Collaborative Research Proposals: A Guide

prepared for the

Capacity Building For Collaborative Health Research In Nova Scotia Workshop

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Contents

1.0 Introduction

This document was put together as a resource tool for the Capacity Building for Collaborative Health Research in Nova Scotia Workshop. It provides basic information and additional resources in two broad areas: collaborative research and research proposal preparation and writing. This text serves as a general guide and does not supersede any specific funding application guidelines. In general, the ideas presented here are applicable to any application for funding.

2.0. Elements of the Research Proposal Process

2.1 Needs Assessment

- What are the key problems?
- What is the best way to address those problems?
- What specific needs do we to address? For whom? Why?
- What are our priorities in addressing these needs?

2.2 Assess Your Capabilities

- Do we have the staff needed to implement a new project?
- Is the project compatible with our mission and priorities?
- Are the resources in place?
- Am I and my staff committed to this project?
- Is it feasible? Can we really accomplish what we are proposing?
- What are our collaboration options?

2.3 Identifying and Approaching Potential Funding Sources

Foundations, government agencies, corporations and non-profit organizations are all potential research funding sources. Unsolicited proposals are created by the funding seeker. Other opportunities are created when the funding source offers specific programs that solicit proposals. While identifying possible funding sources is not particularly difficult, the challenge lies in knowing what to do with the information once you have it. There are steps to take after you identify a potential sponsor and *before* you submit your proposal that will significantly improve your chances of getting funded.

- Do not limit your funding search to one source
- Pinpoint program approaches, interests and priorities of the funder
- Make direct contact with the funder
- Request proposal guidelines and a list of previously funded projects
- Identify a program officer in your area of interest. Contact the program officer *after* you have studied the program guidelines carefully and you have additional questions. A program officer may

- o Help determine the closeness of fit between your area of interest and their organization
- o Act as a sounding board for your ideas
- o Help you define a research problem
- o Advise you on a methodology to reach the desired objectives
- o Put you in touch with others working on the same theme to develop mechanisms for research collaboration
- o Suggest other unannounced programs or unsolicited funds available to support your project
- o Review the project proposal prior to submission of the final version
- Unless specified, inquire about the maximum amount available and the average size and funding range of awards
- If technical assistance, including a review of proposal drafts, is available, use it

A funder might have a two-stage application process: letter of intent and the formal application. Only those applicants successful at stage one will be invited to submit a formal application. The letter of intent or inquiry letter is also used when targeting foundations and corporations as either a screening device or as the proposal itself. See "Letters of Inquiry/Intent" in Elements of a Grant Proposal at http://www.silcom.com/~paladin/promaster.html for the elements of such letters and "Inquiries to Private Foundations" in Proposal Writer's Guide at http://www.research.umich.edu/research/proposals/proposal_dev/pwg/pwgfoundations.html for a sample letter of inquiry.

Check if the funder has specific criteria for the letter of intent. The letter of intent is usually short (often only two to four pages); it is more challenging to write than a long proposal! See "Letter Proposal" section of *A Guide to Proposal Planning and Writing* at http://www.oryxpress.com/miner.htm or, for an example of a longer letter of intent request, the "Application Procedure" for SSHRC's Major Collaborative Research Initiatives at http://www.sshrc.ca/english/programinfo/granstguide.htm.

2.4 Funding Sources on the Web

There is a wealth of information available on the Internet regarding research funding sources and the programs of individual funders, as well as electronic application processes for some agencies. If you know the organization you wish to apply to funding for, check out their website for up-to-date information on guidelines, policies, application procedures and deadlines.

The *Nova Scotia Health Research Foundation* website (at http://www.nshrf.ca) lists its funding programs in addition to providing links to numerous non-government health organizations (e.g., Arthritis Society of Canada). Check under "Links to other sites".

