Beyond the academic duties of teaching, research, publishing, and service, expectations that faculty should generate external funding are increasing—and are increasingly important. Tenure and promotion evaluations of faculty may or may not explicitly review dollars won, but are clearly influenced by successful grant-getting as a measure of contribution to one’s field, especially for peer-reviewed proposals. In nearly every type of academic institution, from small liberal arts colleges to state public universities, the pressures of shrinking state budget allocations coupled with increasing proportions of organizational revenue coming from outside sources (Lee and Clery 2004) make grantsmanship an ever-critical aspect of professional life for tenure-track research faculty, lecturers, and part-time faculty alike. Graduate students, as well, seek outside monies to conduct their research activities, not only to garner additional financial support, but also to demonstrate their abilities in fund-raising and gain early grants experience that will serve them well in their budding careers.

Even if a grant is not awarded, the process of writing research grant proposals can help you solidify your research ideas and make them tangible,
realistic, and programmatic. Proposals, funded or unfunded, can themselves become sources for publishing journal articles (a point reinforced in Chapter 13). Writing to external sponsors can aid you in thinking through your rationale or finding ways to connect with others in the scientific community or with the broader society—whether you end up with the money or not.

This chapter aims to give you some advice for how to do that successfully. Admittedly, there have been a great many articles and books written on the subject of grant proposal preparation, and at the end of this chapter you will find an annotated list of those which I deem among the best. These resources adeptly cover issues such as choosing research topics, mechanics of writing, necessary elements of proposals, hallmarks of successful proposals, obstacles to overcome, strategies for locating funding sources, perspectives of sponsor agencies, and effective research design. In this chapter I include a focus not only on practical recommendations that will help you prepare competitive research grant proposals but also on habits of mind and action that will prepare you as a researcher who is successful at generating external funding.

Ten actions you should take are listed below. This list, of course, does not represent everything you need to know but will help you develop your own strategies and tactics for success to incorporate into your professional practice:

1. Start with a good problem.
2. Create the right fit.
3. Assemble a winning team.
4. Design to deliver.
5. Be perfectly persuasive.
6. Make it real.
7. Demonstrate your unique value.
8. Go the extra mile.
9. Achieve and communicate coherence.
10. Live it.

This chapter explains each of these ten imperatives and includes some suggested concrete actions you can implement either as a novice to begin preparing winning proposals or perhaps as a seasoned grant writer trying out some new ideas and tools to refine your skills—ultimately to become a more effective research grant proposal writer. In box diagrams throughout this chapter, I highlight proposal excerpts contributed by graduate students and faculty whose proposals were funded by the National Science Foundation [NSF] (these proposals appear in chapter appendices on this book’s web site).

Most research grant writing skills must really be learned by practice, and unfortunately, trial and error. To this end, in-depth activity guides are provided for two of the actions, “Start with a Good Problem” and “Achieve
and Communicate Coherence.” The first is designed to help you turn your research idea into a clearly communicated thesis paragraph. The second activity is designed to aid you in the revision of a relatively complete proposal draft, providing a set of relational questions in the form of a matrix of elements that your proposal should contain.

**TEN ACTIONS YOU SHOULD TAKE**

**1. Start with a Good Problem**

No amount of writing skill will compensate for a poorly developed research problem. A good problem is more than just a topic; it encapsulates some kind of tension, contradiction, unresolved issue, challenge, question, or even a mystery of sorts. A particular problem makes for a good proposal if it is very specific, precise, and focused. You should be able to clearly express what this research problem is in no more than three to five sentences.

Good problems lead to good questions, which underlie the scientific enterprise, be it theoretical or applied, quantitative or qualitative. The objective of a research project is always to answer those questions. This sequence of problem–question–purpose should be as explicit as your thesis. Clarity, lucidity, and a sharp thesis will allow you to develop a sound project and a convincing proposal. It will leave your reviewers with something to remember after reading all of the many other competing proposals.

A good problem is properly contextualized. A critical element of grant proposals is a summary of the current state of knowledge that is supported by references to relevant scholarly publications. You should carefully and explicitly position your work relative to this context. This entails a different approach to writing than would a traditional literature review, especially as you consider that most likely not all of your reviewers will be familiar with your specialized literature. A good rule of thumb is to precisely answer this series of questions: “What is already known? What don’t we know that is worth finding out? What will be learned from this research?” Or “What [have others] done to address the problem and why wasn’t that sufficient?” (Gerin 2006, 73).

To communicate this contextualized problem, it is helpful to consider three general models of what research is supposed to accomplish with respect to existing knowledge. These include that research might (1) advance an existing line of research, (2) resolve a contradiction (Box 11.1), or (3) develop a new line of inquiry (Box 11.2).

There are certainly other functions of research, but these three are common models to begin thinking about how your project contributes to the academic enterprise of knowledge production. Activity 11.1 and Appendix i provide additional discussion and opportunities for you to explore these ideas.
BOX 11.1

The following excerpt of a funded proposal from Lawson & Jarosz (Appendix v) eloquently demonstrates how research can start as grounded in an important empirical problem and can contribute to our understanding by resolving a contradiction:

“All across the American West, rural families are dealing with rapid changes to their livelihoods and communities. Many rural places are experiencing dramatic social and economic transformations as urban middle and upper class migrants bring new politics, new aesthetics and new economic activities into contact with longer-term resident populations (Nelson, 1999; Beyers and Nelson, 1999; Rudzitis, 1997). These changes have brought the paradox of both income growth and rising poverty rates. Along with these new income distributions within rural counties, shifts in the class composition of communities and new social tensions between residents are emerging. While there is a growing volume of research on the demographic and economic dimensions of these changes (Rasker and Alexander, 1997; Nelson and Beyers, 1998; Shumway and Davis, 1996; Barrett and Power, 2001), less attention has been devoted to the social and cultural tensions surrounding this process of rural restructuring and how poverty is understood within this context of transformation and change (Rudzitis, 1993; Cloke, 1997; Nelson, 1999).” (emphasis added)

Note that the use of terms like “paradox” and “tensions” emphasize the function that this research intends to perform and help create a focus on the interplay of factors that the study will address.

