



THE EDUCATION
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Crafting a Winning Research Idea: From Concept to Proposal.

By

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My experiences in winning proposals

Over the years, I have written several proposals – I have won in some cases, and lost in many cases

I have learnt a lot of lessons on ways to win good grants

It is not just sufficient to write “good proposals” as many would advice

There are other issues to consider – five principles of which I outline in this presentation

First Principle

- The idea is **the most important component of a proposal.**
- Without a good and “sellable” idea, no funder would be interested in a proposal
- The idea should be compelling, and is best to relate to an emerging social and developmental challenge

Developing Ideas for Grant-writing

- Having **an important idea is the most important secret behind winning a research grant** – it's the central tendency and locus of successful grant application
- The second secret is providing evidence that you or the team can carry out the project, or that you have **a track record in implementing similar project activities**
- To “seal up the deal” for the grant, the proposal **must be well and succinctly written in plain and unambiguous language.**

Difference between Ideas and Innovation

- An idea is a **thought or suggestion** as to possible course of action.
- An innovation is the process **of taking action on an idea.**

Failure to take action (innovate) on an idea is the reason that many researchers stall in the process of developing their research pathways.

Some critical questions relating to the idea

- Do you have a clearly defined research question or area of interest?
- What is unique about your research (area of interest)?
 - Is the idea something no one else has tried?
 - Have you done a literature search to refine the idea?
 - Does it seem out of the ordinary?
 - Does your idea fill a gap?
 - Are you proposing a new technique in your teaching, or building on a proven practice using a new twist?
- Keep a journal of your ideas and scholarly interests.

How to obtain ideas for research grants

- Being top-notch in your discipline through detailed reading, service delivery and scholarship
- Reading and learning the types of research and research grants that have been received by others in your discipline
- Through participation in conferences and networking activities
- Working with a mentor or a senior academic in your discipline

Characteristics of ideas that are fundable

- Ideas should be novel, innovative, fresh – and should bring new thoughts into ways to address a developmental challenge
- Should not be repetitive – unless you can provide evidence that such ideas having worked in other places is relevant to solving the immediate challenge of the targeted community
- The ideas would be more likely to be funded if they are “action-oriented”.

Characteristics of fundable ideas

- The idea must be simple and “do-able”
- It should be technically, culturally and ethically feasible
- It should be conceived within a reasonable budget and one that is within the limits of the funding agency
- It should be replicable, and expandable
- It should be scalable or at least designed in such a way that it can be scaled up for larger societal impact at a later stage

Ideas that win Research Grants

Must be relevant to national and international frameworks and definitions of a health problem

Must synchronise with the mission and vision of the funding agency

Should ideally focus on issues not addressed by national governments, and that can contribute to addressing the challenge

Issues related to social justice, human rights, poverty alleviation, gender and the promotion of social equality are also priorities for funding

Concept Papers and Research Funding

1

A concept paper will help to harmonise and synthesize the idea

2

It's the first entry point to funding

3

It should be short and succinct, and it should focus on the main purpose and key methods and outcomes of the project

4

It should not be more than 5 pages long

Second Principle

Get some assurance of available funding or funding source before you start to write the proposal

Never write a full proposal, until you have submitted a concept paper to a funding agency and they have invited you to develop a full proposal

Types of Proposals

- **Solicited Proposals** – this is easy as you have to respond to a call for proposal in a particular thematic area. If you do not respond timeously, you will lose out.
- **Unsolicited Proposals** – this is possible if you have reached out to the funding agency
- **Letter Proposals** (also called LOIs, Concept Notes/Papers, Pre-Proposals) – often the best approach when you know little of the agency but you are aware they have funded similar projects in the past

Identify Key Funding Resources

- Grants.gov <http://grants.gov/>
- Catalogue of Federal Domestic Assistance <https://www.cfda.gov/>
- Federal Agency Homepages
<http://www.usa.gov/directory/federal/index.shtml>
- ❖ NSF <http://www.nsf.gov/>
- ❖ Education <http://www.ed.gov/>
- ❖ NEH <http://www.neh.gov/>
- ❖ HRSA <http://www.hrsa.gov/index.html>
- ❖ Fee-Based, Searchable Databases
- ❖ Towson Office of Sponsored Programs & Research

