Grant writing in ethics & social science
Lessons, Pitfalls, Advice

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Overview

Getting Started:
• Coming up with research ideas, funding sources, planning, building a team

Writing the grant:
• First drafts, feedback, what makes a good grant

Surviving the review Process:
• Reviewers, revisions

The interview:
• How to prepare, what to expect

After the decision:
• Coping with rejection, after funding – what’s next

Questions & shared experiences from the group
Getting started

• How do you come up with a grant idea?
  • Gap analysis
    • Literature review and/or prior research reveals important gaps in what we know
  • Pilot or prelim data
    • Interesting questions that emerged from your prior data or experiences in the field
  • Expert workshop
  • Questions raised by a linked clinical or socio-behavioural study
    • e.g. new tech raises new social/ethical questions
  • Responding to a specific funding call
  • Vivid dream
    • See Benzene
Getting started

• **Types of research questions in Social Science & Ethics**
  - Ethical considerations in ‘X’
    - e.g., machine learning in global health
  - Investigating an ethical idea more deeply
    - e.g., vulnerability, equity, right to health
  - Confirming or challenging suggestive data on a problem
    - e.g., acceptability of broad consent to research
  - Exploring novel approaches to familiar problems
    - e.g., designing and evaluating cartoons for use in HIV disclosure to children
  - Rethinking familiar ethical paradigms
    - e.g., the recent work challenging the idea that pregnant women are a vulnerable population.
  - Identifying ethical, social, cultural barriers/facilitators to implementation of interventions
    - e.g., cultural attitudes toward minimally invasive tissue sampling over autopsy
  - Studying patient/public perceptions about an ethical issue/intervention
    - e.g., young people’s views on the ethics of research
Getting started

• How do you identify a funding source?
  • Addressing a funder’s call on a specific area
  • Submitting a research idea to a general call
  • Read the funder’s priorities or specific call very carefully, BEFORE you start working on the grant. Fit is critical.

• Methodology  Research Question
  • Methods should be adequate to answering your research question(s)
Practical steps in planning a submission

✓ Create a timeline to submission
  ✓ Funder’s deadline
  ✓ Your institutional deadlines: grants office, budget, approvals
  ✓ Your team’s deadlines – circulating for input from collaborators, colleagues, supervisors
  ✓ Letters of support, advisory boards
  ✓ Other institutions involved? What are their deadlines?

✓ Allow time to build teams
  ✓ Early, informal community engagement to assess feasibility/need/interest and to gather helpful insights

✓ Budget planning
  ✓ Be mindful of giving collaborators, supervisors and others time to write letters or contribute to grant
Writing the grant

  • Abstract – succinct summary of project
  • Background – Why is this important? Literature and justification for research
  • Research questions or aims – What questions will you answer?
  • Methods/approach – What will you do? How will you answer your research questions
  • Timeline – what happens when, milestones, outputs
  • Team structure – who is on the team, expertise, why are you the right people?
  • Budget and justification – costing to carry out the work and why necessary
  • Tools or instruments – appendices with draft tools
Writing the grant

What makes a strong proposal?

• Strong idea: high impact, novel, important, interesting
• Clear rationale for the research
• Clear plan: reviewers should be able to imagine what you will be doing
• Methods adequate to answering research questions
• Right person or team for the job
• Institutional support
• Feasibility: sufficient time and resources to answer the questions; right partners and support; recruitment aims are reasonable; no glaring ethical concerns or ethical concerns anticipated and planned for.
Writing the grant

Other characteristics of a strong proposal:

• It is clearly written
• Written for reviewers who might not be experts in your area: no jargon, acronyms spelled out initially and not excessive, definitions for key concepts
• Use headers and first sentences to guide reviewers through your proposal
• Engaging language and some enthusiasm – convey the importance of the work
• Avoid hyperbole – don’t describe as “innovative” unless it really is innovative.
• Figures and diagrams: workflow, team structure, conceptual framework, timeline
• Look at strong examples:
  • Some funders post sample grants on their websites
  • Ask supervisors or senior colleagues if they will share proposals.
Navigating the review process

• Who will my reviewers be?
  • Experts in the field
  • Sometimes announced on funder website or told in advance, sometimes not
  • Outside reviewers often pulled from your citations
  • Don’t forget to do a thorough background review and include key people in the field

• What do reviewers look for?
  • See previous criteria for strong proposal!

• Anticipating questions
  • What are the limitations of your approach or research questions?
  • Most criticisms are fair and track genuine concerns or limitations – acknowledge these and try to anticipate.
The interview: How to prepare

• How to prepare for an interview?
  • Know your proposal inside and out.
  • Know the field/literature and where your proposed research fits within this.
  • Think through and write down possible questions and your answers – especially re limitations.
  • Identify 2-3 key messages to convey.
  • Practice, practice, practice!
    • Schedule a mock interview with colleagues.
    • Practice in front of your partner and/or cat/dog/hamster
  • Look professional but be comfortable – not the day to try a new suit or shoes.
  • Follow your normal routine, GET sleep, allow time to get there, bring water.
During the interview

• What are some strategies for interviewing?
  • BREATHE
  • LISTEN to the questions. If you don’t understand what is being asked, ask for clarification.
  • Don’t be defensive – have confidence in your idea and calmly speak to criticisms/concerns.
  • Don’t show annoyance if one person keeps harping on the same concern – do your best to answer but stand by your approach.
  • Acknowledge constructive criticism and suggestions for improvement.
  • Show some enthusiasm for the idea! (without being weird and manic)
  • Remember your 2-3 key messages – if things get off track, try to come back to these and end on one of these.
  • Begin and end by thanking the panel
What to do if a grant is not funded

Stages of Grief:

**Denial:** Binge watch Netflix and eat pizza

**Disappointment:** Complain to your partner, dog, tolerant friend

**Anger:** “Reviewer #2!#$%@!” Go to boxing class or martial arts

**Sadness:** It’s only a grant, don’t let it get you down.

**Acceptance:**
- Sit down with supervisors/colleagues to discuss reviewer comments
- Realize reviewers maybe had a point...

**Restored faith in universe:**
- Realize: many excellent projects are built on prior rejected grants that have been revised and improved.
- Revise and resubmit for another round or another funder.
- Or, try a different idea and put this on the shelf for later. Sometimes the timing is not right.
What to do if a grant is not funded

• Develop a thick skin – try not to take it personally!

• Reasons grants are not funded
  • Proposal did not meet all criteria for a good proposal discussed above – needs work.
    • Significant question//poor methodology
    • Excellent methods/research questions not novel
    • Issues around feasibility, support, team, cost
  • The proposal was good but the interview did not go well.
  • The competition was just very, very high.
  • Did not fit funder’s priority areas
  • Funder divided on priority areas, or priority areas have changed
  • Funding pulled or cut (more common in gov grants)
  • The planets were not aligned (sometimes we just never know....)
Congratulations!
You got the grant, now what?

• Go out for beers, eat cake!
• Don’t wait for the funds to get started on activities not requiring ethics approval.
• Have job adverts ready.
• Meet with finance team.
• Develop interview tools, instruments.
• Ethics application.
• Conversations with key stakeholders around recruitment and planning.
• Other preparatory activities.
• Timeline is often tight and it helps to be ready to hit the ground running.
Questions & discussion