Preparing Research Proposals

David Cantor
Office of History, National Institutes of Health
Bethesda, Maryland
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The research proposal is a very time-consuming and far too familiar aspect of scholarly life. Few would claim that it is one of the pleasures of academia. It takes up so much time that one can forget what it should be: the first step in persuading your colleagues that they should care about something that you care about; an exercise in figuring out why you yourself care about it. It can be a dreadful chore, but it can also be an opportunity to think through an idea systematically, and to figure out how you might actually go about doing the research that you want to do.

Too often the grants agencies seem to get in the way. Too often they throw in a lot of seemingly needless demands. Too often they ask you to fill out a hundred incomprehensible forms, and to use electronic submission procedures that they say cannot fail, and yet always seem to fail for you, with the loss of days – weeks, months – of work, and the acquisition of nothing but worry lines, a sense of frustration, and an ulcer at the age of 50. All this may happen, but ultimately grants applications should be about persuading your colleagues that they should care about your ideas, that you have a doable project, and that you love it enough to go through all the frustrations of writing the proposal. There is sometimes a moral equation that goes with writing a grant that states that you can only do something you really love if you really suffer for it. And grants writing can sometimes be a finely tuned, long drawn out way of making you suffer. Yes—academic life can be a mixed-up, muddled-up, shook-up emotional world. But remember I did say that writing a grant is an exercise in figuring out why you care about something. You'd better care about it, or why go through all the pain of writing these damn grants?

So your main goal in writing a proposal is to persuade a group of your colleagues– some of whom you'll want as reviewers; some whom you won't – that your idea for a project stands out, that you have an important topic, that your approach is imaginative, that it is methodologically robust, and that your subject has rich, solid content – or at least the promise of this at the end of your research. Some of your reviewers may know you; others will never have heard of you. You may be little more than a number on an anonymous application. Applications may be blind refereed. So the first thing that you are going to have to do is to capture your readers' attention. Tell them why what you are doing is important. Why you care about it. Why they should care.

The Distracted Reviewer

The first thing to realize is that your readers may be reviewing an awful lot of proposals. Some will be members of a grants committee asked to assess the mass of proposals received by that committee; others will be individual scholars asked to review your proposal because of their special expertise in your area. Most will be doing it on their own time, and for members of a grants committee may be working through a mountain of applications. There may be no academic credit for doing this sort of work. It's a form of professional service. And while readers may be conscientious about it, they may give it only a limited amount of time in between writing their own grants proposals, writing up the results of successful grants proposals, teaching their courses, publishing their books, feeding their kids, mowing the lawn, and so on – they are all busy, they all live distracted lives. So capture their attention in the first page, ideally in the first paragraph. It is here that you should tell them why they should read on. You can add the caveats later. Don't start with the qualifications. You can bring them in at some point, but don't bring them in too soon.

It's all the more important to grab their attention because in some committees one of the members may be asked to present some of the proposals to the rest of the committee, to act as advocates for them. In other words, one member of the committee will have to argue for your proposal and a number of others in front of the rest of the committee. It is crucial that you get your reader on your side. You want him or her to really advocate for you, to push your proposal above all the others in his or her portfolio; and a clearly stated opening paragraph can help. Grab his or her attention. Give him or her the turns of phrase he or she needs to make your case. Draw them into your proposal. Make your advocate read on. Remember, he or she may never have heard of you before picking up your proposal, and may never have thought about the topic you intend to investigate. Give him or her something to remember, in the best sense of that phrase.

In most – probably all – committees there is a ranking system, and this can be brutal. I was told of one National Institutes of Health (NIH) committee that sat around a triangular table with a hole in the middle into which was inserted a large garbage can. Committee members were asked to rank a proposal and to state whether it should be considered. Those that failed this test were thrown into the waste bin. Imagine the scene. These were major proposals, hundreds of pages, heavy wads of paper, months of work, thumping into the can. It was a noisy procedure: the end of funding dreams for many researchers. Other committees have different procedures, but all have to deal with many more proposals than they can fund. You've got to grab the attention of your readers, and then keep their attention.