BOX 11.2

This proposal exemplar simply and elegantly opens up space for a new line of inquiry (Patel, Appendix vi):

“In a recent review, Tuan (2004) contends that “cultural geography remains almost wholly daylight geography” (Tuan 2004, 730) and that more attention needs to be given to the “after hours.” This contention makes particular sense as the “second shift,” namely a night shift labor force, emerges in the global economy. The hyper-growth of the transnational call center industry in India is the quintessential example of this nightscape . . .”
2. Create the Right Fit

Like people, institutions have their own personalities, and funding institutions do as well. Whether they are private, federal, state, foundation, or other kinds of organizations, each has its own specific mission, goals, and program objectives. Each sponsor organization also has particular preferences on operational protocol, including whether it invites unsolicited proposals or not, whether it issues calls for proposals that are clearly or vaguely defined, whether it prefers formal or informal inquiries, whether program officers should be contacted prior to deadlines, and other tacit protocol. You should make it an integral part of your research proposal preparation process to find out about the individual characteristics of potential resource providers. In other words, do your homework before you write. Many organizations now have easily accessible information online where you can research past funding history and current priorities. If information about previously funded projects is available, study it. If only the contact information of their previous awardees is listed, consider talking to funded principal investigators (PIs) about their projects and experiences with the sponsor organization. Do talk to program officers if possible, but have a clear objective for your conversation.

There are also general guides available about how the funding process works with sponsors from different sectors. For instance, it is very important for aspiring academics to know about the federal government in general (see CFDA n.d.), given that the federal government remains the largest research sponsor to U.S. universities (Lee and Clery 2004); and about the National Science Foundation in particular (see NSF 2005). Private enterprise donors are increasing in importance for researchers, and resource requests to businesses call for a specialized approach that understands the sector’s perspective (see Schumacher 1992). Similarly, foundations often require more insider knowledge, and they conduct calls that are unlike the competitive proposal processes of public institutions (Geever 2001).

The purpose of knowing your potential funding organization well is to be able to write to the right audience and create what I call the “Right Fit”—finding the overlap between your own research agenda and the goals and mission of the funding organization. Alternatively, you might think of a good fit as a temporary alignment in the same general direction to advance goals together. You will need to consider how to package your research idea, which as Michael Watts (2001) notes, is not the same as to “compromise” it.

The way you go about searching for potential funding opportunities is itself an opportunity to ensure the right fit. One approach is to follow the path of leaders in your field. The Curriculum Vitae (CVs) of experienced researchers in your area are a gold mine of potential funding sources for your own research. Many scholars now publish their resumes online or at least some kind of list of recent projects. Look up the name of a senior scholar in your subfield, using a search engine to find their home page, or find them through their department’s
organizing and systematically prioritizing which funding opportunities align best with your work—rather than jumping at the nearest deadline—will help you focus on the best fit and, by extension, the highest probability of success. Create a spreadsheet of possibilities from a variety of sources, listing the potential sponsor organizations’ name, address, web site, contact person, e-mail, telephone, published funding program priorities, grant funding ranges (minimum to maximum amount of awards), eligibility criteria, deadlines, and so on. Annotate each record with a reference to a particular research problem or question (not just a topic) that might be developed into a proposal. Rate the likelihood you believe you have in receiving funds from each potential source, using a percentage scale. This is a bit of an instinctive process, weighing a multiplicity of factors such as the level of competitiveness, how good the “fit” is, how amenable the timeframe is to your research agenda, how well you match the eligibility profile, whether the request limits will meet your resource needs, and other factors. In this way, you can prioritize the list of possibilities according to the likelihood of success and your own preferences for research questions.

For discovering and creating the right fit as you design and write the proposal, you might find common ground in one or more of the following areas:

Organizational mission: There may be some shared vision between the goals of the organization and your respective research goals. These may not align perfectly, so the objective is to discover where they overlap and exploit those connections fully (Box 11.3).

Targeted beneficiaries and research subjects: Pay special attention to shared constituencies and their needs (e.g., both you and the funder are interested in youth populations) or relationships between respective constituencies (e.g., your interest in youth and their interest in retired professionals possibly connecting through mentoring relationships).

Operational approach: The means of executing your projects may coincide with those that sponsors prefer or promote (e.g., the use of geographic technologies, mapping, communication technologies, community participation, or shared markets).

Mutually beneficial deliverables: What might your project produce that serves both you and the funding organization? (e.g., a tourism brochure for the organization that includes a community map you seek to create).

Global objectives: What global or international targets might you both care about? (e.g., investigating progress toward the U.N.’s Millennium Development Goals).
Communicating in the language of the sponsor is a critical part of creating the right fit for your proposal. Scholars should recognize that the style of writing for a grant proposal differs sharply from that of an academic journal article, for instance, and different modes of expression are called for. Even proposals to scientific funding agencies such as the NSF should avoid scientific jargon and use an appropriate style that reflects the manner in which the funding agency communicates. When key terms are used in the proposal announcement, integrate those same terms in your proposal. Don’t leave reviewers guessing if...
your research meets their specific objectives; tell them exactly, in their own words how it does. To practice, read through an entire proposal announcement carefully and identify “buzzwords” that in the language of the sponsor express important key concepts significant to their organizational mission or the goals of the granting program. These might be words, word combinations, or phrases. List them, and then define each of them using the kinds of language that your research would normally use to express ideas to create a kind of glossary, a handy reference when you are writing and revising your proposal.