Canadian Institutes of Health Research (CIHR) (major federal agency that funs health and medical research in Canada) at http://www.cihr.ca

Canadian Health Services Research Foundation (CHSRF) (facilitates the production, dissemination and uptake of research for evidence-based decision-making in the management, organization and delivery of health services) at http://www.chsrf.ca/english/index.html

National Research Council (NRC) at http://www.nrc.ca/corporate/english

Social Sciences and Humanities Research Council (SSHRC) at http://www.sshrc.ca/english/index.htm

Natural Sciences and Engineering Research Council (NSERC) (the national instrument for strategic investments in Canada's science and technology sectors) at http://www.nserc.ca/index.htm

Additional Resources

J.T. Miner and L.E. Miner, "Proposal Planning", A Guide to Proposal Planning and Writing", at http://www.oryxpress.com/miner.htm

> The authors set out a three-step process to grant seeking and detail how to approach each step. They list the key questions to answer as you write your proposal and provide writing tips and examples for the main components of a proposal. They include strategies to approaching foundations and corporations.

Schumacher, Dorin. 1992. *Get Funded! A practical guide for scholars seeking research support from business*. Newbury Park, CA: Sage Publications.

> A practical guide introducing the corporate environment and its role in university research, strategies for successful research partnerships, and programmatic approaches to university-industry research.

2.5 Project Review and Approval

Project proposal review and approval processes will vary between funders. Contact the funder and ask for details on their review and approval process. Letters of intent will usually undergo a similar process of review.

- Is the proposal reviewed at the funding source or at another location? (Mail reviews are done under more relaxed conditions but often require greater documentation while a panel review is apt to be done more quickly, placing a higher premium on proposal readability.)

- Does the funder following a particular point or scoring system (i.e., where should you concentrate your greatest efforts in the proposal)?

- Do staff review proposals prior to or after the peer review?

A first step in the review process may be a review of proposals for *responsiveness* to the purpose, research objectives or special requirements of the request for applications and administrative considerations. Incomplete proposals or those not considered responsive will be returned to the applicant.

Most often applications are then peer reviewed through a committee process established by the funder. Generally, peer reviewers are volunteers who do the task over and above their daily activities. The funder may set out the criteria for determining membership on the committee (see, for example, CIHR "Factors to be taken into account in determining membership on Peer Committee" at http://www.cihr.ca/). *Peer review* is based on the principle that colleagues are best placed to evaluate the substantive and technical quality and merit of a research proposal. Peer review ensures that the process of adjudication remains as independent and objective as possible. There may be more than one stage in this process (e.g., SSHRC submits proposals to external assessors inside and outside Canada (experts in the research field in question); their written assessments are provided to peer review committees composed of other researchers which make funding recommendations.

The *review criteria* are often available from the funder. See, for example, the 'descriptor statements' provided to reviewers by the CHSRF (at http://www.chsrf.ca/english/programs/ac-ogc2000_e.html). Assessment criteria might include:

- Significance (of both the research to the problem and advancement of knowledge in the subject)
- Clarity of research questions and objectives
- Approach (i.e., development and appropriateness of conceptual framework, design, methods, and analyses; acknowledgement of problems and alternatives; feasibility)
- Innovation (i.e., use of new concepts, approaches or methods)
- Investigator (i.e., track record capacity and skills of the research team)
- Nature and extent of collaboration (e.g., how the activities of all the participants are interdependent and integrated toward the achievement of the project's objectives)
- Appropriateness of the budget in relation to the proposed project
- Communications/dissemination (i.e., extent, appropriateness and uniqueness of plans)
- Institutional environment and administrative capacity (i.e., level of support; ability to support and employ useful collaborative arrangements)

Contact the funder for a list of reviewers, if appropriate. Some websites list reviewer names. If you are unable to get specific names of past reviewers, ask the program officer for general information on the types of reviewers they use – their age, background, and training; how they are selected; how they use the review process; and how points are allocated to a proposal. This information allows you to match your proposal writing style to the level of sophistication of your reviewers. If you receive a copy of the reviewer's evaluation form use the same headers and subheaders on your proposal. Contact a past reviewer if possible (see Miner and Miner, above, for a detailed list of questions to ask of a past reviewer).

The funder usually bases its approval decision on an assessment of the results of the peer review in conjunction with overall program balance, policy and budgetary considerations.

3.0 Collaborative Research

3.1 What is it?

- Collaboration is a mutually beneficial and well-defined relationship entered into by two or more researchers or organizations to achieve common goals.