You can start in a number of ways. You might begin with a set of clearly posed historiographic questions. You aim to fill a gap in the literature (though tell me why I should care about that gap; it may not be obvious.) Or perhaps you intend to reinterpret an older historiography in the light of newly discovered sources. A good story may also grab attention, but be sure to tell us why it's important, and how it leads into the research project you propose. In some cases, it may be impossible to sum up your ideas in a quick turn of phrase: You may only be able to set out the key issue or issues in meticulous detail and subtle argument. But don't let your reader get mired in minutiae. He or she has a lot of other proposals to read, so leave him or her with a takeaway point, your main argument or the main issues or themes you wish to address. You want your readers to remember you after they have ploughed through acres of applications; you want them to dream of you through the torpor of interminable grants committee meetings. It may be a chore producing a grant proposal; but can also be a chore reading one – don't make more of a chore than it needs to be.

Bear in mind that your reader may not be from your discipline: committees often comprise a mix of specialists. Check out who is on your review committee, and if your committee has specialists from different disciplinary or historical backgrounds, write your proposal so that they can engage with it. It's a first step to making your case to them; towards convincing them of the value of your project. It is possible that some readers will never be persuaded: some committees become battlegrounds for limited funding between a number of stakeholders – and those stakes can be sharp. But, even in these sharply divided committees there may be readers who joined the committee out of an interest in other people's ideas. You want these members on your side. Offer them an introduction as to what is exciting about your discipline, not a snooze through the sleepy byways of the field. Avoid specialized language where possible, and where you cannot avoid it, limit yourself to words for which there is no easy alternative, and make sure you clearly define their meaning. Also, keep the focus on your big themes, not the nitty-gritty details of the evidence you are accumulating. When the proposal requires detailed supplementary information sometimes you can put it into appendices. Don't clog up the main text.

What's new?

Your application should tell your readers what you expect your project to show, but also what it will show that has not been shown before. It should demonstrate that it will bring something new to the field; something significant that other scholars do not already know. To do this, you must read what is already known about the subject, and think about how better knowledge of this subject will advance broader scholarship in your field – will it answer unanswered questions, contribute to an ongoing debate, correct mistaken assumptions, open up new questions or perspectives? You should also

provide a full bibliography. But beware: Most application forms have page limits or limit the number of citations you can include, so you will have to be succinct. Don't attempt a complete survey of the literature. Instead, provide your readers with a focused account of the specific body or bodies of knowledge to which you will contribute. Your survey of the current state of knowledge thus sets the stage for your own work: it raises questions about existing scholarship, and shows where you will add to it. And make sure that the bibliography is complete: an incomplete or outdated bibliography can weaken your proposal – it is often one of the first things readers look at after the summary of the proposal, much as some scholars read the footnotes before the book, to see where you are situating your work. Some readers will dissect your citations in detail, especially if they have an investment in the subject. Your bibliography can provide evidence that you are familiar enough with the field to ensure that your project will engage with other scholars' work, and will not repeat their research. Don't leave out key figures in the field, even if you disagree with them (especially if you disagree with them), for they or their acolytes may be your readers. And besides you should be engaging with them: They are part of the field to which you seek to contribute.

Such contexts help to keep your reader with you, situate your work in the field, and tell us why you care about it. Crucially they should help to set up the major historiographic or theoretical questions you want to address. It is crucial to convince readers that such topics are not only timely, but that they also provide a lens onto some broader, more enduring problem. You should point towards these broader problems, not avoid them. Your 'problem' may be some broader historiographic debate to which you seek to contribute, or perhaps some theoretical questions that need to be teased out. Whatever it is, your problem should situate the local topic of your research in terms of its relevance to critical historiographic and/or theoretical issues. Help your reader understand where the problem intersects the main historiographic/theoretical debates in your field and show how this inquiry will test conventional wisdom or offer new ideas. Good proposals recognize different viewpoints. They address the field broadly. The last thing you want to suggest is that you, the author, have adopted a narrow partisan position, and are unresponsive to alternatives.

How will you do it?