Beyond the horizon of one particular grant proposal, long-term success in generating resources for your research rests upon your ability to build and maintain mutually beneficial relationships with sponsors. You should be willing to invest in developing these relationships over the long term. Start planting seeds with a good understanding of who the sponsor is and with what language they communicate. Resource requests, including everything from informal inquiries to formal proposals, themselves often both draw from and generate relationships, whether they ultimately are short or long term, whether intimate or formal or casual. Doing it right may make the difference not only for a positive response to your current proposal but also for the long-term success of your research agenda.

3. Assemble a Winning Team
The saying goes that “no man is an island.” Grant preparation is no different. Assemble a winning team on your side to increase your chances of success. This advice holds for experienced faculty, early career faculty, and graduate students alike.

There are at least three kinds of help you might need in preparing your research grant proposals. Firstly, you should early on ask for help from your university’s Sponsored Research Office or Program (SRO), where they can provide a wealth (and often literally a library) of information, including granting agency directories, model proposals, writing services, human subjects advice, and so on. In most cases, consulting with the SRO from the start can also help you get through university review more easily and quickly.

University review is often required because most grants are contracts between the granting agency and the university (or a unit within the university), not between the agency and the researcher. A typical university review will consist of a series of forms and procedures, including some kind of researcher information form, a proposal or abstract form, budgeting forms (including your final budget with justification), human subjects’ approval, and other information. Generally a litany of signatures is required, from you as the PI, your department chair, your dean, the university office of grants and contracts, and finally the SRO. If your university does not specify the time frame by which you must submit all materials prior to the granting agency deadline, it is recommended that you provide your complete written proposal (and all related documents) at least three to five business days before, but at some
universities a much longer approval period is needed. You should check with your office well ahead of time to know what their internal deadlines and requirements are. Any research that involves human subjects must also undergo a review by your university’s Institutional Review Board (IRB), for which you should leave at least a couple of weeks if the granting organization requires final approval prior to submission (see Chapter 12 by Iain Hay and Mark Israel in this book for a detailed treatment of IRB issues). Finally, a common required element of the research grant narrative is some general information about the applicant institution (i.e., your university). Your SRO should be able to assist you with standard responses to those requirements.

Secondly, you might seek out the aid of a seasoned grant writer who can help you keep on task and on time and cover all of the bases. This person can play the role of practice reviewer for later drafts of your proposal. If willing and available, scholars experienced in proposal writing can serve as critical mentors as you develop your skills.

Thirdly, when appropriate, you might invite these same scholars to team up with you on the research project as a co-principal investigator. Nothing breeds success like success, and if you can develop collaborations and partnerships with other successful researchers, you will see your own success expand. By building a team, you may also become eligible to compete for larger funding programs.

If you are not quite ready yet to call a team to arms around a particular research proposal, you could simply make an appointment with a scholar or two in your subfield who are experienced in writing and getting grants. Interview them, share your ideas and questions with them, invite them to mentor you on specific aspects of the process, or generally consider developing joint proposals with them. If you do not find an experienced colleague, you could also benefit greatly from doing the same even with a less-experienced peer.

4. Design to Deliver

The actual research activities and methodologies that you will undertake should be very carefully designed and clearly organized to instill confidence in your reviewer that you can deliver on your promises. As Krathwohl (1988, 15) advises, “while projects typically start with an idea, sponsors fund activities, not ideas.” Focus on what you will do. Keep your scope realistic and doable within the granted time period. Think carefully through your entire plan, step-by-step from start to finish to ensure that you will be able to administer the research project on time and on budget. Practice good time management (see Chapter 1 by Ken Foote), not only in your writing process but also in the design of the project; determine how long and at what point in time each of the set of activities will need to occur.

To be clear about what you will do when, how, and with what resources, you should as a matter of practice always include a separate section called “project design” where you identify the specific activities needed to carry out
your research methodology, a timeline (see Box 11.4 and Appendix ii), and a bulleted list of deliverables or products or outcomes expected—even if the call for proposals does not specifically request these items.

Designing to deliver also means that you will be able to realize your project with the requested resources. Above and beyond serving as your formal request for a particular dollar amount, your budget section should
demonstrate your resource plan. The single most important key to designing a good budget you can live with and get approved is to be very clear first about what you will do, then ask for the resources you will need according to each activity. Ask yourself for each activity, what do I need to perform this task? Convert how much time it will take into dollars, since most budgets also pay for salary or wages.

You may ultimately have to negotiate a final budget with some sponsors, so be sure that each item in the budget is fully justified and necessary, or you may find that it gets cut. Most novice grant writers need some guidance on deciding how much to ask for and how to ask for it. A good rule of thumb is to use the guidelines and limits in the call for proposals, remembering that you do not have to ask for the full amount available, but you should ask for the amount you need and can appropriately justify. For travel expenses, look up current federal government guidelines for per diem rates; for equipment expenses, get some quotes from vendors to provide evidence of costs; for indirect rates that differ widely among universities, be sure to check with your SRO for proper procedure and documentation.

In short, basic criteria for designing a budget that delivers include the following:

- Is each item eligible for funding according to donor rules?
- Is each item necessary for the project and linked to a particular activity?
- Is each amount properly justified?
- How much “bang for the buck” can your project deliver? Put your request in perspective according to what impact your research will have.

For more details on budgeting basics and how to test a budget to ensure that it is reasonable and sound, see Henson (2003) and The Foundation Center (2006).

You should strive to meet the expectations of the granting organizations, or at least your reviewers with what you ultimately propose to deliver. Expectations, of course, differ by field, with research in the humanities, social science, and physical science having their own unwritten codes of expectations of their communities of scholars. Conform your proposal to the appropriate context. If you don’t know much about that set of unspoken assumptions, talk to a mentor. In any case, this usually means that you should deliver some kind of impact—be it impact on practitioners of the field, impact on our knowledge about the problem, or impact on a community affected by the issue. Clearly specify what that impact is and show how you will achieve it.