- Collaboration in practice is a continuum – as the relationship moves from stage to stage, the level of engagement of the partners moves from low to high; the importance of the relationship to each collaborator's mission shifts from peripheral to strategic; the magnitude and nature of resources allocated to the relationship expand significantly; the scope of activities encompassed by the partnership broadens; partners' interactions intensify; the managerial complexity of the alliance increases; and the strategic value of the collaboration escalates from modest to major (Austin 2000).

- A collaborator is a person who does not necessarily have research experience per se but who has a wealth of experience in relation to the research question – someone who can assist the researcher by providing substantive feedback and personal support. Collaborators can provide data as well as participate in the formation of the research question, selection of data gathering methods, data analysis, and presentation of the information.

A collaborative relationship includes a commitment to:

- A definition of mutual relationships and goals
- A jointly developed structure and shared responsibility
- Mutual authority and accountability for success
- Sharing resources and rewards (Mattessich and Monsey 1992)

3.2 Why do it?

Collaborative research can enhance the quality of research through exposure to new perspectives on specific research problems and to access to new or different expertise, data, in-kind support services or specific facilities, communities or financial resources. Normally, collaborative research requires a broad range of expertise and participants, with collaboration between researchers in other disciplines, sectors, institutions and geographic locations.

- Synergy offers ways to overcome obstacles and manage inescapable interdependencies
- Make services more accessible and effective
- Increase the integration of research results into other sectors (e.g., industry, government agencies or departments, community groups, universities) and offer opportunities to aid the dissemination of results
- Diversify capability to accomplish tasks (e.g., provide opportunities for trainees to spend time in different laboratories, interaction and exchange of personnel between institutions and sectors)

- Foster ties between researchers in the academic, community, private and public sectors
- Funders like it

While collaboration may introduce economies of scale and scope and reduce costs in some research projects, other projects may incur higher costs associated with directing, managing and integrating the activities of the collaboration. Funders often encourage collaboration; check their guidelines on the limitations to supporting collaborative research. When collaboration increases the research budget, detail the contribution collaboration plays in the intellectual direction and conduct of the research and the special opportunities made available by encouraging and establishing the collaborative framework.

3.3 What is involved in designing a collaborative research project?

Research collaboration can take many forms:

- pairing of institutions
- mechanisms to support networks of institutions or researchers
- research programs that include a research training component
- targeted research
- institution building
- informal research partnerships

The Social Science and Humanities Research Council (SSHRC) funds several programs directed to establishing research partnerships. *Guidelines for Building Research Partnerships* (SSHRC, June 1999) provides a series of questions that you should consider in designing a collaborative research project including:

Principles, Beliefs and Values
- What are the common principles, beliefs and values upon which the partnership will be built?
- Do expectations differ significantly among the partners?

Objectives
- What are the major collective objectives of the collaboration? What are the specific objectives in terms of the research results?
- What are the deliverables of the project, for each partner, and for the community at large?
- Which objectives, if any, are *not* shared? Are these known by all the partners?

Resources
- What resources can each partner contribute?
- Would changes in circumstances impede the project?

Roles
- Have each partner's roles been made clear during each phase of the project?
- How will project management decisions be made?
- Is a formal contractual relationship necessary, or would a memorandum of agreement suffice?

Creating the Collaborative Team
- Will the team have continuity of membership? What happens if the lead investigator withdraws from the project?

Conflict Resolution, Evaluation and Ownership
- Who will own the data and other intellectual property produced through the research?

Communication
- How will the team ensure effective internal and external communication?

Further Resources

Issues in Linkage and Exchange Between Researchers and Decision Makers: Summary of a workshop convened by the Canadian Health Services Research Foundation, Montreal, at: http://www.chsrf.ca/english/document_library/issues-researchers-decision-makers.pdf.

"Collaborative Relationships" from the Community Partnership Toolkit of the W.K. Kellogg Foundation at http://www.wkkf.org/documents/cct/secd/cptoolkit/Sec3-Collaborative.htm identifies questions to consider when establishing a shared vision, developing a collaborative strategic plan, determining meeting rules and building consensus about decision making.