Key Resources

Association of American Universities (AAU)

<https://www.aau.edu/budget/article.aspx?id=14318>

USAspending.gov

<http://www.usaspending.gov/>

OMB – Office of Management & Budget

<http://www.whitehouse.gov/omb/budget/Overview>

Identify Private Funding: Key Resources

- The Foundation Center
 - ❖ <http://foundationcenter.org/findfunders/foundfinder/>
 - ❖ <http://foundationcenter.org/findfunders/fundingsources/fdo.html>
- Foundation Search
 - ❖ <http://www.foundationsearch.com/>
- Federal Tax Form 990
 - ❖ <http://www.guidestar.org/>
- MD funders
 - ❖ <http://www.jankowskiresearch.com/Default.aspx?folderID=1>

To summarize this first part of the presentation

- “Ideas”, leading to “innovations” are the most important part of a research proposal that can guarantee funding
- Often embedded in the first part, the introduction of the proposal, it is often written in the form of a justification for the funding being requested
- A concept paper will first introduce the idea to a funding agency who will then decide whether or not to fund the idea.
- My experience is that lack of innovative ideas is the reason for low funding of research for development in Nigeria

Steps in the Grant-writing process

- Concept letter/Response to RFA to a novel idea
- Draft full proposal
- Collate supporting documents
- Final proposal and submit with documents
- Wait for reply, and follow up
- If successful, implement project
- If unsuccessful, find out why not and try again



Unsuccessful Concept Papers!

- Find out the reasons for failure – use the reasons to revise the concept and forward to other agencies
- Also, find out from the initial agency, who else funds in the area
- If you think the idea is novel, do not give up!



Successful Concept Papers

- Write to thank the Funding Agency for accepting the CP, and assure them you would be sending a full proposal
- Ask for more details about the writing guidelines.
- Study the details with your writing team before you start



Third Principle

Create a winning proposal and project management that can solve the developmental challenge you have identified.

Components of a full proposal

- Executive Summary/Abstract
- Justification: why is this project necessary?
- Project description or Narrative: the nuts and bolts of how the project will be implemented (might be 3 pages or 20 pages! See agency requirements.)
- Budget: what are you going to use the \$ for?
- Organization info
- Conclusion: summary
- See Agency's guidelines for sections to include

Elements of a good project team

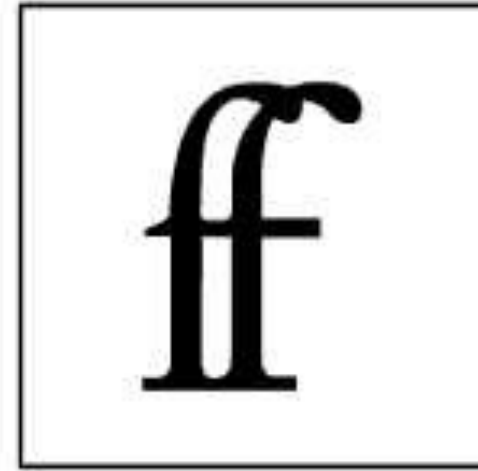
- Problem-solving is the rationale for asking for funds for a grant.
- No single discipline can solve a social challenge alone.
- My experience has shown that the selection of multi-disciplinary team members that can show evidence that they are capable of solving the problem together is often more convincing.
- Multidisciplinary teams and multistakeholder groups are often the best.

