

# T H E GRADUATE



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A NEWSLETTER FOR GRADUATE STUDENTS  
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## THE MAKING OF A SUCCESSFUL PROPOSAL

In the last issue of the newsletter, we discussed the necessity of planning ahead to get funds for dissertation research and writing.

Now we offer tips on proposal writing, garnered from Berkeley faculty who have served on review committees for both University and extramural awards. We also talked to Berkeley staff and students well versed in the perils and strategies of writing a proposal.

### GETTING A PERSPECTIVE ON NEED

As you prepare to set pen to paper, keep in mind the following: Many graduate students apply for funds from foundations, agencies, and the University. You are not alone in having an interesting, worthy project to be funded or in wanting to travel to broaden your experience and contacts.

But just wanting to go to Spain or New York or Tahiti is not enough to persuade a review committee. Nor is simply being a Berkeley graduate student who happens to need funds (even desperately) for the next year.

Instead, you are going to have to convince the reviewers that your project is worthwhile, unique, and that you are the person to carry it out.

To get a better understanding of your need for a fellowship or grant, ask yourself what activities the funds will permit you to do that you couldn't do otherwise. Why are those activities important? If you're asking for travel funds, what resources at the place you wish to visit are essential to your research?

To be convincing, you need to be convinced yourself that you really need the funds to carry out your project, and that you're just not submitting a wish list to the reviewers but a concrete plan

that is critical to the success of your research.

### REVIEW THE CRITERIA

Nearly everyone we talked to had this advice: Review the guidelines the agency or foundation has sent to you and follow them precisely.

"Follow directions," advises Sabrina Soracco, who leads campus workshops on applying for grants and who has served as a student member of the campus Fulbright committee. "Pay attention to what they say about length or criteria. If they say they don't give money in your discipline, believe them!"

Many of the applications to private foundations (close to 80 percent) are not appropriate or are misdirected, according to the *Annual Register of Grant Support*. Make sure that your topic is suitable for the funding agency's consideration and that you tailor your proposal to suit their perspective. This means, unfortunately, that you cannot get away with using one proposal for several agencies or foundations.

"Students invariably commit this mistake: They don't take cognizance of the issues that the granting agency wants to see," says Anthropology Professor William Shack, who has served as a reviewer for the Mabelle McLeod Lewis grants. "They go off on tangents. The proposal has to meet the aims of the granting agency."

Shack adds that if you are applying for a fellowship that requires dissertation research to have been completed, be sure to show that you have indeed completed your research.

"If students haven't completed their research, they will be hard put to be funded for writing," he says.

Likewise, if a fellowship requires proficiency in a foreign language, you must know the language.

"Don't say you will learn the language later or that you are taking a self-paced course," advises Anthropology Professor Alan Dundes, a member of the campus Fulbright committee. "To do research, you must know the language of the country you will visit."

Remember, many students apply for fellowships and grants. To be considered seriously, you must submit a proposal carefully crafted for the particular foundation to which you will submit it. Know the requirements and meet them.

### WHAT GOOD PROPOSALS DO

No matter what length your proposal is, it should answer the following questions:

- What is the problem?
- What will your work contribute toward solving the problem? (Objectives)
- How will you go about investigating the problem? (Methodology)
- How are you uniquely qualified to undertake this project? (Your background)

Your proposal should give specific answers to these questions but in language that the well-educated general reader will understand.

"If students write as though they're writing for their own doctoral committee, they get themselves in trouble," says former Associate Graduate Dean Clara Sue Kidwell, who oversaw the Graduate Fellowships Office and who has participated on many review committees. "They should keep in mind that although review panels are specialists in certain general areas, the reviewers are not specialists in what the student is writing the proposal about."

If possible, find out who the audience for your proposal will be. National Science Foundation reviewers, for example, are usually specialists in your subdiscipline. Other funding agencies

may have, for example, a biochemist who reviews all the biology and physical science proposals.

**Choosing a problem.** Begin with a realistic, well-defined problem that can be addressed in the time you propose and with the funds you are requesting.

“A lot of students submitted projects that were way too grand,” says Philosophy Professor Bruce Vermazen, a former member of the Humanities Graduate Research Grants (now the Humanities and Social Science Research Grants) committee. “They would have taken much longer and more money than they proposed.”

A well-focused project, on the other hand, convinces reviewers that you are realistic about the funding you need and that an award would be well spent.

“Your project should be doable,” says Dundes. “Some applicants are hopelessly naive. You need to consider the culture [in the case of travel grants] . . . where military juntas reign, you cannot examine secret files. Be realistic.”

**Stating the problem.** The faculty advised students to state the research problem at the beginning of the statement of purpose. Then give some of the historical background and describe some of the other research that has been done, always with the goal of showing how your project is unique.

“Show what you’re doing that other people haven’t done,” advises Kidwell.

This year’s highest ranked Fulbright proposals, for example, prompted this kind of comment from reviewers: “No other scholar has systematically observed and recorded . . .” and “This work has not been done before.”