3.4 Factors Influencing the Success of Collaboration

Mattessich and Monsey (1992) have identified 19 factors that influence the success of collaborations formed by human service, government and other nonprofit organizations. The factors are grouped into six categories. Based on an analysis of several studies of collaboration, they assigned check marks against each factor identified in these studies. While they consider these tallies to be an important research finding, they stress that successful collaboration depends on paying attention to *all* the factors listed.

1. Factors related to the *environment*
   〡〡〡〡〡〡 History of collaboration or cooperation in the community
   〡〡〡 Collaborative group seen as a leader in the community
   〡〡〡 Political/social climate favorable

2. Factors related to *membership characteristics*
   〡〡〡〡〡〡〡〡〡〡〡 Mutual respect, understanding and trust
   〡〡〡〡〡〡〡〡〡〡〡 Appropriate cross-section of members
   〡〡〡〡〡〡 Members see collaboration as in their self-interest
   〡〡〡 Ability to compromise

3. Factors related to *process/structure*

- Members share a stake in both process and outcome
- Multiple layers of decision-making
- Flexibility
- Development of clear roles and policy guidelines
- Adaptability

3. Factors related to *communications*

- Open and frequent communication
- Established informal and formal communication

5. Factors related to *purpose*

- Concrete, attainable goals and objectives
- Shared vision
- Unique purpose

6. Factors related to *resources*

- Sufficient funds
- Skilled convener

Further Resources

Austin, J.E. 2000. *The Collaboration Challenge*. San Francisco: Jossey-Bass Publishers.

> Using examples from various partnerships and collaborations in all kinds of industries with all kinds of nonprofit organizations, the author explores the nature of collaboration, the potential pitfalls, the points for leverage, and the management strategies that work in bringing different organizations together and make for effective collaborations.

Brill, Naomi. 1976. *Team-work: Working together in the human services*. Philadelphia: J.B. Lippincott Company.

> The author provides information about group membership and team operation to enhance an individual's ability to participate in teams more effectively and to improve the performance of teams.

Lomas, Jonathan. 2000. "Using 'linkage and exchange' to move research into policy at a Canadian foundation". Health Affairs, Vol. 19, No. 1, pp. 236-40.
At: http://www.projhope.org/HA/bonus/lomas.pdf

> This paper describes the efforts of the Canadian Health Services Research Foundation to link the processes of health services research and decision making through all aspects of its research funding.

Mattessich, Paul and Barbara Monsey. 1992. *Collaboration: What Makes It Work*. St. Paul, Minnesota: Amherst H. Wilder Foundation.

> The authors review and summarize the existing research literature on factors that influence the success of collaboration. In reporting their results, the authors identify a set of success factors one can use as a checklist to enhance one's general understanding of the subject or to evaluate proposed collaborative projects.

Thompson, Pamela and Sylvie Stachenko. 1994. "Building and mobilizing partnerships for health: a national strategy". *Health Promotion International* Vol. 9, No. 3, pp. 211-215.

> This paper describes a Canada's national collaborative strategy development process, 'Enhancing Preventive Practices of Health Professionals', involving Health Canada and eight national health profession associations. The paper includes lessons learned from the process and outputs produced by the initiative.

Winer, Michael and Karen Ray. 1994. *Collaboration Handbook: Creating, sustaining and enjoying the journey*. St. Paul, Minnesota: Amherst W. Wilder Foundation.

> This handbook supplies a definition of collaboration and sets out four stages of collaboration. It provides a step-by-step "how to" guide through these stages using an illustrative example. Appendices provide resources on collaboration and forms for documenting collaboration.