5. Be Perfectly Persuasive

Grant writing uses persuasive communication, aiming to convince the reader that the project is worth investing in. This means that you should use carefully crafted arguments backed up by evidence, not unfounded assertions
that your reviewers might doubt or worse, challenge. It also means that the language should exude confidence, eschewing grammatical formulations that are overly reliant on “might” or “could,” opting instead for simple present or future tenses as often as appropriate, like “is” and “will be.” To convey the sense of action that you will perform as you carry out your project, be sure to avoid the passive voice unless absolutely necessary.

Excellent persuasive proposals distinguish themselves by anticipating opposing arguments or identifying points of contention in the research plan. By preparing a positive response to defend likely criticisms, rather than avoiding them, you demonstrate thoroughness in your thought process and can convince reviewers that might otherwise remain skeptical about how your research will contribute to the field (Box 11.5). Mentors and colleagues can help identify opposing arguments. Or, consider reviewing your proposed work in a seminar where the discussion might raise ideas about possible responses to your work.

Being persuasive is not only about what you say but also about how you say it. Be sure that your document is perfect, error free, and looks great. First and foremost, conform exactly to the formatting specifications in the call for proposals. Use the very same headings and subheadings for proposal narrative elements in the same order as requested (e.g., Introduction, Significance, and Methodology). Don’t cheat on line spacing or margins; use standard, black color, and readable fonts and font sizes (never less than 10 point) and stick with the same choice throughout all of the proposal documents. Leave plenty of white space and break up long paragraphs of text. Use but don’t overuse bullets, tables, and graphics to draw attention to particular elements of your proposal. Don’t rely on automatic spell check in word-processing programs to catch all spelling or grammar errors. Don’t allow widow or orphan lines, always number your pages, and use a common paragraph justification for the whole document.

When you finish, step back from your document to check for possible formatting problems by using the “zoom” feature of your word-processing program—scroll through to look for inconsistencies (Box 11.6). Print out a hard copy to see what it looks like, even if you will be submitting electronically. Leave enough time in your writing schedule to let your proposal gather a little dust and reread it fresh again, or ask a colleague to proofread for you.

In short, a good rule of thumb is to avoid any kind of presentation problems that might irritate your reviewer or distract from your content. Similarly, follow all submission guidelines precisely and on time. Leave extra time for using online submission systems, especially if it is your first time preparing an electronic proposal for that agency. By paying attention to these details, you not only produce a polished proposal, but you will also instill confidence in your reviewer that you can deliver a well-conducted research project.
6. Make It Real

Related to the idea of persuasion is the strategy of making your project real. The discipline of geography, for example, has a distinct intrinsic advantage of being intimately connected to the actual phenomena that we study, phenomena that generally intersect with our everyday lives in a real way, whether
they be about income distribution patterns in a major city or linkages between rural land use and groundwater quality or statistical evaluations of global climate change models (see Box 11.7). Even theoretical research often draws from and has implications for very real everyday matters. Take advantage of this perspective to connect to your reviewers by providing them with real-life examples and connections that avoid jargon. Infuse your narrative with one or two (don’t over do it!) carefully selected maps or photographs that validate the adage of a picture being worth a thousand words. Writing with passion (but not hype) also makes it real for your reviewers, as Abler (1989) so elegantly enjoins. Flip through newspapers and magazines for inspiration on compelling examples. Explain your unique geographic work in a way that will implant an image into the minds of your reviewers to remember as they wade through the other scores of proposals they still have to finish reviewing this afternoon.
Chapter 11 • Preparing Competitive Research Grant Proposals 151

7. Demonstrate Your Unique Value

The proposals that are successful are the ones that stand out from the crowd. Explicitly state what is special about your work. Usually every call for proposals requires a special section to describe the “significance” of the project, where you identify what is unique about the proposal. Brainstorming answers to the following questions may help you pinpoint what aspect or combinations of characteristics are valuable in the work you plan to do:

- What is special about the problem I have chosen to address?
- Is my work conceptually innovative?
- Does the field know less about my case than other similar cases elsewhere?
- Have there been any recent critical breakthroughs in the field that my work draws from or seeks to build upon?
- What about my methodology might represent a contribution to the field?
- How is my approach different from the way others have looked at the issue?
- What is the payoff? (Przeworski and Salomon 1995)
- What is new about what my expected research results?

Use words that signal difference, uniqueness, and the special quality of your work (Box 11.8).

**BOX 11.7**

“Many decades ago, Americans observed the effects of wildfires on the composition and structure of hardwood forest environments (the kind of natural environment where most people lived at the time). Based on those observations, people drew the plausible conclusion that fires in nature were harmful, and that policies were needed to “protect” forests from wildfire. Well-intentioned applications of fire suppression policies in other environments – e.g., the Plains grasslands, Rocky Mountain coniferous forests, or southern California chaparral – have proven unwise.

We now know that fire is an integral part of many natural environments, and that the suppression of normal fires in those environments will lead inevitably to an altered ecosystem, often accompanied by a buildup of fuel and a more catastrophic fire. Similar examples could be cited in such diverse fields as urban planning, natural hazards, counterterrorism, agricultural biotechnology, infectious disease control, and energy policy. In each case, activities and policies that work well in one place may be less effective or even counterproductive in another place.”

