

PGR Tips on writing grant applications

If you aspire to a career in academia the ability to generate funding (descriptor C3.1 of the Researcher Development Framework) is a real necessity. Outside academia this ability is also highly prized.

Start small

Start with applications for funding for travel, conferences, equipment and so on during your doctorate, before necessarily tackling grant applications. If you are able to include these successes in your CV this is evidence of your ability to write persuasively.

Be as informed as you can be

Being informed about the research area (what are the emerging hot topics?), literature, funding sources and deadlines, but also about competition and potential panel members will help pitch your application. Use references to show you are familiar with the field.

Perfect the art of persuasion

A grant application is in effect a sales pitch. Make sure it grabs the attention of reviewers who are likely to have many applications competing for their time. This means having a really strong abstract and gripping first sentence (ideally placing your proposal in the big picture). Bear your audience in mind, which is why it is useful to find out who is likely to be on your review panel. Make sure the proposal forms a coherent story (with you as a likely hero) and the described research will contribute towards the overall goal.

Formulate a strong hypothesis

This is something reviewers value very highly. Having a strong hypothesis will prevent your application to be seen as either 'a technique in search of a problem' or 'a fishing expedition'. It may strengthen your case to evaluate other hypotheses against your chosen one.

Be clear on the methodology you intend to use

Explain why you have chosen your methodology and make its use and applicability clear.

Put in detail

A high level of detail will convince reviewers you are an expert in your field and have thoroughly thought through your proposal.

Be realistic

A significant factor you will be judged on is whether the scope of the research you aim to do in the time available, what the results will reveal and your costings are all realistic.

Present preliminary data

Preliminary data you have collected yourself will show you have the technical ability and technology available to generate and interpret the data required and your proposed approach works in reality.

Follow any guidelines to the letter

As there are likely to be many applications, not following the guidelines may be seized upon as a reason to dismiss one with a minimum amount of work.

Edit, edit and edit again

As the word limit is generally restrictive, edit the proposal so every word counts. Make sure there are absolutely no spelling mistakes, make it read smoothly. Any signs of sloppiness in your application will give rise to the idea you may not be thorough in your research either.