4.0 Standard Contents of Research Proposals

The following sections are generally required in research funding proposals. Check the funders guidelines for specific requirements and follow them. Section 7.0 of this document offers general hints on proposal submission and tips on writing style for proposals. Together these sections offer suggestions on research proposal planning, writing and submission with a view to maximizing the chance of success of your request for funding. For an overview of the purpose, key questions to answer and writing tips of each of the sections set out below, see

"Proposal Writing" section of *A Guide to Proposal Planning and Writing* at http://www.oryxpress.com/miner.htm

The Art of Grantmanship by Jacob Kraicer at http://www.med.uwo.ca/physiology/courses/ survivalwebv3/grantsmanship/content.htm

"Elements of a Grant Proposal" at http://www.silcom.com/~paladin/promaster.html

"Basic Elements of Grant Writing" by the Corporation for Public Broadcasting at http://www.cpb.org/grants/grantwriting.html

A Proposal Writing Short Course by the Foundation Center at http://fdncenter.org/onlib/shortcourse/prop1.html

"Beginners Guide to the Research Proposal: Part 1" at http://www.health.ucalgary.ca/bob/prop_ele.htm provides general proposal writing tips and "Part 2" at http://www.health.ucalgary.ca/bob/prop_el2.htm provides information related to research and study design and data collection and analysis components of proposals.

The *EPA Grant-Writing Tutorial* (at http://www.epa.gov/seahome/grants.html) is an interactive software tool that walks the user through the grant-writing process and includes detailed information and tips on writing a grant proposal, examples of good grant packages and a mock grant-writing activity where the user is able to compare their results to a successful grant application.

Each of these resources has links to other proposal writing tools on the Internet.

Cover Letter

The cover letter provides a clear, concise overview of your organization, the purpose of the research and the amount of the funding request. The letter should demonstrate how the proposal furthers the funder's or funding program's mission, goals and matches the application guidelines. A cover letter should always accompany a proposal.

- Direct the letter to the individual responsible for the funding program (not "To whom it may concern", "Dear Sirs", etc.)
- Include the name and phone number of a contact at your organization
- Have the letter signed by the person who speaks with authority on behalf of your organization

Project Overview/Abstract/Project Summary

- Should be brief; no more that two or three paragraphs or half a page
- This section clearly and concisely summarizes the proposal providing the reader with a framework that will help him/her visualize the project

Qualifications of the Organization

This section describes the applicant's organization(s) and its (their) qualifications for funding and establishes its (their) credibility. A proposal often sinks or swims based on the need for the project and the project methodology, *not* on the accomplishments of the overall organization – do not devote too much space to the history or programs of your organization.

Problem Statement and Justification

Careful crafting of the problem statement is essential as it is one of the first sections a reviewer reads. All other proposal elements provide support showing how you will address the problem. The key point is not stating the problem per se, but stating a problem that is manageable and solvable. Objectively address the specific situation, opportunity, problem, issue, need and the community your proposed research addresses.

- Provide an appropriate introduction for the project
- Show a logical lead to a problem or need statement
- Establish that a relevant, compelling problem or need exists
- Demonstrate the problem or need is feasible to address
- Demonstrate your knowledge of the issue or problem – provide statistical data or third-party research/evidence to support the statement
- A literature review should provide a concise summary of the main arguments properly juxtaposed to the new and better plan of action
- For a training project, has the 'target' group provided support to the need or problem?
- Clearly state assumptions or hypotheses
- Present the statement in a logical order
- Make a connection between the issue and your organization
- Demonstrate the need for your methodology; the reviewer should be able to anticipate your solution based upon your analysis of the problem

Further Resources

"The Statement of Need" in *A Proposal Writing Short Course, Part 1* at http://fdncenter.org/onlib/shortcourse/prop1.html

"Brainstorming; Procedures and Method Guidelines" at http://www.scn.org/ip/cds/cmp/brainsto.htm details the brainstorming technique for a group seeking to define a problem and identify a plan of action to solve it.

"Reviewing the literature: Writing the right stuff" details the purpose and format of the literature review. In L.R. Locke, W.W. Spirduso, and S.J. Sliverman, *Proposals That Work* (Newbury Park: Sage Publications, 1987), pp. 58–61.