Excerpted from Solem 2004
This example excerpt (Song, Appendix viii) compares the proposed approach to others to demonstrate its unique value:

“We propose to expand the scope and depth of existing studies at Duke Forest by scaling up carbon fluxes from stand to landscape through integration of remote sensing, ecological modeling and ground observations. Our scaling up strategy differs from the traditional ‘big-leaf’ model as we explicitly incorporate spatial vegetation heterogeneity into ecological models to simulate landscape carbon cycle.” (emphasis added)

Another example integrates compelling vocabulary to show its special character (Wasklewicz, Appendix x):

“The proposed education and research activities are a significant shift away from the compartmentalization of techniques and concepts found in many disciplines. A holistic approach, like the one proposed, will compel students to develop sound habits in project design, fieldwork, data collection and management, analysis, synthesis, and articulation (written, spoken, and visual). A student immersed in this learning environment can provide innovative approaches to broaching integrative subject material. The application of these systematic practices will permit students to go beyond lecture and lab to conduct publishable original field- and computer-based research because they have a clearer view of science and its applications” (emphasis added)

Certainly, as Przeworski and Salomon (1995) point out, “disciplinary norms and personal tastes in justifying research activities differ greatly: Some scholars are swayed by the statement that it has not been studied (e.g., an historian may argue that no book has been written about a particular event, and therefore one is needed), while other scholars sometimes reflect that there may be a good reason why not.” In any case, justifications should be based upon evidence and argumentation rather than assertions or opinions about what is appealing about the subject matter.

Generally, another effective approach is to capitalize upon trends in your field or recent events worthy of note (Box 11.9). For instance, in response to interdisciplinary calls for proposals, the broader trend of a “geography rediscovered” can give contextual importance to your work. Over the last decade, the discipline of geography has undergone a renaissance that has moved it to the academic center (NRC 1997; Pfirman and the AC-ERE 2003) and has generated an importance for geographic research in society at large (Richardson and Solís 2004; NRC 2006). Consider the fact that geography majors have increased by 32 percent in the past 5 years (NCES, various years), dozens of new geography programs have been initiated, including at
prestigious universities such as Harvard and Howard (AAG Guide, various years), geographic information technologies are diffusing rapidly in all sectors of the economy (Gewin 2004), and job opportunities are multiplying rapidly as demand rises for workers who are globally literate, knowledgeable of geographical concepts, and skilled in interdisciplinary research methods (Jackson 2005). As you make your case for the importance of your own research, it may serve your purposes to point out one or more of these aspects of a growing discipline (Pandit 2004). A few well-placed bullet points can impact your reviewers and increase the likelihood that they will understand your research as significant.

If you choose a problem that is unique because it is a topic of current salience, you should take care to convince your reviewers that “such topics are not merely timely, but that their current urgency provides a window into some more abiding problem” (Przeworski and Salomon 1995) (Box 11.10). However, beware of the fact that “hot topics,” whether theoretical or applied, will likely also attract more competitors. If everyone is writing about it, you may be better advised to develop or stick to a quality research niche that is your own. “By the time you write your proposal, obtain funding, do the research, and write it up, you might wish you were working on something else. So if your instinct leads you to a problem far from the course that the pack is running, follow it, not the pack: nothing is more valuable than a really fresh beginning” (Przeworski and Salomon 1995). Doing so will not only distinguish your particular proposal but will also set you apart as a researcher in your own right.

**BOX 11.9**

Wasklewicz (Appendix x) positions his research as a timely intervention, taking advantage of new developments coupled with a rich empirical tradition:

“Form analysis in geomorphology has *languished for decades*, mired in studies of 2D shape as opposed to interpreting 3D and 4D landform characteristics. This produced a situation whereby our current understanding of continuous terrain is not equated with repeatable, measurable form attributes, but rather with qualitative observations or simplified empirical interpretations. *Recent developments* in geomorphometry have promoted the concept of numerically characterizing form by analyzing geomorphometric structures. Structure arises from a quantitative understanding of the spatial arrangement of morphometric point data and represents a numerical signature of the topographic form. *Historical analyses* of alluvial fans, which have produced *a solid literary foundation*, the ubiquitous nature of fans, and an exposed surface expression of fans *make them an ideal feature for establishing* a morphometric structure approach.” (emphasis added)
8. Go the Extra Mile

Increase your competitiveness by including one or more strategic elements that may not be required but can help round out your proposal. While some of these ideas apply better to faculty proposals, including others in student proposals may demonstrate early professional maturity. All should be applied to enhance your work, not distract from it. Be sure to check that your target sponsor agency allows these items in proposals; some sponsors have very strict guidelines. At best, incorporating these strategies regularly can help you transform individual research projects into a solid research program.

An advisory board is a group of people who can help you ensure quality and provide a sounding board for ideas and problems. If you can identify and convince experienced scholars to agree to serve on such a board (pending acceptance of your proposal), referring to their tentative agreement to participate in your proposal also lends a measure of credibility to your efforts. Advisors usually serve on a volunteer basis, but if it is allowed by your sponsor agency, you might consider writing in a budget line item to cover a small

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**BOX 11.10**

Lam, Campanella, and Pace (Appendix iv) explain the intellectual merit and broader impacts of their proposed project in the immediate aftermath of Hurricane Katrina. Note that both short and longer term benefits of their work are featured in this justification:

“Very little research has focused on collecting *time-critical, empirical data* on how businesses make spatial decisions on whether they remain or relocate after a catastrophe, *especially a catastrophe as deep and wide as we have seen* that affects an entire metropolis of New Orleans. The time-critical data that we collect for this project will provide *unique information* on how decisions among businesses are made in this *unprecedented* case. The coupling and tracking of street and telephone surveys over time will provide vital information for research on human-social-economic dynamics over space and time. The data we collect will also serve as an important *benchmark dataset for subsequent research* and for comparisons with other studies (e.g. studies on decisions made by individuals) . . . The time-critical, integrated GIS data set collected in this project can be made available to other researchers and planners, and can be used as a *basis for further related research*, such as modeling the impacts of Katrina on health, poverty, and crime. Our preliminary analyses of the data will be published and widely disseminated. Our data will provide a first-hand, *rarely captured view* of how a city recovers, literally from ground zero, and how businesses make decisions in post-catastrophe uncertainty. This information will help governmental and planning agencies in devising effective policies for economic recovery in the region.” *(emphasis added)*
amount of basic communication or travel expenses. A cost-effective strategy is to plan your advisory board meeting(s) during a national conference where you and your advisors are already likely to be in attendance. If you are a student, form your board now, inviting scholars from inside and outside your home university, and establish a track record to support your career development goals.