My voice is rapidly becoming that of a reviewer of proposals. As a reviewer, I want you to grab my attention, and also to keep it. Tell me why you care, why I should care, and how your proposed project will address some larger point. Also show me that it is a doable project – how you intend to carry out your research. The term "method" covers a lot of ills, but basically the proposal should tell us what you will actually do when you do your research, and how you will interpret the results of these activities. Do not just tell me the historiographic or theoretical justification for your work. Don't just tell me what

you hope to accomplish. Tell how you will spend your time while doing your research. How can I as a reviewer recommend a proposal that leaves me wondering what it is that you will be doing after we give you the money? Identify the archives you intend to use, your published primary sources, the databases you will mine or create, the people you intend to interview, and how you will analyze the material you collect – a timeline for completing the project can help, and it should have markers along the way (when you plan to finish data collection; begin analysis; start/finish writing and so on). But, don't claim too much for yourself. If you don't read German you will have to work to persuade a reader that you can work in a project that requires German archives. We readers have ways of finding out whether you can do the work: It's not unusual for reviewers to check up on your background. And don't be fooled by the promise of blind refereeing; in a small field your identity may be difficult to hide. Finally, remember that a methodology is not just a list of research tasks: a list alone does not show that these tasks are the best way of tackling the question you seek to address. When you set out your methods you should be making an argument as to why these tasks are the best way of approaching your subject.

Goals

Finally, proposals should normally describe the outcome of the project: an article, book, chapter, dissertation, and so on. Some grants agencies require you to set out these outcomes, but even if your agency doesn't require it, it still helps to provide this information. It may aid the reader to evaluate whether your research plans fit the outcome (a book will generally be a bigger project than an article), the sorts of audiences you hope to address, and what their expectations may be. Put another way, it can help figure out whether your project is doable, and provide clues as to who, if anyone, is likely to read it, and whether they will be persuaded by your methods. It may also help to determine whether you are likely to complete. And on this last important point: make sure the results of a previous grants or fellowships are published or demonstrably on their way to publication.

Know your patron; know your budget

While drawing up your proposal, you should ensure that it follows the application procedures specific to the organization or program from which you hope to extract funding. Make sure that your project fits its goals, and set a budget that is appropriate to both the project and the organization to which you are applying. What does your agency normally award in terms of dollars, euros, pounds, or yen? And when you do a budget, explain how important estimates were calculated, and, where appropriate, don't forget to include key items such as phones, postage, laptops, or travel to an archive. Always check your

calculations: it is amazing how often columns do not add up to the totals stated, or that anticipated expenses and revenues do not match.

Call the grants manager of the program to which you are applying. Writing a proposal without talking to the grants manager can be like producing junk-mail, and may have as much chance of success. How often do you take up the offers in your spam? Do you feel that the spammers know you and your goals? So talk to the grants manager: he or she can help you pitch your application. And if you can't get through, talk to others with more experience of grants writing – perhaps your adviser, someone on your dissertation committee, or someone once on the grants program you are targeting. And don't forget the panel that will assess your application. Recall that I mentioned you should try to find out who is on the grants panel. Ask the grants manager or contact person about it, and write to engage that specific committee. Your final proposal should include all requested documentation and be on time. Check the deadline.

Time

A first-rate application needs time – how long depends on the type of grant you are applying for: a major National Science Foundation (NSF), Wellcome, or NIH grant will take much longer, and require greater knowledge than a small traveling grant to a library. So start soon, long before the deadline approaches. Make yourself familiar with all the sources and issues related to your subject. Open a file, collect references, check finding aids, visit the archives if you can, and write a few pages of ideas and arguments. It may seem that you have to do all the research before you write the proposal – you don't, but you should know enough about your sources and issues to write a substantive application. Write a first draft as far in advance as possible. Revise it. Show it to colleagues. Make it your lunchtime conversation. Give it as a seminar: it will force you to think of the big points, and the debate can help you think through possible criticisms. Put it in a drawer; leave it in the dark. Revise it again. Revise it again. Go over the language, style, and form. Check the substance, argument, spelling, grammar. Hone your opening paragraph again so that it does its work, driving home exactly what you mean, capturing your reader. Submit.

Begin again

Your application may not work the first time. You may have to learn to love rejection. But, use it as an opportunity. The grants agency will often provide you with detailed feedback and, if it doesn't, ask for it. You should have the readers' comments for guidance, the committee's evaluation, and perhaps the remarks of the grants manager. Talk to him or her again. Disinter the files you buried after your first application. Read them. Revise again. And again. Resubmit and return to the rest of your life.