…write a successful proposal

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The competency to write convincing proposals becomes more and more important for researchers. The reason: Throughout the last decades the percentage of competitive funding for scientific projects and institutions has increased in comparison to direct funding by the state. The idea behind it is ultimately, that competition creates more excellent and innovative science. Even though a lot of the German funding organizations (e.g., DFG, Volkswagenstiftung, the ministries) are financed by tax money, scientists and research organizations have to compete for these funds. So, if you are good at bringing in third party funding, you are attractive for research organizations. Other aspects are, that by writing your own proposals you can do the research you like, build your own scientific profile, and achieve academic independence – all of which are important success factors on your way to a professorship. Now that you know the WHY, what about the HOW?

Structure, structure, structure

A well-structured proposal goes a long way. A concise form of expression is key. Make it as easy as possible for the reviewers to read and understand your proposal. Reviewers rarely have time to spend days reading a proposal, so all

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relevant information should be accessible at first glance.

Base your proposal on a clear and well-thought-out hypothesis or question that the project can either confirm or refute. This gives your proposal an inner logic and clarity in its objective. It makes it not only easier to write but also easier to read. To flesh out the research question/focus, the following questions can help:

- What problem do I want to solve? Which phenomenon do I want to investigate?
- Which question do I not want to answer?
- What preliminary work have I already done?
- What results do I expect?
- What procedure/methods can answer my question?

Based on the research question and the methodology design your work plan. What tasks must be done? How can they be clustered into work packages? How much time will each work package take? To finish the methodology section, describe the work packages and visualize your work plan (e.g., as a Gantt chart).

Your budget can be derived from and justified based on the work plan. Do not make your project cheaper than it is. By all means, don't be too modest. I have seen proposals with great scientific value rejected because the reviewers were wondering how the applicants would make the project work with so few funding. Also, don't make it more expensive than necessary. The reviewers check *appropriateness*.

Once you have set up your research question and work plan, you can start on the other parts of the proposal: Introduction, state-of-the-art section, goals, and impact. Change your perspective and try to put yourself in the reviewers' shoes: What do they need to understand my project? In the state-of-the-art section make sure to define the knowledge gap that your project will fill. Orient the impact part on the goals/vision/philosophy of the funding organization and funding line: With a DFG proposal the impact might be on the scientific community, with European Funding it is often the impact on society and economy, for BMBF projects think about how policy makers could profit from your research.

The abstract is key!

Last write the abstract. It is a key element of your proposal. Staff members of the funding organization and members of the decision making committees will read it and use the abstract for their orientation to decide about your proposal. The peer reviewers who read the whole proposal only give a recommendation! Committee members will also have access to the reviewer's assessments.

Take time to compose the abstract thoroughly. Formulate 1-2 sentences on each of the following points:

1. Context: Connection to "real" world. How does your project tie into everyday problems (e.g., a thousand people die of this illness every day, freshwater is one of the most valuable natural resources, the bond between mother and child is thought to be a strong one)
2. Problem definition: The gap your research will fill.
3. Objective of your proposal.
4. Methodology.
5. Relevance and impact.

Typical reasons for rejection…and success factors

Common reasons to reject a proposal are doubtful feasibility, logical flaws, when the relevance remains unclear or when there is an obvious misfit between the applicant's expertise and the project topic.

All of this can be avoided if you take care in composing your proposal:

Nothing is more frustrating than a good idea that fails because of sloppy execution...so check these boxes:

- Good connection to the funding scheme
- Concise research question
- Methods fitting the research question
- Applicant suiting the project
- Clear structure & comprehensibility
- Appropriateness of work plan & budget
- Convincing relevance and impact

Last but not least: Do not give up!
Since funding rates are declining or stagnating, most scientists will have to expect a negative decision sooner or later. A negative decision does not necessarily mean that your project is bad. Don't be discouraged; you have already invested far too much work. Put the application in the corner for a few days after rejection to build up your bruised ego. Then go back to improving the application with fresh thoughts. If you have received the reviewer's comments, be sure to use this to optimize your (next) application.

If you have topics for the „how to" section we have not yet touched, please email to jGfV@G-f-V.org.