

## Writing successful grant proposals for graduate research

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## Why apply for a grant?

- Money
  - to improve your research
  - to make your life easier while you research
- Prestige
  - Grants (especially external ones) look very impressive on your CV
- Experience
  - If you plan to have a research career, you need to master the art of grant writing early
  - Teaching positions also often require some grant writing

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## Where to start: Sources of information

- Graduate Division
- Mailing lists and websites
- Your department
- Your advisor
- Other graduate students

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## Where to start: Sources of funding



- UCSB-internal grants
- UC-wide grants
- External grants (public and private)
- Note: Most graduate research funding requires ABD status
  - Many government-funded sources are restricted to domestic students, but some sources are specifically for international students

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## When to start: Early



- Ideally, identify promising funding sources at least six months to a year before you plan to do the research
- Develop a timeline for writing your grant proposal
  - Equivalent in time and effort to a dissertation prospectus or a research article: allocate the time you need
    - At least three months for a major external grant proposal (e.g., NSF)
    - At least a month for an internal or small external grant proposal
    - At least two weeks for a rewrite of an existing grant proposal for resubmission to the same or another agency

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## How to start: Plan and prepare



- Find a good match for your research interests
  - Don't waste your time applying to funding agencies that are unlikely to be interested in the type of work you do
- Familiarize yourself with the guidelines and follow them to the letter
- Plan first, then write

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## Planning your grant proposal



- Think through every aspect of the research design
  - Where will you carry out the research? Why there?
  - What methodologies will you use?
  - What precisely will the research involve, with respect to both people and resources/tools? Why are these the best people and tools for this project?
  - Will you need to go through Human Subjects? Will other sorts of permission be needed?
  - How long will it take you to complete the research and writing?
  - What special skills will you need? Do you have them or can you acquire them before carrying out the research?
  - What expenses will you incur?
  - What resources, skills, or background do you already have?

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## Planning your grant proposal



- Decide what you expect to find out
  - Hypotheses (science model)
  - Research questions (qualitative/humanistic model)
- Decide what's new and important about your project
  - Note: New is not the same as important
  - How does it fit into the scholarly dialogue (i.e., published research in your field)?
  - Be original but not too original
- Think of ways to frame your project in relation to what the funding agency is looking for
  - Don't make reviewers adapt to your worldview; talk to them in their own language

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## Planning your budget



- Don't guess prices: include actual current costs and give a dollar amount (round to nearest dollar)
- Don't inflate your budget, but don't pretend you can get by on less money than you really need
- Everyday expenses are just as important as big-ticket items
- Include things that will make your research life easier (e.g., assistants, equipment, per diem)
- Consult your advisor about what you can reasonably include

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## Preparing to write



- Compile the relevant literature(s)
  - For most references, skim, don't read closely
  - Connect your project to several bodies of work (e.g., based on theory, method, area)
  - Select references appropriate to the funding agency
    - Your reviewer may have written a key reference!
  - Don't be exhaustive, but include as many relevant references as you reasonably can

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## Writing the proposal: Structure



- Follow the structure given in the guidelines exactly
  - If no explicit guidelines are given, include the following sections:
    - Goals of the project
    - Previous research
    - Research design (or Research plan for humanistic work)
    - Significance of the project
- Use headings
- Use keywords from the guidelines

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## Writing: Content and style



- Be explicit and clear
  - State exactly why your project is crucial at this stage in the development of the field
  - Avoid specialist jargon
  - Avoid complicated prose
    - Humanistic fields use a more complex style, but aim for clarity and don't use an elevated style you're not comfortable with
  - Include as many specific details as possible
  - Repeat the key ideas throughout the proposal (in different words)
  - Avoid cute and clever titles; instead, be specific and descriptive
    - In applying for humanities funding, your title can be clever if the subtitle is specific and descriptive

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## Writing: Content and style



- Write like a scholar, not a student
  - Make others' ideas serve your needs, don't subordinate your work to theirs
  - Give yourself credit for your skills and accomplishments (and be sure to cite yourself if at all possible)
  - Don't worry that your project won't turn out quite as promised; surprises are part of the process
  - Sound more certain than you (probably) feel
  - Don't apologize for the project's limitations
  - Avoid self-praise
    - Use description, not evaluation, to demonstrate your qualifications

NOT: "This project is important because..." BUT "This project is the first to..."

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## Accommodating reviewers



- Reviewers have to read quickly; make the information easy for them to find by having clear topic sentences and explicit transitions between ideas
- Make your proposal memorable by including rich details, not vague generalizations
- Don't make it easy for reviewers to throw your proposal out—follow directions!
- Don't assume reviewers are specialists in your field; define terms and avoid jargon
- Critique with caution—your target may be your reviewer

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## Getting help



- Look at some examples of successful proposals
- Ask for detailed, critical feedback from an experienced grant writer/reviewer
- Keep your advisor informed and involved throughout the process

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## After you've applied



- Don't get your hopes up; statistically, the odds are against you
- Apply to other funding sources, but be sure to adapt the proposal to the new funder's priorities
  - Change the framing (and the budget as needed), not the research design

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## If you're rejected



- If you don't receive funding, take reviewers' criticisms seriously (if available) and work to improve the proposal for next time
- Don't get discouraged—revise and reapply to other funding sources
  - The first rule of grant writing: You're only guaranteed not to get funding if you don't apply

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## If you're funded



- Start laying the groundwork right away to get the project up and running
- Be organized; having a grant means being a manager
- Meet the funder's deadlines (e.g., for submitting final reports)
- Present at conferences and publish work from your grant—and acknowledge your funder!
  - Funding agencies look for evidence that their money was well spent before funding someone again
- Start planning for the next grant

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## For more tips on surviving grad school and beyond



- <http://www.linguistics.ucsb.edu/faculty/bucholtz/sociocultural>
- Although labeled as "Resources for Sociocultural Linguistics," the page contains information about writing a thesis/dissertation, conference abstracts, academic publishing, and the job search, among other issues
- Please let me know if you'd like to see other topics addressed on the website

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