Examples of good research and multi-disciplinary teams

- Multi-stakeholders - from different sectors
- Multi-centre – multiple institutions working together.
- Multi-professionals – different professional backgrounds
- Multi-country – different countries and regions
- The triple helix – Universities, governments, and industry working together
- Networks
- Consortia

Ford Foundation Guidelines

- Brief Project justification
- Brief about the organization
- Organizational experiences
- Project goal
- Project specific objectives
- Project activities
- Monitoring and Evaluation
- Project Indicators
- Work plan
- Grant Budget
- Supporting Documents

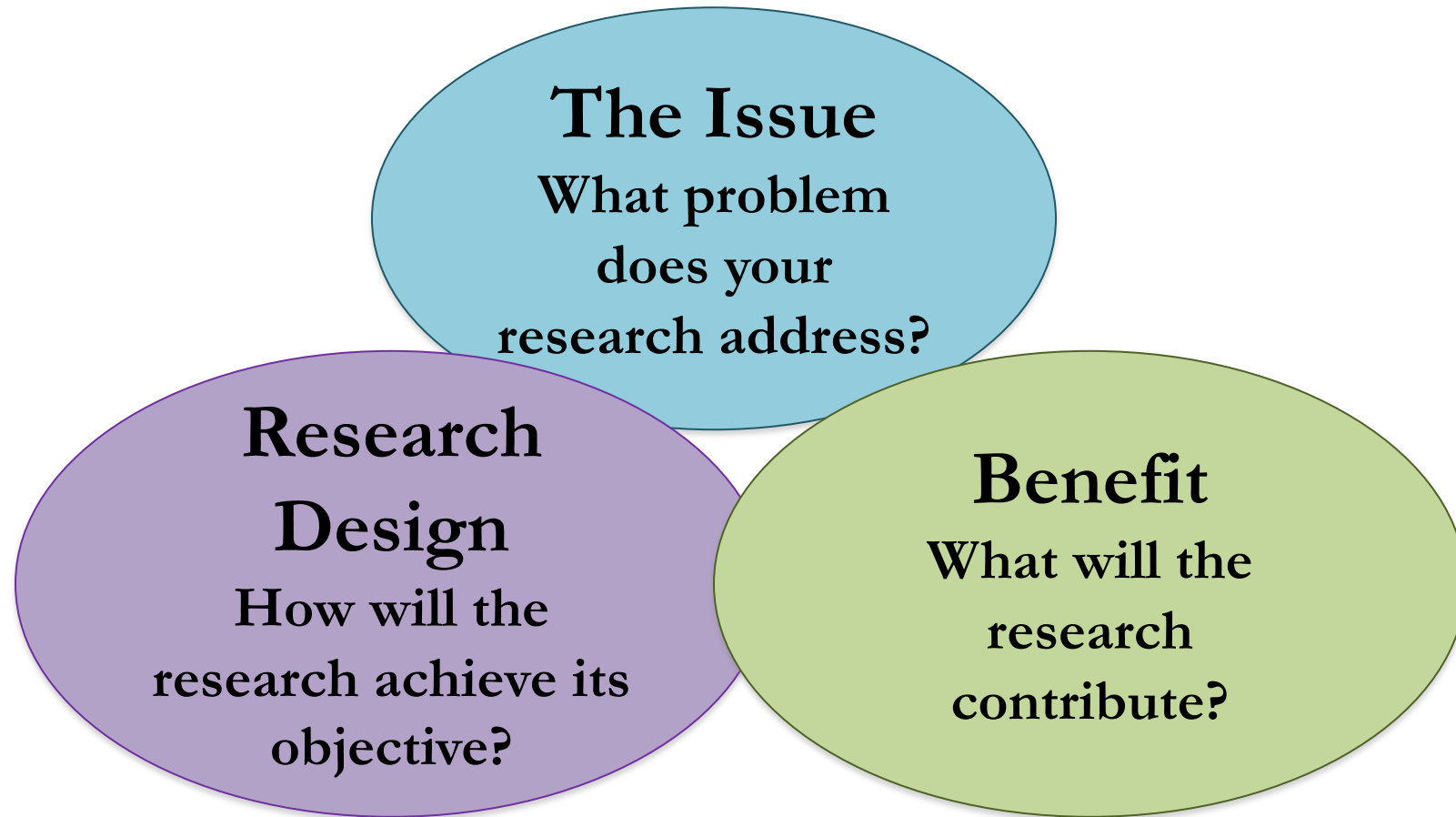


Ford Foundation

Fourth Principle

A good flow and internal consistency of the proposal

The essential ingredients of a good research proposal



Key elements of a good proposal?