**What will your work contribute toward solving the problem?** Now that you have clearly defined the problem, you must show what your investigation of the problem will accomplish.

This is commonly known as the “objectives” section of a proposal. Specifically, what do you hope to accomplish through your work? What important gaps of knowledge will your work aim to fill?

“You need to show the far-reaching ramifications of the problem, what kinds of big questions your project

might answer or illuminate,” says a graduate student formerly on the Graduate Fellowships Office staff, who has received several extramural grants. “Say, ‘This will be significant in resolving \_\_\_\_\_ problem.’ Don’t be too embarrassed to state what seems simplistic and obvious.”

Here you state *what* you believe your project will accomplish, not *how* you will go about addressing the problem (methodology).

“Students often emphasize the mechanics of the project, rather than its purpose,” says Shack. “They need to address the wider theoretical issues and to show the relevance of their work to the field.”

**How will you investigate the problem?** Describe your methodology, how you plan to carry out your project. How will you move from the original problem to the hoped-for results?

“In a lot of proposals, I see that this is the research project, and this is the methodology, but I can’t see any connection between the two,” says Soracco. “I can’t see how this methodology is going to work on this project.”

The methods you employ should follow logically from your proposed goals, and you should provide a justification for the methods you choose. Why are you going about the project in this particular manner? What methods have been tried before and with what results? Soracco advises having someone else, preferably in another field, review your proposal to see if he or she can follow your plan.

It is the methodology, the doing of the project, that costs money. If your methods are sound and well justified, chances are your project will impress the reviewers as well designed and feasible.

If you are applying for travel funds, the methodology section is where you also specify where and why you must travel. Do you need to go to a certain library to study documents, to a museum to examine specimens, to a particular region to study features of an environment? Is travel essential to solving the problem you have posed?

“Avoid making it look as though you are going to use the money to go on vacation,” says Vermazen. “Some pro-

posals were so transparent, we couldn’t miss it.”

“Show that you need to read archive materials or work in a lab with a particular individual,” agrees Dundes. “And have a letterhead letter from the archives or institution confirming that.”

Top-ranked Fulbright proposals elicited these comments from reviewers: “He shows knowledge of institutions’ holdings” and “Her project is excellent—imaginative, methodologically sound, and she knows exactly the resources she needs.”

**How are you uniquely qualified to do this work?** Tell the reviewers about your background. How did you get interested in this project? What related work have you done?

Depending on the requirements of the funding agency, you may simply submit a curriculum vitae to explain your qualifications, or you may have to write a lengthy personal statement. In a short proposal, such as the one required for the Humanities Graduate Research Grants (now the Humanities and Social Science Research Grants), you may want to include a mention of your background and your qualifications in the statement of purpose.

History Professor Thomas Metcalf, a member of various fellowship committees, has this advice: “Give a straightforward account of what you have accomplished and a sense of the kinds of subjects you’re interested in in graduate school. Say, ‘I have developed an interest in \_\_\_\_\_ over the course of a year.’ Be reasonably precise.”

“Avoid cuteness, mocking comments, and an amusing, self-deprecating tone. The faculty is turned off by that.”

Letters of recommendation also attest to your qualifications to carry out the project you have designed.

“The main thing we looked at was whether the student had a clear project in mind and whether the student had the time and intellectual equipment to do that project, based on the student’s letters of recommendation and academic records,” says Vermazen.

Metcalf suggests that letters of recommendation play different roles in University fellowship competitions, depending on whether a student is

newly admitted, continuing but not advanced to candidacy, or advanced to candidacy and proposing doctoral research. Often second- and third-year graduate students don't yet have a clear idea of what their research will be. Those students, Metcalf says, will need stellar letters ("the best student I've seen in the last ten years") if they are going to get a fellowship award.

It is essential that your recommenders read your proposal before you submit it. They can give you ideas on how to improve it, and they will be well informed so that they can write a knowledgeable letter about your project.

#### **A WORD ABOUT BUDGETS**

If the agency or foundation requires a budget—many do not for smaller grants—make certain you follow the guidelines.

"Remember that it's important to be realistic in describing your proposed project's costs—the budget may be another way for a funding agency to determine the feasibility of your project," says Soracco.

Also, be sure to mention any money you will receive from other sources. This shows that other funding sources consider your project worthy of support and lets reviewers know that that particular agency is not being asked to underwrite the entire cost of the project.

#### **WATCH OUT FOR BASICS**

Do type your proposal (yes, some overlook this), and do have someone proofread it for you. This is no place for typos and misspellings. And be sure to confine your proposal to the recommended length.

Many fellowship competitions draw hundreds of applicants. The review committees simply will not read pro-

posals that run over the advised length. Read the guidelines and write no more than suggested. If an agency requires that your statement of purpose be typed within the margins of a specified form, xerox the form and make a draft to see if your proposal will fit.

#### **TRY, TRY AGAIN**

If your proposal is not funded, try again the next year, advises Soracco. The intervening period will give you time to think about your ideas and to rework your proposal.

"There are a lot of qualified people out there," she says. "And part of getting a grant is luck."

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