

T H E GRADUATE



THE GRADUATE DIVISION
<http://www.grad.berkeley.edu>

REPRINT
VOLUME III, NUMBER 1
SPRING 1987

A NEWSLETTER FOR GRADUATE STUDENTS
UNIVERSITY OF CALIFORNIA, BERKELEY

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 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."

THE GRADUATE

Published semiannually by
The Graduate Division
325 Sproul Hall
University of California
Berkeley, California 94720-5900
(510) 643-7358
gradpub@uclink4.berkeley.edu
<http://www.grad.berkeley.edu>

Joseph Cerny, Dean
Suzanne Pierce, Management
Services Officer
Liz Randal, Editor
Arnold Yip, Publications Coordinator

*Copyright © 1991 by The Regents of
the University of California. All rights
reserved.*

The Art of Writing Proposals

By Adam Przeworski and Frank Salomon

Writing proposals for research funding is a peculiar facet of North American academic culture, and as with all things cultural, its attributes rise only partly into public consciousness. A proposal's overt function is to persuade a committee of scholars that the project shines with the three kinds of merit all disciplines value, namely, conceptual innovation, methodological rigor, and rich, substantive content. But to make these points stick, a proposal writer needs a feel for the unspoken customs, norms, and needs that govern the selection process itself. These are not really as arcane or ritualistic as one might suspect. For the most part, these customs arise from the committee's efforts to deal in good faith with its own problems: incomprehension among disciplines, work overload, and the problem of equitably judging proposals that reflect unlike social and academic circumstances.

Writing for committee competition is an art quite different from research work itself. After long deliberation, a committee usually has to choose among proposals that all possess the three virtues mentioned above. Other things being equal, the proposal that is awarded funding is the one that gets its merits across more forcefully because it addresses these unspoken needs and norms as well as the overt rules. The purpose of these pages is to give competitors for Council fellowships and funding a more even start by making explicit some of those normally unspoken customs and needs.

Capture the Reviewer's Attention?

While the form and the organization of a proposal are matters of taste, you should choose your form bearing in mind that every proposal reader constantly scans for clear answers to three questions:

- What are we going to learn as the result of the proposed project that we do not know now?
- Why is it worth knowing?
- How will we know that the conclusions are valid?

Working through a tall stack of proposals on voluntarily-donated time, a committee member rarely has time to comb proposals for hidden answers. So, say what you have to say immediately, crisply, and forcefully. The opening paragraph, or the first page at most, is your chance to grab the reviewer's attention. Use it. This is the moment to overstate, rather than understate, your point or question. You can add the conditions and caveats later.

Questions that are clearly posed are an excellent way to begin a proposal: Are strong party systems conducive to democratic stability? Was the decline of population growth in Brazil the result of government policies? These should not be rhetorical questions; they have effect precisely because the answer is far from obvious. Stating your central point, hypothesis, or interpretation is also a good way to begin: Workers do not organize unions; unions organize workers. The success, and failure, of Corazon Aquino's revolution stems from its middle-class origins. Population growth coupled with loss of arable land poses a threat to North African food security in the next decade.

Obviously some projects are too complex and some conceptualizations too subtle for such telegraphic messages to capture. Sometimes only step-by-step argumentation can define the central problem. But even if you adopt this strategy, do not fail to leave the reviewer with something to remember: some message that will remain after reading many other proposals and discussing them for hours and hours. She's the one who claims that Argentina never had a liberal democratic tradition is how you want to be referred to during the committee's discussion, not Oh yes, she's the one from Chicago.

Aim for Clarity

Remember that most proposals are reviewed by multidisciplinary committees. A reviewer studying a proposal from another field expects the proposer to meet her halfway. After all, the reader probably accepted the committee appointment because of the excitement of surveying other people's ideas. Her only reward is the chance that proposals will provide a lucidly-guided tour of various disciplines' research frontiers. Don't cheat the reviewer of this by inflicting a tiresome trek through the duller idiosyncrasies of your discipline. Many disciplines have parochial traditions of writing in pretentious jargon. You should avoid jargon as much as you can, and when technical language is really needed, restrict yourself to those new words and technical terms that truly lack equivalents in common language. Also, keep the spotlight on ideas. An archeologist should argue the concepts latent in the ceramic typology more than the typology itself, a historian the tendency latent in the mass of events, and so forth. When additional technical material is needed, or when the argument refers to complex ancillary material, putting it into appendices decongests the main text.