Goals and Objectives

- Goals are general and offer an understanding of the thrust of your project
- Objectives are specific, measurable outcomes
- A good objective emphasizes what will be done and when it will be done; a method will explain why or how it will be done
- Include the rationale for collaboration
- In general, an objective should be provided to meet each problem or need identified in the statement of the problem

- Keep them S-I-M-P-L-E –
  - **S**pecific – indicate precisely what you intend to change through your research
  - **I**mmediate – indicate the time frame during which a current problem will be addressed
  - **M**easurable – indicate what you would accept as proof of project success
  - **P**ractical – indicate how each objective is a real solution to a real problem
  - **L**ogical – indicate how each objective systematically contributes to achieving your overall goal(s)
  - **E**valuable – indicate how much change has to occur for the project to be effective

Methodology or Project Design

- Describe the process you will use to achieve each objective
- Describe why you have chosen these activities and justify them over other approaches you could have taken
- Provide a chronological description of the proposed project
- Describe the impact of your proposed activities and how the research will benefit the community
- Identify who will carry out the activities
- Identify long-term strategies for maintaining the project and its results

Further Resources

"Systematic Reviews on the Web" at http://www.mcms.dal.ca/gorgs/phru/workshop.htm provides a workbook on "How to find, evaluate and use applied research in evidence-based planning" and sources of systematic reviews on the World Wide Web.

Facilities

- When relevant, indicate facilities required and how such will be provided
- Identify any special equipment required for the project

Personnel

- Identify the number and categories of project personnel
- Provide vitae or resumes for key personnel (keeping in mind any page limits set for vitae) and selection criteria for support personnel

Budget

- Typically includes details on personnel (salaries, fringe benefits, contracts, volunteers); equipment and materials; communications; travel; and indirect costs (overhead)
- If you plan to hire someone with the funding, include a position description
- Justify requests for salary and travel

- Include any in-kind contributions and other sources of income related to the project
- Make sure the budget and narrative coincide
- Clearly indicate collaborating individual/institutions contributions
- Use only the allowable budget categories
- Contains no unexplained amounts for miscellaneous or contingency

Results and Dissemination

- Clearly identify the intended outcome of the dissemination effort
- Describe any products resulting from the dissemination effort
- Provide a feasible and appropriate plan for dissemination which indicates who is responsible for it and specifies tentative targets (i.e., journal titles, meetings to be attended, locations for presenting papers)
- Where appropriate, name who owns the rights to intellectual property from the research

Further Resources

Improving Research Dissemination and Uptake in the Health Sector: Beyond the Sound of One Hand Clapping by Jonathan Lomas (Hamilton: McMaster University Centre for Health Economics and Policy Analysis, Policy Commentary C97-1, November 1997) examines the issue of communications between health researchers and policy makers and processes for enhancing research dissemination and uptake.

Communications Primer (November 1998) at http://www.chsrf.ca/english/document-library/communicationsprimer.pdf identifies ways to improve communications between applied health services researchers and health system managers or policy makers utilizing the principles of persuasive communication.

The Health Transition Fund of Health Canada provides a useful example of a dissemination strategy with its "National Synthesis and Dissemination Strategy" available at http://www.hc-sc.gc.ca/htf-fass/english/subjectareas_e.htm.

Evaluation

- Plan for evaluating accomplishment of your objectives
- Plan for modifying process and methodology
- Provide methods – criteria, data, instruments, analysis
- Determine who will be involved in evaluating and how they will be used
- Identify the expected outcome at the end of the funding period

Further Resources

W.K. Kellogg Foundation, *Evaluation Handbook* at http://www.wkkf.org/Documents/ PhilVol/EvalHandbook.pdf is comprised of two sections: an overview of the Foundation's philosophy and expectations for evaluation and a step-by-step blueprint for planning and

implementing project-level evaluation and communicating findings and utilizing evaluation results.

Appendices

- Include strong letters of support or endorsement
- Attach assurances of collaboration in interagency proposals
- Include vitae or resumes of key project personnel
- Do not include if they are specifically excluded
- Make sure reviewers could make an informed funding decision without any appendix information

In summary, a research proposal should reflect planning, research and vision. A proposal must convince the funder that a research problem need of significant magnitude exists and that the applicant has the means and the imagination to solve the problem or meet the need. Successful proposals clearly and concisely state the community's and organization's needs and are targeted to funders in that field, a reflection of careful planning and research. The appropriate format should be used, and the required information must be provided.

Further Resources

"Dealing with Short Deadlines" at http://www.research/umich.edu/ research/proposals/proposal_dev/pwg/pwgdeadlines.html provides a strategy for dealing with writing a proposal on a short timeline.

