The Intention of this Workshop

My intention is for you to be enthusiastic and excited about submitting proposals rather than dreading the process—because doing what you love and want to do leads to a more fulfilling life—especially when someone else is willing to pay for it!

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Overview: 4 Sections

1. Overall approach to proposal writing

2. Specific parts of proposals and their requirements

3. Issues pertaining to the writing itself

4. Mock review committee

• Time for questions
What is the Purpose of Any Proposal?
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Proposal writing is a justification process:

• You have to justify the use of the requested funding.
• You have to convince a panel of reviewers that your idea is worthy of being explored.
• You must convince them that you will do it in such a way that it provides useful results.
Oh, and did I mention...

on time
and
under budget
Before You Write the Proposal

1. Know your personal motivation. Why is this important to you?
Before You Write the Proposal

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   b. Long-term goals: How does this project fit into your life’s work?
Before You Write the Proposal

1. Know your personal motivation. Why is this important to you?

2. By extension then, why will it be important to others?
   a. E.g., your community of fellow academics
   b. Does it involve outreach to the local community?
   c. Does it have applicability to other communities?

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Before You Write the Proposal

1. Know your personal motivation. Why is this important to you?

2. By extension then, why will it be important to others?

3. How is it novel? (or, what is the wow factor?)
   a. What are the gaps in the knowledge base that your project will help to fill?
   b. Does it challenge the prevailing paradigm?
Think through EVERY aspect of what you want to do

1. What methods will you use? (and why?)
   a. Are they commonly used in your field or are they novel?
   b. What are the inherent limitations of your methods?
   c. Balance your methods with your budget.
Think through EVERY aspect of what you want to do

1. What methods will you use?
2. What are all the possible outcomes?


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Think through EVERY aspect of what you want to do

1. What methods will you use?
2. What are all the possible outcomes? (seriously, this time)
For example: Make a chart of your research plan.
Think through EVERY aspect of what you want to do

1. What methods will you use?
2. What are all the possible outcomes?
3. What analytical tools will you use; e.g., what kind of statistics?

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Oh, and don’t forget good logic


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Overview of Proposal Structure, Scientific

• Abstract
• Specific Aims/Purpose/Research Questions
• Background/Significance
  – Innovation
  – Preliminary Studies
• Methods/Approach/Experimental Design
• Statistical Analysis
• Expected Results, Potential Pitfalls, Alternative Approaches
Overview of Proposal Structure, Humanities

• Summary
  – Purpose/Research Questions
  – Background/Significance
    • Innovation
    • Preliminary Studies (what you have done so far, eg, published journal articles on the topic)

• Work Plan

• Chapter Outline (if you are writing a book)
Important Caveat

Always consult the Request for Applications or the Proposal Application Instructions, and provide exactly what is requested—no more, no less.

Follow all instructions to the letter.
Abstract

• Write this last, as it is a summary of the whole proposal.

• Should contain
  – the hypothesis or objective (for non-hypothesis-driven studies),
  – the aims,
  – the methods you will use to accomplish your aims,
  – the expected results/impact.

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Generating a Good Hypothesis

• One common form: “Determine whether [X is the case, X causes Y, the addition of X results in Y] [or not]”
  – It is tested against the null hypothesis, namely, that there is no effect.

• Specify the nature of the interaction
  – Not simply hypothesize that there is/might be an interaction
Not a Good Hypothesis

• Stating something that you are going to do
  – E.g., Interview subjects about their views on homelessness
    • This is a method, not a hypothesis

  – E.g., Stain cells with fluorescent dye and determine the amount of fluorescence in treated vs. untreated cells.
    • Fix this by saying what an elevated level of fluorescence indicates.
Specific Aims

• Generally have between 2 and 4 aims.
• Should be interconnected, not disconnected, all supporting the overall hypothesis.
• Each aim can have its own hypothesis as well.
Example of good interconnection of aims

- The overall goals of this project are to 1) elucidate the relationships between genes in the microRNA (miRNA) biosynthesis pathway and prostate cancer (PCa) aggressiveness and recurrence, 2) determine the association between miRNA biosynthesis pathway genes and plasma levels of miRNAs involved in prostate carcinogenesis, and 3) evaluate associations between plasma levels of these miRNAs and prostate cancer aggressiveness.
Significance

• Provide background information and justify the importance of your study.

• Point out what is known in the field, where the gap is that you are studying, and how important it is to fill in that knowledge gap.