Establish the Context

Your proposal should tell the committee not only what will be learned as a result of your project, but what will be learned that somebody else does not already know. It is essential that the proposal summarize the current state of knowledge and provide an up-to-date, comprehensive bibliography. Both should be precise and succinct. They need not constitute a review of the literature but a sharply focused view of the specific body or bodies of knowledge to which you will add. Committees often treat bibliographies as a sign of seriousness on the part of the applicant, and some members will put considerable effort into evaluating them. A good bibliography testifies that the author did enough preparatory work to make sure the project will complement and not duplicate other people's efforts. Many proposals fail because the references are incomplete or outdated. Missing even a single reference can be very costly if it shows failure to connect with research directly relevant to one's own. Proposal writers with limited library resources are urged to correspond with

colleagues and libraries elsewhere in the early stages of research planning. Resource guides such as Dissertation Abstracts International and Social Science Periodical Index are highly recommended. For many disciplines, annual reviews (e.g., Annual Review of Anthropology) offer state-of-the-art discussions and rich bibliographies. Some disciplines have bibliographically-oriented journals, for example Review of Economic Literature and Contemporary Sociology. There are also valuable area studies-oriented guides: Handbook of Latin American Studies, International African Bibliography, etc. Familiarizing yourself with them can save days of research. Powerful bibliographic searches can be run on CD-ROM databases such as the Social Science Citations Index, Social Sciences Index, and Modern Language Association International Index. Also, on-line databases such as CARL and ERIC, available by library or network access, greatly increase your bibliographic reach.

What's the Payoff?

Disciplinary norms and personal tastes in justifying research activities differ greatly. Some scholars are swayed by the statement that it has not been studied (e.g., an historian may argue that no book has been written about a particular event, and therefore one is needed), while other scholars sometimes reflect that there may be a good reason why not. Nevertheless, the fact that less is known about one's own chosen case, period, or country than about similar ones may work in the proposer's favor. Between two identical projects, save that one concerns Egypt and the other the Sudan, reviewers are likely to prefer the latter. Citing the importance of the events that provide the subject matter is another and perhaps less dubious appeal. Turning points, crucial breakthroughs, central personages, fundamental institutions, and similar appeals to the significance of the object of research are sometimes effective if argued rather than merely asserted. Appealing to current importance may also work: e.g., democratic consolidation in South America, the aging population in industrialized countries, the relative decline of the hegemony of the United States. It's crucial to convince readers that such topics are not merely timely, but that their current urgency provides a window into some more abiding problem. Among many

social scientists, explicit theoretical interest counts heavily as a point of merit. Theoretical exposition need not go back to the axiomatic bases of the discipline, proposal readers will have a reasonable interdisciplinary breadth, but it should situate the local problem in terms of its relevance to live, sometimes controversial, theoretical currents. Help your reader understand where the problem intersects the main theoretical debates in your field and show how this inquiry puts established ideas to the test or offers new ones. Good proposals demonstrate awareness of alternative viewpoints and argue the author's position in such a way as to address the field broadly, rather than developing a single sectarian tendency indifferent to alternatives.

Use a Fresh Approach

Surprises, puzzles, and apparent contradictions can powerfully persuade the reviewer whose disciplinary superego enforces a commitment to systematic model building or formal theorizing: Given its long-standing democratic traditions, Chile was expected to return to democracy before other countries in the Southern Cone, and yet . . . Is it because these traditions were already extinct by 1973 or because the assumption on which this prediction was based is false? Everyone expected that One Big Union--the slogan of the movement--would strike and win wage increases for workers. Yet statistical evidence shows just the contrary: strong unions do not strike but instead restrain workers' wage demands.

It is often worthwhile to help readers understand how the research task grows from the intellectual history or current intellectual life of the country or region that generated it. Council committees strive to build linkages among an immense diversity of national and international intellectual traditions, and members come from various countries and schools of thought. Many committee members are interested in the interplay of diverse traditions. In fact, the chance to see intellectual history in the making is another reason people accept committee membership. It is a motive to which proposals can legitimately appeal.

