instructions, including for deadlines, eligibility, allowable activities and expenses, required application components, page limits, document formatting, and file type and naming requirements.

# Part 4: Proposal Writing Resources

There is a wealth of proposal development resources available for faculty and researchers at the University of Utah. Visit [www.research.utah.edu/resources](http://www.research.utah.edu/resources) and [uofuhealth.utah.edu/research/resources](http://uofuhealth.utah.edu/research/resources) to learn more.



## Have Questions? Need Assistance? Want Support?

### GUIDANCE AND ASSISTANCE

- **External Funding Opportunities:** The [VPR Research Writing Services Office](#) offers proposal writing and editing services for all U faculty and researchers applying for external funding. Submit requests at least 2 weeks in advance.
- **Foundation Grants and Fellowships:** The [U's Corporate & Foundation Relations \(CFR\) Team](#) oversees grant and fellowship applications to national foundations. Your college's Development Team manages funding request to local foundations. In both cases, contact them as early in the process as possible. They manage the university's relationship with many of those funders and can provide invaluable insights, guidance, and connections. And, in some cases, certain foundations only accept U-affiliated applications through special calls.
- **Federal Grants and Fellowships:** Check out our university's [RED NSF Grant Writing Consultation](#), [RED NIH Grant Writing Consultation](#), [CTSI NIH Grant Peer Grant Review Program](#), and [U Health Team Grant Support Program](#).
- **Large-Scale Grant Applications:** The [VPR Large Infrastructure Funding Team \(LIFT\)](#) offers grant writing support for center, program, and other large-scale interdisciplinary grants. Submit requests at least 12 weeks in advance.
- **Budgets, Forms, Approvals, Submissions:** Your College Grants Officer is available to assist with budgets, compliance requirements, institutional reviews and approvals, application forms, user accounts, and online submissions. In addition, they serve as your interface with the university's Office of Sponsored Projects (OSP). Contact them as soon as you plan to apply for something but no later than 2 weeks before the application deadline. Also, be aware that certain applications must be submitted for OSP review 5 business days before the funder's deadline; this includes federal grant applications, projects involving human studies research, multi-institution submissions, and applications in which the organization (not the individual) is the official applicant.

### TRAININGS AND GROUPS

- **General Grants and Fellowships:** Check out of the [U's Research Education \(RED\) online classes](#), including proposal preparation and submission (RED 401, RED 451, RED 900) and budget preparation and development (RED 359, RED 400). Also, the [VPR Research Writing Services Office](#) and the [U's Corporate & Foundation Relations \(CFR\) Team](#) offer various trainings.
- **National Endowment for the Humanities (NEH):** Check out [NEH's pre-recorded virtual workshops](#) covering various grant opportunities and application tips.
- **National Institutes of Health (NIH):** Check out [NIH's Guide to Grants](#) and [NIH's Tips Before You Submit](#), and our university's [RED NIH Grant Writing Training](#), [CTSI NIH Grant Writing Group](#) (sign-ups due in August, December, and April), and [VPR NIH Grant Writing Cohort](#) (sign-up due in Spring).
- **National Science Foundation (NSF):** Check out [NSF's Getting Started Guide](#) (including tips on preparing and submitting proposals) and our university's [RED NSF Grant Writing Training](#) and [VPR NSF Grant Writing Cohort](#) (sign-ups due in April).

*DISCLAIMER: This guide contains guidance synthesized from various funder resources, insights shared by faculty and researchers, and best practices from university grant specialists. The information provided is accurate to the best of our knowledge at the time of publication. However, this document is not exhaustive and may contain errors. Please let [Jenna Taylor](#), Director, Corporate & Foundation Relations, know of any needed corrections or useful updates. Thank you!*

UPDATED 2024-11-08