"You lost me in the third paragraph: A guide to gracious criticism" at http://www.gmu.edu/ departments/writingcenter/handouts/eiphand.html and "Revision checklist and editing guidelines" at http://…/check.html, although not directed specifically to proposals, do offer questions to consider as you review your proposal (or another's).

5.0 What Next?

Once your proposal is submitted, you should begin to plan to deal with either outcome option: your proposal is funded or declined. You might want to consider submitting the proposal to other funders while you are awaiting a funding decision. However, you are ethically obligated to tell a funder that you have submitted a similar proposal to another funder. Multiple submissions demonstrate your serious commitment to your project and shows you are willing to exert considerable effort to secure funding.

If you are successful,

- Request a copy of the reviewer comments, if allowed by the funder
- Ask the program officer about common mistakes other grantees make so you don't fall into the same trap
- Clarify the submission deadlines for technical and financial reports

- Invite your program officer to come and visit you

If you are turned down by the funder,

- Thank the funder for considering your proposal
- Ask what can be done to improve the proposal
- Request reviewer comments, particularly verbatim comments (rather than summary comments which are less specific), if available
- Ask if you should reapply in the next competition
- Use this as an opportunity to build a relationship with the funder for the next submission cycle
- Invite them to your organization to get to know them better

6.0 Why Proposals are Rejected

Assuming that the funds are available, that geographical distribution is not a criterion, and that political considerations are not at play, the success of a proposal depends on both the quality of the project itself and the presentation of the proposal. The following are common reasons for disapproval of a proposal:

- An apparent lack of new or original ideas

- The problem is not of sufficient importance or is unlikely to produce any new or useful information

- Failure to understand and to demonstrate an understanding of the problem and meet the funders' specific targets

- The proposed tests, methods or scientific procedures are unsuited to the stated objective

- A diffuse, rambling, superficial or unfocussed research plan

- A lack of background and experience in the essential methodology

- Measurable outcome indicators are not provided

- The absence of an acceptable scientific rationale

- An attempt to conduct an unrealistically large amount of work

- Costs/budgets are unreasonable (too high/too low) or incomplete

- Costs/budgets do not provide sufficient detail or required breakdown of information

- Proposal does not demonstrate that your organization and personnel have the experience and capability to carry out the research project

- Proposal is unprofessional in appearance (e.g., typos, blank pages, unnumbered pages, smudges, no whitespace, etc.)

- Proposal is poorly written (e.g., poor grammar, difficult to follow the text, illogical organization of information)

- Failure to submit the proposal on the required date and time

- Failure to include all the information requested by the funder

7.0 Fundamentals of Proposal Writing

7.1 Hints on Proposal Submission

Your goal is to provide a well-focused, clear, well-organized and accurate project proposal. Keep in mind that reviewers often do their reviewing under less than optimum conditions (i.e., evenings, weekends, holidays, or even on an airplane) and may wait until the last minute to begin their task. Reviewers may do their reading in bits and pieces – organize your proposal so that it can be read this way.

- Read the request for proposal guidelines/application forms, then read it again. And again!

- Follow the funding source's application guidelines

- Plan ahead – respect deadlines– plan the preparation process and the project implementation schedule accordingly

- Leave adequate time for conducting any required internal reviews and obtaining required signatures

- Submit your proposal in the format and media (i.e., e-mail, fax or hard copy) requested by the funder

- Choose a format that is clear and easy to read – this includes tables, budgets and appendices

- Use graphics (i.e., diagrams, cartoons and figures) as appropriate – a picture is worth a thousand words!

- Use appropriate type size, font, spacing and margins

- Use white space to break up long copy – it makes your proposal appear inviting and user-friendly

- Do not go over the maximum number of pages allowed

- Explain things – don't declare them!

- Document your assumptions

- Be innovative!

- Be passionate!

- Be realistic!

- Be specific!