It pays to remember that topics of current salience, both theoretical and in the so-called real world, are likely to be a crowded field. The competitors will be more numerous and the competition less interesting than in truly unfamiliar terrain. Unless you have something original to say about them, you may be well advised to avoid topics typically styled of central interest to the discipline. Usually these are topics about which everyone is writing, and the reason is that somebody else has already made the decisive and exciting contribution. By the time you write your proposal, obtain funding, do the research, and write it up, you might wish you were working on something else. So if your instinct leads you to a problem far from the course that the pack is running, follow it, not the pack: nothing is more valuable than a really fresh beginning.

Describe Your Methodology

Methodological canons are largely discipline-specific and vary widely even within some disciplines. But two things can safely be said about methodological appeal. First, the proposal must specify the research operations you will undertake and the way you will interpret the results of these operations in terms of your central problem. Do not just tell what you mean to achieve, tell how you will spend your time while doing it. Second, a methodology is not just a list of research tasks but an argument as to why these tasks add up to the best attack on the problem. An agenda by itself will normally not suffice because the mere listing of tasks to perform does not prove that they add up to the best feasible approach.

Some popularly-used phrases fall short of identifying recognizable research operations. For example, I will look at the relation between x and y is not informative. We know what is meant when an ornithologist proposes to look at a bird, but looking at a relation between variables is something one only does indirectly, by operations like digging through dusty archive boxes, interviewing, observing and taking standardized notes, collecting and testing statistical patterns, etc. How will you tease the relationship of underlying forces from the mass of

experience? The process of gathering data and moving from data to interpretation tends to follow disciplinary customs, more standard in some fields than in others; help readers from other fields recognize what parts of your methodology are standard, which are innovative. Be as specific as you possibly can be about the activities you plan to undertake to collect information, about the techniques you will use to analyze it, and about the tests of validity to which you commit yourself. Most proposals fail because they leave reviewers wondering what the applicant will actually do. Tell them! Specify the archives, the sources, the respondents, and the proposed techniques of analysis.

A research design proposing comparison between cases often has special appeal. In a certain sense all research is comparative because it must use, implicitly or explicitly, some point of reference. Making the comparison explicit raises its value as scientific inquiry. In evaluating a comparative proposal, readers ask whether the cases are chosen in such a way that their similarities and differences illuminate the central question. And is the proposer in a position to execute both legs of the comparison? When both answers are positive, the proposal may fare particularly well.

The proposal should prove that the researcher either possesses, or cooperates with people who possess, mastery of all the technical matters the project entails. For example, if a predominantly literary project includes an inquiry into the influence of the Tupian language on rural Brazilian Portuguese, the proposal will be checked for the author's background in linguistics and/or Indian languages, or the author's arrangements to collaborate with appropriate experts.

Specify Your Objectives

A well-composed proposal, like a sonata, usually ends by alluding to the original theme. How will research procedures and their products finally connect with the central question? How will you know if your idea was wrong or right? In some disciplines this imperative traditionally means holding to the strict canon of the

falsifiable hypothesis. While respecting this canon, committee members are also open to less formal approaches. What matters is to convince readers that something is genuinely at stake in the inquiry, that it is not tendentiously moving toward a preconceived end, and that this leaven of the unknown will yield interesting, orderly propositions.

Proposals should normally describe the final product of the project: an article, book, chapter, dissertation, etc. If you have specific plans, it often helps to spell them out, because specifying the kind of journal in which you hope to publish, or the kind of people you hope to address, will help readers understand what might otherwise look like merely odd features of the proposal. While planning and drafting your proposal, you should keep in mind the program guidelines and application procedures outlined in the brochure specific to the Council program to which you are applying. If you have specific questions about the program, you may wish to consult with a staff member. Your final proposal should include all requested enclosures and appendices.

Final Note

To write a good proposal takes a long time. Start early. Begin thinking about your topic well in advance and make it a habit to collect references while you work on other tasks. Write a first draft at least three months in advance, revise it, show it to colleagues. Let it gather a little dust, collect colleagues' comments, revise it again. If you have a chance, share it with a seminar or similar group; the debate should help you anticipate what reviewers will eventually think. Revise the text again for substance. Go over the language, style, and form. Resharpen your opening paragraph or first page so that it drives home exactly what you mean as effectively as possible.

Good luck.