Letters of support are also a good means of demonstrating the importance of your proposed research. Even if not required, a key endorsement from a leading scholar, a partnering agency, or other group can help your proposal stand out. To get these letters, be prepared to write each letter draft yourself and tailor every single one to each individual supporter. Do not use a form letter or you will receive five letters back with exactly the same wording. Do be sure that the letter refers to the exact, correct title of your project and is addressed to the right person or department at the funding organization or generally to the review committee. Alternatively, have the letters addressed to you.

A research agenda is a common way to demonstrate that you anticipate how this project contributes to a larger and broader knowledge-generating enterprise. By proposing to develop one during the course of your research project (and even better, in conjunction with your advisory board), you set yourself up for possible future funding opportunities. Later you can point to the research agenda as the source for new questions you wish to raise in subsequent proposals. (For an example of a research agenda publication, see AAG 2003.)

A sustainability plan is a tool to allow you to continue making progress beyond the grant period. Many granting agencies like to see that you are thinking about how to leverage their resources as a way of launching new, long-term efforts. Say a few words in your proposal about how you envision sustaining your work after the funds are gone (Carlson 2002, 47).

Matching funds or in-kind contributions are another way to demonstrate to funders that you will use their resources efficiently and stretch them to their highest impact. Even if not required, if acknowledgment of outside contributions is permitted, it is valuable to explicitly name what other resources you or your institution will bring to bear upon the effort, if nothing more than pointing to the use of facilities, extra faculty time spent working or writing on the project, and so forth.

References to your own publications in your proposal narrative and bibliography can help demonstrate your competence in the field and position yourself relative to other scholars. Having publications that relate to your proposed work certainly reinforces credentials in the eyes of proposal reviewers, but be sure that the references are relevant and appropriate to the project. Furthermore, even unfunded proposals themselves may later become a source of future articles, creating a synergy between your grant writing and scholarly publication writing activities.

Memorable project titles or acronyms can help reviewers recall your proposal over others, particularly in discussions among review committees. Proposal titles in fact make the first impression, so be careful to choose wisely, or the memory reviewers have may not be a positive one.

Dissemination activities include ways you will ensure that your research results are broadly known. Donors are often interested in investing in work that will be widely recognized and continue to have further impact on the scientific community or the public. It is easy to add a few strategic dissemination activities such as publishing your work in a journal, writing a newspaper op-ed about the results, holding a workshop or seminar or a panel at a conference to consider the results, creating a web site, or others (Box 11.11).

Evaluation processes are often required for major research projects, but even if yours is not mandatory, it is advisable to incorporate some kinds of evaluation procedures into your work. This ensures quality and effectiveness and allows you to map outcomes to original goals. It also provides excellent material for future proposals that build upon the same line of research. You may only need to include a few statements regarding how you plan to assess success. Or you may be required to contract with a professional evaluator that is external to the project. Formal, external evaluations

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**BOX 11.11**

The following dissemination plan from Elwood (Appendix ii) demonstrates a commitment to both academic and public/community dissemination:

“I will disseminate results of the project in academic forums, the Humboldt Park community, and broader Chicago community development forums. Scholarly dissemination will take several forms and target several research areas in geography. I expect to produce multiple manuscripts for dissemination in urban geography, GIS, and geographic education journals. In the 2 years following completion of the project, I plan to produce a book focusing on the research results of the project, targeting the book toward an audience in urban geography, urban politics, community development. Throughout, I will make presentations at academic conferences focusing upon the project’s research and educational initiatives. In terms of community dissemination, all data developed for the spatial analysis data library and materials produced in the spatial analysis projects will be available to the partner organizations, and will be disseminated in local community development and neighborhood organizing forums such as the Great Cities Conference – an annual gathering of scholars and practitioners to share results of research and action throughout Chicago. Data and results will also be shared with Humboldt Park’s many other community organizations in presentations, and through the project website. This process will be facilitated by the ongoing partnership between DePaul’s Egan Urban Center and the Humboldt Park community. I am particularly committed to this local dissemination of data and results, given the underdeveloped infrastructure of local support resources for community-based spatial analysis.”
generally should be budgeted at about 10 percent of the overall budget (before overhead percentages are applied). Be sure that the evaluation utilizes a valid and reliable evaluation design, referring to methods that are appropriate to the kind of funding agency you are seeking support from. For example, foundations may prefer Logic Model Evaluations (Kellogg Foundation 2004); international organizations may require that you adhere to ISO standards (e.g., ISO/IEC 19796-1:2005, the accepted reference criteria for evaluation of scenarios for Information and Communications Technology); or agencies such as the U.S. Department of Education may promote following any number of methodologies depending upon grade level, subject content, or other factors. The NSF makes available a number of guides that are helpful specifically for NSF-directed proposals (NSF 2007).

9. Achieve and Communicate Coherence

The whole is truly more than the sum of its parts. While writing each section of the narrative, completing the budget, putting together your biographical sketch, and compiling all of the other parts of the proposal, you should strive for coherence among all of the elements. While you will not be able to eliminate all possible contradictions from any text, the idea is to create a complete package that minimizes a sense of the disjoined. Don’t leave this to chance: systematically structure your proposal to generate this coherence by using a matrix or other device that helps you to question the relationships among elements.