- Strive for an error-free proposal – don't rely solely on the word-processing spell checker; ask someone to proofread for spelling, grammar and sense

- Make sure your numbers add up

- Ask a colleague who has experience with, and is successful in, the peer review process to review the final draft – but first have someone who has not seen the proposal proofread it for spelling, typos and grammar – you do not want your internal reviewers distracted by mechanical errors and fail to miss fundamental problems

- If attachments or appendices are not allowed, do not submit them (they will be discarded)

- Always address your cover letter to an individual – verify spelling of all names, titles and addresses

- Make sure you include the requested number of copies of your proposal

- Go over the checklist (twice!) to ensure each element of the application is addressed and all requested information is provided

- Do not submit additional information after the deadline (unless explicitly allowed)

Further Resources

"Beginners Guide to the Research Proposal: Common Pitfalls" at http://www.health.ucalgary.ca/bob/pitfalls.htm provides examples and tips on how to avoid ten common problems with proposals.

"Hints for Preparing Funding Proposals" at http://www.science.iupui.edu/wilson/ GrantSk.IUPUI.html.

"Guide for Writing a Funding Proposal: Proposal Writing Hints" at http://www.learnerassociates.net/proposal/hintsone.htm provides extensive suggestions – starting with the project title and ending with the appendices.

7.2 Tips on Writing Style

- Use active rather than passive voice

- Do not use jargon or acronyms unless absolutely necessary and then define them

- Use simple sentences; keep paragraphs short

- Use headings and subheadings

- Bold type is easier to read than underlining, italics or all capital letters as a means of creating emphasis – emphasize only key words

- Use numbered lists when items need to be examined in a specific sequence; use a bulleted list when all items are equally important

- Use transitional words and phrases to signal connections among ideas and give coherence to your writing – also, next, finally, for example, specifically, in fact, therefore, as a result, in summary, to conclude, as a consequence.

- Assume that you are writing for a reviewer in a somewhat related field, rather than an expert directly in your area

- Write your proposal from the perspective of those who will benefit from it – talk about their needs and how your research will address those needs

- Write with the funder's perspective in mind

Further Resources

"Writing an Electrifying Proposal" at http://www.nursing.mcgill.ca/writingpro.html provides useful links to several websites on writing as well as general grant proposal websites.

"The Writing Center" at http://www.gmu.edu/departments/writingcenter/handouts.html provides a wealth of links to information on grammar, punctuation, the writing process (from starting the writing process through structure and argument to revision and editing) and guides to specialized writing.

The George Madison University website also provides links to online information sources for writers, encyclopedias, dictionaries, and guidelines on documenting and citing sources (at http://www.gmu.edu/departments/writingcenter/wcref.html).

The Bedford/St. Martin's website provides links to resources for writers (at http://www.bedfordstmartins.com/English_research/links/list1.htm) as well as links to the on-line versions of major documentation sources (MLA, APA, Chicago, CBE) (at http://www.bedfordstmartins.com/hacker/resdoc).

And if you still are looking for that last bit of information (e.g., postal codes, currency conversion, how to spell Canadian geographical names, acronym expansion), check out "Useful online stuff" at http://www.charityvillage.com/charityvillage/ires6.html with links to a wide range of online resources.

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"Beginners Guide to the Research Proposal: Part 1" at http://www.health.ucalgary.ca/bob/prop_ele.htm provides general proposal writing tips and "Part 2" at http://www.health.ucalgary.ca/bob/prop_el2.htm.

"Brainstorming; Procedures and Method Guidelines", at http://www.scn.org/ip/cds/cmp/brainsto.htm.

"Collaborative Relationships" from the Community Partnership Toolkit of the W.K. Kellogg Foundation at http://www.wkkf.org/documents/cct/secd/cptoolkit/Sec3-Collaborative.htm.

"Dealing with Short Deadlines" at http://www.research/umich.edu/research/proposals/proposal_dev/pwg/pwgdeadlines.html.

"Elements of a Grant Proposal", at http://www.silcom.com/~paladin/promaster.html

"Guide for Writing a Funding Proposal: Proposal Writing Hints", at http://www.learnerassociates.net/proposal/hintsone.htm.

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"Systematic Reviews on the Web" at http://www.mcms.dal.ca/gorgs/phru/workshop.htm.

"The Statement of Need", *A Proposal Writing Short Course, Part 1,* at http://fdncenter.org/onlib/shortcourse/prop1.html.

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