

Applying for Research Grants

September 08, 2003

Grantsmanship is an important skill for graduate students aspiring to either an academic or applied research career. Securing your own funding can lead to higher quality research (e.g., better measurement tools, more advanced technology, larger samples), a larger salary, additional grants and job market appeal, and the ability to hire research assistants.

Unfortunately, most graduate programs in psychology do not provide students with formal training and we must learn as we go. Due in part to lack of encouragement by faculty mentors, graduate students often do not apply for funding to support their research (Locke, Spirduso, & Silverman, 2000). Despite a prevalent belief that little money is available for graduate student research, funding is widely available, but you must know where to look and how to prepare a competitive application. This article will offer tips on how to locate funding sources, proposal guidelines, and how proposals are evaluated.

Locating Appropriate Sources of Funding

There are several types of funding, including internal grants from your university and external grants from local or national organizations. Grants can come from public agencies, such as the U.S. government (e.g., National Institutes of Health), or private ones such as non-profit foundations (e.g., Ford Foundation) and corporations (e.g., Microsoft).

The most important aspect of locating funding is finding an organization whose mission matches your research goals. Browse the organization's website to become familiar with the type of projects funded. Many organizations, such as the National Science Foundation, publish abstracts of projects currently being funded. NIH uses CRISP, Computer Retrieval of Information on Scientific Projects, which provides a searchable database of all funded research projects.

Professional organizations such as the American Psychological Society and the APA also provide a database of grant opportunities for student researchers. Another great resource, the Community of Science, is a searchable database that allows investigators to find grant opportunities using keywords or specific criteria, such as ethnic minorities, women, people with disabilities, and undergraduate students.

Preparing the Proposal

Once you have located sources of funding, the application and research proposal should be tailored to the priorities of each specific granting agency. Begin preparing your grant application at least three months in advance of the due date. This allows time for multiple revisions and feedback from peers and advisors. It is also beneficial to get feedback from people outside the field of psychology to make sure your research proposal is understood by a lay audience. Grant writing takes careful planning. It is imperative to follow the application timeline – especially when submitting a prospectus, if required – and the application due date. It is also critical to follow the application directions exactly. Applications that deviate from the guidelines will not be reviewed, even if your margins are only two-tenths of an inch smaller than the required size.

Different granting agencies have different requirements. The format required by NIH is a good protocol to follow if an agency does not specify exact proposal requirements. The grant proposal format is unlike an empirical journal article and the general writing style is different from most academic writing. The general format for NIH proposals consists of the following components: cover page, abstract, statement of the problem, hypothesis, theoretical framework, literature review, method and design, data analysis plan, significance, human subjects, references, curriculum vitae, resources and environment, budget, budget justification, and supporting materials.

This format may seem counterintuitive for students familiar with the traditional APA format of introduction, method, results, and discussion sections. In a grant proposal, however, most of the essential and summary materials are at the beginning, allowing reviewers to quickly familiarize themselves with each proposal. For example, the statement of the problem, hypotheses, and theoretical framework come before the literature review so that reviewers can easily identify the focus of the proposal without having to sift through a long introduction. Grant proposals must be written in a clear, jargon-free manner intelligible to both readers in various psychological disciplines and those outside academia.

Proposal Evaluation

Granting agencies also vary in the guidelines used to evaluate a proposal. The general framework used by NIH is a good guideline to follow for most grant proposals. NIH grant proposals are evaluated on the following dimensions:

1. **Significance:** Why is conducting your study important? Include theoretical, methodological, social, or practical significance. How will your study contribute to the field?
2. **Approach:** Are the methods, research design, and data analytic strategy appropriate to your research questions?
3. **Innovation:** Do you examine a new topic or use creative methods?
4. **Investigator:** Is the researcher qualified for carrying out the research?
5. **Environment:** Will the environment (e.g., laboratory, institution) be able to support the needs of the study?

Conclusion

Graduate students should start applying for research funding early in their careers to develop the necessary skills and to begin establishing a successful track record. It is important to locate agencies whose mission matches your research goals to ensure optimal funding probability. Understand that since grants are desirable to everyone the competition is intense—a sloppy presentation will doom even the most fascinating proposals. Applicants should expect to revise their proposal several times and expect rejection on the first few attempts. Perseverance and an understanding of the review process will maximize the likelihood of success.

Specific details on the proposal format and writing tips will be discussed in “Writing Grant Proposals” to be featured in next month’s Student Notebook.

References and Resources

Locke, L. F., Spirduso, W. W., & Silverman, S. J. (2000). *Proposals that work* (4th ed.). Thousand Oaks, CA: Sage.

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