For example, following line A as marked in Figure 11.1: Do your research objectives actually address the problem or need you identify? Line

**FIGURE 11.1** A coherence matrix for research proposals.
B: Will your methodology really enable you to answer the question(s) you pose? Line C: Do your skills match up with the demands of the research activities that you propose? Line D: Will the project activities suffice to produce the deliverables that you promise? Line E: Do budget items line up with the activities? Line F: Will your expected results actually inform the research context? Do all of these elements overlap with the goals and perspective of the sponsor organization? And so forth (see Box 11.12 and also the example in Appendix vii).

You can create your own matrix using required elements of the specific call for proposals you are responding to. Or, you can create a general matrix tailored to your research by incorporating your own research questions. Activity 11.2 outlines a procedure for how you might create and use this kind of tool not only to design your project, and in turn structure your proposal, but also to review written drafts for completeness and coherence.

10. Live It

Preparing competitive research grant proposals is just as much about preparing yourself for a successful career as it is about getting resources for one particular project. Writing grants successfully is a continual process that is best practiced as integral to your professional life—not just parallel to it. Here I highlight a few simple organizational tools you can employ to create a constant state of readiness that will allow you to respond to funding opportunities as a matter of professional practice, rather than approaching it as a project (or chore!) in itself.

- Keep files/folders (either digital or hard copy) on possible research questions or problems that interest you. A research idea diary can help you focus on lines of work that you would like to elaborate, without having to flesh them out completely in the moment. You will be surprised in reviewing past entries just how your thoughts develop over time. This can then be a source for responding quickly to new funding opportunities.

- Keep similar but separate files/folders on possible sponsors amenable to your work. Organize this information, as you gather it into a spreadsheet so that you can find what you are looking for at a glance and you can see relationships between opportunities. Information on these funding agencies can come from a variety of sources, including your university’s SRO. You can also simply use any search engine on the Internet combining key words for your research and the word “funding” or “grant” to dig up potential opportunities. Or mine the CVs of scholars in your field, as suggested above in “Create the Right Fit.” Be sure the spreadsheet includes a column for deadlines; plan ahead, and prioritize.

- When you have identified a match between a sponsor and one of your research questions or when you have a sufficiently developed
With limited space in the proposal narrative, you can create a sense of coherence by lining up goals/purpose, activities, the timeline, and deliverables as shown in this example table (Solís, Appendix vii):

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>ACTIVITY</th>
<th>PURPOSE</th>
<th>M</th>
<th>A</th>
<th>M</th>
<th>J</th>
<th>J</th>
<th>A</th>
<th>S</th>
<th>O</th>
<th>N</th>
<th>D</th>
<th>J</th>
<th>F</th>
<th>Deliverable</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Initial Advisory Board &amp; Planning Session at AAG</td>
<td>To review research plan, identify additional collaborations</td>
<td>X</td>
<td></td>
<td>X</td>
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<tr>
<td>Gather departmental data</td>
<td>To inventory geography in the Americas</td>
<td>X</td>
<td>X</td>
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<tr>
<td>Develop survey respondent listings</td>
<td>To identify IRC activities and participants</td>
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<tr>
<td>Draft and pilot survey instruments; translate</td>
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<td>Implement surveys</td>
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<tr>
<td>Mail reminders to non-respondents</td>
<td>To increase response rates</td>
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<tr>
<td>Conduct follow-up telephone interviews to non-respondents</td>
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<td>X</td>
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<tr>
<td>Create and input data into GIS</td>
<td>To visualize and understand spatial patterns</td>
<td>X</td>
<td>X</td>
<td>X</td>
<td>X</td>
<td>X</td>
<td>X</td>
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<td></td>
<td>X Directory of Geography in the Americas</td>
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<tr>
<td>Analyze data (spatial and statistical)</td>
<td></td>
<td>X</td>
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<tr>
<td>Publish data in Directory and online</td>
<td>To share information and facilitate linkages</td>
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<tr>
<td>Research presented at US geography conference</td>
<td>To discover and understand qualitative content of IRC</td>
<td>X</td>
<td>X</td>
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<td>X</td>
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<tr>
<td>Participant observation at CoK</td>
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<td>X</td>
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<td>Investigate disciplinary history</td>
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<td>Devise focus group methodology participants</td>
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<tr>
<td>Conduct focus groups</td>
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<tr>
<td>Data analysis of focus groups</td>
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<tr>
<td>Devise interview methodology respondents</td>
<td>To test assumptions, determine extend or quantify findings</td>
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<td>X Case Study</td>
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<td>Conduct interviews</td>
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<tr>
<td>Data analysis of interviews</td>
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<tr>
<td>Research presented at US geography conference</td>
<td>To share results and gather geography community feedback, seek input for recommendations</td>
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<td>X Set of Best practices; Sustainability Plan</td>
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<tr>
<td>Plan Geography Summit</td>
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<td>Send invitations for Geography Summit and Advisory Board meeting</td>
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<tr>
<td>Conduct effectiveness model evaluation analysis</td>
<td>To develop recommendations</td>
<td>X</td>
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<tr>
<td>Write project reports / NSF report</td>
<td>To determine results and catalyze future IRC</td>
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<td>Hold Geography Summit</td>
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<td>X Geography Summit</td>
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<tr>
<td>Dissemination to geography community and other disciplinary societies</td>
<td></td>
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<td></td>
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<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>X International Model</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
research question arising in response to a particular call for proposals, you should launch a special writing operation. Start with a proposal writing timeline for each proposal working backward from the deadline, and identify key dates for finishing certain benchmarks.

