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# Time Management 101 for Grant Applicants

8 OCT 1999 · BY [VID MOHAN-RAM](#)

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Are you on the brink of scientific stardom as a faculty member but need extra funding? Are you beginning a postdoctoral project and need start-up assistance? Stop! Before you get carried away in a mad dash while writing your dream proposal, be aware that preparing a good grant application requires more than just a slick sale of scientific ideas.

## Common First-Time Application Errors

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"Start writing before you enter the lab!" advises Jason Kahana, a postdoctoral fellow at the Ludwig Institute for Cancer Research at the University of California, San Diego (UCSD). His Ph.D. committee at Harvard suggested he begin writing postdoctoral fellowship proposals while he was finishing up his thesis. This advice was especially relevant, as his postdoctoral supervisor instructed him to apply for funding before he started in the lab. To ensure funding, Kahana submitted as many proposals as he possibly could.

As he found out, sending off several grant applications with deadlines just days apart takes some fancy juggling. "A couple were proposals 9 to 10 pages long, like the NIH [National Institutes of Health] applications, but other [funding organizations] only wanted two pages," which Kahana had to completely rewrite. He spent the last few months at his Ph.D. lab and the first month at his postdoc lab applying to five different agencies for funding.

Kahana admits that he suffered through some common grant application missteps. He was so focused on writing the application that he "didn't even read the whole NIH booklet until I needed to, which was bad." He warns that there is definitely more to applying for grants than he first assumed. "Everyone thinks writing the proposal is the hard part--you have to get institutional signatures, a lot of supporting materials, letters of recommendations. Once you write your proposal, you think you're out of the woods, but you're not!"

Sharyl Nass, a postdoc at the Johns Hopkins Oncology Center in Maryland, agrees. "The running around was a little more than I anticipated," she concedes. She applied for a grant from the Department of Defense (DOD) to fund her research on breast cancer less than 2 months before the deadline. Fortunately, she says her supervisor was very supportive and warned her early on that she had to apply for funding, "so I was ready. I also had help from the office in the department that deals with grants and budget details."

For many first-time applicants (as well as their more experienced counterparts), the final days leading up to a grant application deadline can be spent in a near frantic state. There are pages and pages of administrative forms and letters and references that must accompany your research proposal. How do you organize your time so that submitting an application is an efficient and productive process?

"Most people I know do their grant application at the last possible minute. That's like shooting yourself in the foot," declares Liane Reif-Lehrer, a former research scientist who now runs a proposal-writing consulting firm. "An extremely important point in preparing a grant application is leaving yourself enough time to think about it and write it well." She advises that you "send out drafts to people in your field at least 2 months ahead of time, consider carefully what they say, and incorporate pertinent comments."

Reif-Lehrer also recommends that before researchers apply for first-time funding, they "find out what projects the agency has funded in the past and determine whether an agency is really interested in the project to be submitted." Compared with the potential loss of invested time, "the cost of a long-distance phone call is a small price to pay."

It seems obvious, but studying directions can also influence the health of your grant application. Bob Godt, a professor at the Medical College of Georgia in Augusta who also sits on NIH review panels, describes his grant-writing experience while doing research in Sweden. "I had no old hands to give me pointers on how to write an NIH grant" to fund his research back in the States, he remembers. So he did something that his future supervisor called a "real insight." What did Godt do? "I read the instructions and followed them."

## Recommendations

Because many grant application deadlines occur in late summer or early fall, planning your proposal and obtaining application forms by March or April may be wise. Faculty members and other colleagues are also more likely to be on vacation or sabbatical during the later summer months, which complicates the process of getting letters of recommendation or commitments to collaborate.

"You should already know who's going to give you a reference or recommendation," Kahana adds. Because "it only takes a little more effort for them to provide you with a number of reference letters," he advises that you tell your reference providers that "you will be applying for such-and-such grants later in the year" and would like additional copies of letters.

## Schedules and Timing

It is important to realize that although it may seem "part of life" to run around campus and stay up till dawn writing, a grant application does not revolve around you. There are other people you are dependent on and to whom you are responsible: your mentor, Ph.D. supervisor, collaborators, secretaries, the dean, and especially the administrators in your grant office. Administrators in particular are often swamped during the days leading up to a major application deadline. As Kahana reasons, "There may be another 45 people ahead of you at your university who also aren't organized." This means you're stuck, which is when the real panic sets in.

But regardless of how organized your application is, you need to ensure that you are doing everything according to the rules of your university or institute. The first time around, Bonnie Firestein, a postdoctoral grant-writing wizard who received three grants during her 4-year postdoctoral stint in the physiology department at UC San Francisco, says she was not aware that her NIH proposal needed to go through her department's administrative offices. (Her application also had to be forwarded to the university's central Office of Grants and Contracts for approval before being sent off to NIH.) Firestein did manage to meet the deadline and was eventually awarded the fellowship, but says experiences like this emphasize the need to be fully aware of departmental and university policies.

Applicants for specific types of federal funds may also find that their application schedules are subject to factors external to their research institution. For example, agencies such as the DOD sometimes do not send the forms required of a complete application until the first round of reviews for preliminary applications is completed and the applicant list is narrowed. "Five months after I sent my application," Nass remembers, "the DOD wanted additional information about the human and animal subjects, radiation, and biohazards." She says this meant more paperwork, "but at the time it was good to know I got through the first round."

Colleen Carpenter, director of the Grants and Contracts Office at the UCSD School of Medicine, has helped applicants submit grant proposals for more than 20 years. Of postdocs and grad students, she observes, "these are good kids, bright scientists, but they are sometimes pressured by senior faculty to produce a grant at short notice." This means they aren't given the option "to have weeks and weeks to prepare," which they really need. Regardless of the time constraints, says Carpenter, young investigators (including faculty members) need to talk to their grant administration offices and learn how the process works.

## Conclusion

Preparing grant applications comes down to adequate planning. The money is there for the taking, but you have to be organized and ready months before you even begin to write. Some tips from recent applicants include:

- Start accumulating results and information that will add weight to your proposal and demonstrate competence.
- Ask for letters of reference and collaboration at least several weeks in advance (6 to 8 weeks) of the deadline date. Remind your reference providers.
- Be aware of what's going on in your field so that you can include relevant material in the proposal.
- Do your homework to see if you can request that your proposal be sent to a specific review panel.
- Obtain all the relevant application forms and read and reread the instructions so that you understand the submission details clearly.
- Don't hesitate to contact your institution's grant office and/or the program officer at the funding agency in question.

Finally, get out of the lab. Walk down the corridor and chat with other faculty members and postdocs and the grant administrators. You can only benefit from their advice and experience.

As Henry Ford said, "The only real security that a man will have in this world is a reserve of knowledge, experience, and ability." All three of these qualities will serve you well in your quest for a share of those almighty research dollars!

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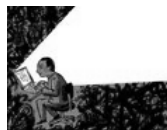
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