• Be concise. This is not a literature review section; nor should it get very technical.
Innovation

• Even if there is no specific section you must include on innovation (there is now for NIH grant applications),

• State briefly what
  – new technology,
  – new methodology, or
  – new conceptual innovations your research will use.
Preliminary Studies/Data

• Describe the groundwork you have laid for this study

• This is to show the reviewers
  – that you know how to conduct the studies that you propose, and
  – that your hypothesis is likely to be right.
Approach/Experimental Design

• Describe in detail how you will conduct your study

• Even in the humanities, describe how you will research your topic systematically. (See the examples on www.neh.gov)
Methods for Research Studies

• a description of the design, sample, and sampling plan, dependent and independent variables
• recruitment methods, inclusion/exclusion criteria
• setting
• study procedures
• measures – quantitative or qualitative
• Include copies of survey instruments as well as reliability and validity of instruments as appropriate.
• DON’T forget your control group(s) (positive and negative controls)
Statistical Analysis

• Describe what kinds of statistical procedures you will use to analyze your data; eg, analysis of variance, Student’s t-test for significance, whether you will use different procedures if your data are not distributed normally along a bell curve, whether you will turn any continuous variables into ordinal variables, etc.
Expected Results, Potential Pitfalls, and Alternative Approaches

• Point: keep an open mind
• What is the likely outcome, based on your preliminary data and logic?
• Think of ways your experiment(s) might fail (eg, methods not sensitive enough to detect differences) or your hypothesis might be incorrect
• Suggest alternative methods
Timeline

- A reality check: can you do what you say you want to do in the time frame allotted?
- Set milestones to keep yourself on track and motivated.
- Things can change, of course. It is not set in stone.
Budget

• Submit the level of detail required.
• Even if you don’t have to submit a budget, think in terms of one with regard to justifying your proposed study.
• Remember that the use of this money is what you are justifying.
Short Break

• Come back in 10 minutes
Writing Issues

• Get to the point *FAST*
  Answer the reviewer’s internal question: what is this person trying to do?

• Differences between writing a proposal and writing for publication
  – Define your terms
  – Don’t use jargon
YOUR JOB IS TO MAKE IT AS EASY AS POSSIBLE FOR THE REVIEWER TO UNDERSTAND YOU.
Citing References—Why and How Many?

• Support your claims.
• No need to review the entire literature, just enough to *show that you are up to date on the current knowledge base*.
• Political reasons: show your potential reviewers that you know their work.
What is the #1 bad writing habit that sucks the life and passion out of your writing?
Nominalization

• A verb that has been turned into a noun
  – Because the action of the verb is turned into a static “thing,” it loses all its power.

• Nominalizations often end in
  o -tion, -sion
  o -ment
How to eliminate nominalizations

1. Determine the root verb.

2. Ask who or what did this (determine the agent)?

3. Use the root verb and insert the agent.
Agent/Action and Nominalization

• "Agent" and "action" are not newfangled terms for the old "subject" and "predicate" because they do not refer to the structure of the sentence, per se. The agent of the action is often the subject of the sentence, but not always.

• Agent refers to that which partakes in the action conveyed by the verb.
What is the best way to confuse your reader?
Don’t pay attention to *information flow*.

Just put down your thoughts as they occur to you.
Information Flow: Terms

• **Old information**: simple, easily accessible, or generally known information; information that has been presented already

• Can consist of:
  1. Referential pronouns (it, that, this, etc)
  2. Repeating words or using synonyms
  3. Shortened versions of long terms
Information Flow: Terms

• **New information:** difficult, complex, or important information
  – Difficult: involves not-yet-discussed topics
  – Complex: involves lists or subordinate phrases (i.e., the information is hierarchical)
  – Important: goes at the end of the sentence
Information Flow

• Put old information at the beginning of the sentence and new information at the end of the sentence

• Link the new information to old information in several ways:
  1. by using referential pronouns (it, that, this, etc)
  2. by repeating words or using synonyms
  3. by using shortened versions of long terms
• **Put new information at the end of the sentence is because it is the emphasized position.** It's like the punch line; the reader expects it to contain the most important information.

• **Compare:**
  - I was mad at him; he was late.
  - He was late; I was mad at him.
Patterns of Information Flow

Focused Topic String

Old A  New B
Old A  New C
Old A  New D
Focused Topic String

• New Orleans serves as starting point for this project because it was the birthplace of the Plessy decision. The city also offers insight into the complexity of culture, class, skin color, and identity within African American communities. This historic part of the nation has been overshadowed by music, first, and then by tragedy.
Focused Topic String

• New Orleans serves as starting point for this project because it was the birthplace of the Plessy decision. The city also offers insight into the complexity of culture, class, skin color, and identity within African American communities. The history in this historic part of the nation has been overshadowed by music, first, and then by tragedy.
Patterns of Information Flow

Chained Topic String

Old A  New B
Old B   New C
Old C   New D

• Note that most paragraphs use a combination of focused and chained topic strings.
• The project highlights a crucial turning point in American history. The turn of the century has been characterized as the "nadir", a time when political repression and extra-legal violence stunted the lives of all black southerners. However, this violent era is also characterized as the age of accommodation, when black southerners, led by Booker T. Washington, de-emphasized a demand for their rights in favor of economic advancement.
Short Break

• Come back in 10 minutes
Mock Review Section

• Get into small groups
• Review the 3 proposals according to the guidelines given on the Review Criteria page
• Choose 1 to be funded

• Appoint a spokesperson from your group to share your process with the whole group