- Not academic, scientific or technical writing
- It should be designed as a marketing document
- Good proposals build and argue their cases in an eloquent manner

What good Proposals “Sell”:

- **Understanding** - of issue, problem, research important to potential sponsor
- **Innovative Solution** - to the problem or Intriguing research on issues critical to the sponsor
- **Significance & Impact** – of the problem and your solution
- **Experts** - right people for right job
- **Expertise** - track record
- **Institutional Capacity, Commitment & Integrity** - We can, do, and have made good on our promises

A Winning Proposal Must be an Answer Book

- No such thing as a generic proposal
- Compliant, complete and fully responsive to each specific RFP, RFA or other application guidelines
- Easy to read and evaluate
- No one wants to read proposals – no one is obligated to fund your work.

All Proposals Are Competitive

ONLY 3 reasons to prepare and submit a proposal:

1. To win
2. To place among the outstanding finalists
3. To gain attention and respect as a serious new competitor within an area or research topic

Six Characteristics of Winning Proposals

- Responsive

- Familiar

- Accurate

- Verifiable

- Benefit-Oriented

- Answer “Why Me?”

10 Steps in proposal writing

1. Do your homework
2. Rigorously manage the proposal writing process
3. Write the proposal for reviewers
4. Structure (outline) your proposal as an “answer book.”
5. Clearly align your project goal & objectives with RFA/RFP purpose, goal, results, deliverables
6. Articulate results-oriented, measurable objectives
7. Use objectives to Develop Plan of Work
8. Align budget with work plan
9. Write, package, and submit on time an impeccable proposal
10. Implement an impeccable project & meet all obligations

Who are the Reviewers?

The Ideal

- Share our interest & enthusiasm about our projects
- Are experts in subject area of our project
- Have time to read our proposals in detail
- Will be fair & impartial in judging our proposal

The Real

- Overworked, overly committed, tired & underpaid
- Skeptical & highly critical
- Risk adverse
- Look for easy ways to review proposals as quickly & as best they can
- Do not want to read proposals—and have many proposals to read

The fifth principle I have learnt

The Budget must be accurate and appropriate. No budget padding!

Why Budgets Matter

- **COMPETENCE** "If we can't do the budget, can we do anything else?"
- **ASSURANCE** "We will effectively use grant funds." "The level of funding is reasonable, and we have sufficient resources to carry out the project and achieve objectives."
- **VALIDATION** Amount and rate of expenditure = scope and timing of activities
- **PROTECTION** Calculating full cost protects your organization's fiscal health and prevents painful surprises
- **RATINGS** Proposal budget can be worth 10-20% or more of evaluation points

Develop a Complete, Compliant, Responsive, and Credible Budget

The budget is a proposal too!

- Must respond to & comply with funder's requirements
- Must be easy to read & understand
- Must be correct—numbers must add up
- Must be reasonable—within funder's range for the project
- Must be credible—proposed costs must align with proposed activities, outputs, and benefits
- **Must align with Work Plan**

Tips for preparing the budget proposal

- Involve budget/costing specialists early in the project design phase
- Crucial to identify project costs & develop project budget as you develop project technical approach and statement of work
- Identify project's full & real costs
- **EACH ACTIVITY—EACH ACTION—IS A COST**
- Identify possible internal resources for your project—cost sharing if required
- Identify cost leveraging

Budget Failures

- Too high
- Too low
- Not compliant with Agency regulations or program requirements
- **Misaligned with statement of work**
- Incomplete, illogical, and badly written/presented **Budget Narrative**

Writing proposals: Some Writing Tips

- **Project titles matter**
- Transmittal Letter/Cover Letter
- Use front matter as reviewer's guides, paging and TOC
- Project Summary
- Executive Summary – Benefit Oriented
- Must-have Graphics
- Marketing Themes
- Thematic Graphs

I thank you all for listening



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