- Write for fifteen minutes a day. Whether or not you have a particular funding opportunity, call for proposals, or research sponsor in mind, your writing skills to address this special audience will develop by frequent practice. Successful grant seekers almost always have one or more proposals in development, with draft documents specifically designed to capture ideas, arguments, and thoughts as they occur saved on their hard drives. This reduces the need to create the research proposal completely from scratch once you find a suitable sponsor organization. This reinforces the advice from Chapter 1 by Ken Foote on time management, that points out how people working in shorter, more frequent periods are better able to sustain momentum and continue progress as opposed to “bingeing” around deadlines. This approach is not only more productive but also less stressful.

Finally, as Iain Hay and Mark Israel discuss in the next chapter, there are clear ethical considerations that must be taken into account when writing grants. These are familiar refrains against plagiarism, integrity, honesty, informed consent, reciprocity, conflicts of interest, and other stances appropriate for aspiring scholars to live up to. (See Locke, Spirduso, and Silverman 2000; Chapin 2004.)

NOW WHAT?

It can be an exhilarating moment to finally submit a grant proposal for consideration after all of the hard work involved in preparing it. However, soon the realization hits that you will have to wait sometimes as long as six months for a decision. At these moments, turn to the next proposal and do not continually ask for updates from the program officers. Reject the temptation to make grammatical corrections or substantive updates and resend. Meanwhile, realistically prepare yourself for what to expect next: actual funding rates are indeed quite low, and even experienced grant writers can expect success rates on the order of 30 percent or less. Instead, focus on the other benefits that the writing process brought you. Reflect on what you might do better next time, regardless of whether you receive a positive or negative response for funding.

After proposals are submitted, they enter some kind of formal review process. Often this includes peer review, but for some foundations, the staff or a board of directors considers the applications. In any case, once you receive notification of a decision, you will usually also receive copies of the feedback from reviewers. If you do not, you should certainly request them. In the event of a declined proposal (a likelihood given the competitiveness of many programs), looking carefully through the feedback will help you understand that the process itself is instructive. A rejection of a proposal
Chapter 11 • Preparing Competitive Research Grant Proposals

does not mean your ideas are not worthy of future consideration, it may simply indicate temporarily limited funding or unusually heavy competition. Read all reviews and use them to revise and resubmit rejected proposals or to reformulate the next one (Ogden and Goldberg 2002, 181) (Box 11.13). Even the reviews of accepted proposals should be carefully considered, because they often include very helpful comments that will improve your funded project.

**BOX 11.13**

Kenney and Patton (Appendix iii) revised and resubmitted their proposal three times to NSF before receiving the award. Note that the overall rating for funding priority in the unfunded proposal sample is the same as the proposal that was ultimately awarded (medium priority), although considered by two different panels. There are discrepancies or disagreements among individual reviewers that are important to consider together. It is worth comparing the proposals, especially the summaries, to see how the authors utilized feedback constructively to craft a winning proposal. In particular, look at the difference in the opening paragraphs in response to reviewers’ comments, reflecting a transformation from a project focused primarily on database construction to one that has the analysis front and center:

**(unfunded proposal text):**

“This study examines the spatial relationships between successful startup firms and various constituents of a startup’s institutional support network that contribute to its birth and growth. In particular, this project requests funding to extend an existing database to include data on all domestic firms that went public between June 1996 through 2000. The existing database includes geographic information on the firms themselves, and five members of their support network: lawyers, venture capitalists, investment bankers, advisors in terms of members of the board of directors, and the universities that trained the management team of these firms.”

**(review excerpts):**

“It is unclear if the study will result in theoretical verification since few details on how the hypotheses will be tested are provided . . . It is primarily focused on the collection of data (although a number of hypotheses are laid out it is not clear how the researcher will proceed in answering them) . . . it is primarily a database building proposal which the author plans to share with the research community . . . the major weakness of this proposal is the lack of analysis. Though hypotheses were described, no information was provided to explain how the data will be analyzed and how the hypotheses will be tested. The methodology section is just the method to complete the database.”
In conclusion, the entire process of writing research grant proposals—from developing ideas to writing convincing text to considering reviewers’ feedback—can be conducted in a way that solidifies your research ideas and shapes your academic career in positive directions. Integrating these practical recommendations and habits of mind and action into your professional life can help you prepare yourself as a successful researcher and grant winner.

Additional Resources


Although written some time ago, Dr. Abler’s advice is salient and timeless. Coming from this renowned geographer, in an elegant and witty style, the text itself is a good example of clear and persuasive writing. A short and easy piece to cover a good deal of conceptual ground.


A more recent and comprehensive treatment written by a former NSF program officer is right on target for an aspiring academic audience, which is likely to try a submission to this funding agency. Chapin’s approach is to contextualize the process of proposal writing within the broader practice of planning and implementing a research project. Beyond its clear guidance on designing and writing the proposal, it includes discussion of managing awarded projects, ethical responsibility, and dealing with proposal rejection.
Chapter 11 • Preparing Competitive Research Grant Proposals 163


A widely read classic and indispensable general resource for proposal writing, especially for applied projects, but also appropriate for studies. The perspective is particularly valuable for researchers seeking to submit proposals to private foundations or donors that are nontraditional in terms of academic research proposals.


For graduate students, this book not only reliably advises on key aspects of developing a research thesis but also navigates through the dissertation proposal process itself, including how to form a dissertation committee and make the oral presentation. Its organization is particularly creative around nine functions that proposals must perform. The sections on writing a literature review, designing budgets, and discussing qualitative research will make this a valuable reference work in any academician’s library.


Although written for a much broader audience than just academic researchers, readers will find plenty of practical value in this volume. This edition includes a section for instructors teaching proposal writing, including a sample syllabus for eleven-week and three-week courses, and suggested assignments related to each chapter.

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