# **How to write your grant proposal**

Although each funding agency will have its own (usually very specific) requirements, there are several elements of a proposal that are fairly standard, and they often come in the following order:

* Title page
* Abstract
* Introduction (statement of the problem, purpose of research or goals, and significance of research)
* Literature review
* Project narrative (methods, procedures, objectives, outcomes or deliverables, evaluation, and dissemination)
* Personnel
* Budget and budget justification

Format the proposal so that it is easy to read. Use headings to break the proposal up into sections. If it is long, include a table of contents with page numbers.

**Title page:** The title page usually includes a brief yet explicit title for the research project, the names of the principal investigator(s), the institutional affiliation of the applicants (the department and university), name and address of the granting agency, project dates, amount of funding requested, and signatures of university personnel authorizing the proposal (when necessary). Most funding agencies have specific requirements for the title page; make sure to follow them.

**Abstract:**The abstract provides readers with their first impression of your project. To remind themselves of your proposal, readers may glance at your abstract when making their final recommendations, so it may also serve as their last impression of your project. The abstract should explain the key elements of your research project in the future tense. Most abstracts state: (1) the general purpose, (2) specific goals, (3) research design, (4) methods, and (5) significance (contribution and rationale). Be as explicit as possible in your abstract. Use statements such as, “The objective of this study is to …”

**Introduction:** The introduction should cover the key elements of your proposal, including a statement of the problem, the purpose of research, research goals or objectives, and significance of the research. The statement of problem should provide a background and rationale for the project and establish the need and relevance of the research. How is your project different from previous research on the same topic? Will you be using new methodologies or covering new theoretical territory? The research goals or objectives should identify the anticipated outcomes of the research and should match up to the needs identified in the statement of problem. List only the principle goal(s) or objective(s) of your research and save sub-objectives for the project narrative.

**Literature review:** Many proposals require a literature review. Reviewers want to know whether you’ve done the necessary preliminary research to undertake your project. Literature reviews should be selective and critical, not exhaustive. Reviewers want to see your evaluation of pertinent works. For more information, see our handout on [literature reviews](http://writingcenter.unc.edu/handouts/literature-reviews/).

**Project narrative:** The project narrative provides the meat of your proposal and may require several subsections. The project narrative should supply all the details of the project, including a detailed statement of problem, research objectives or goals, hypotheses, methods, procedures, outcomes or deliverables, and evaluation and dissemination of the research.

For the project narrative, pre-empt and/or answer all of the reviewers’ questions. Don’t leave them wondering about anything. For example, if you propose to conduct unstructured interviews with open-ended questions, be sure you’ve explained why this methodology is best suited to the specific research questions in your proposal. Or, if you’re using item response theory rather than classical test theory to verify the validity of your survey instrument, explain the advantages of this innovative methodology. Or, if you need to travel to Valdez, Alaska to access historical archives at the Valdez Museum, make it clear what documents you hope to find and why they are relevant to your historical novel on the ’98ers in the Alaskan Gold Rush.

Clearly and explicitly state the connections between your research objectives, research questions, hypotheses, methodologies, and outcomes. As the requirements for a strong project narrative vary widely by discipline, consult a discipline-specific guide to grant writing for some additional advice.

**Personnel:**Explain staffing requirements in detail and make sure that staffing makes sense. Be very explicit about the skill sets of the personnel already in place (you will probably include their Curriculum Vitae as part of the proposal). Explain the necessary skill sets and functions of personnel you will recruit. To minimize expenses, phase out personnel who are not relevant to later phases of a project.

**Budget:** The budget spells out project costs and usually consists of a spreadsheet or table with the budget detailed as line items and a budget narrative (also known as a budget justification) that explains the various expenses. Even when proposal guidelines do not specifically mention a narrative, be sure to include a one or two page explanation of the budget. To see a sample budget, turn to[Example #1](http://writingcenter.unc.edu/handouts/grant-proposals-or-give-me-the-money/#example1) at the end of this handout.

Consider including an exhaustive budget for your project, even if it exceeds the normal grant size of a particular funding organization. Simply make it clear that you are seeking additional funding from other sources. This technique will make it easier for you to combine awards down the road should you have the good fortune of receiving multiple grants.

Make sure that all budget items meet the funding agency’s requirements. For example, all U.S. government agencies have strict requirements for airline travel. Be sure the cost of the airline travel in your budget meets their requirements. If a line item falls outside an agency’s requirements (e.g. some organizations will not cover equipment purchases or other capital expenses), explain in the budget justification that other grant sources will pay for the item.

Many universities require that indirect costs (overhead) be added to grants that they administer. Check with the appropriate offices to find out what the standard (or required) rates are for overhead. Pass a draft budget by the university officer in charge of grant administration for assistance with indirect costs and costs not directly associated with research (e.g. facilities use charges).

**Timeframe:** Explain the timeframe for the research project in some detail. When will you begin and complete each step? It may be helpful to reviewers if you present a visual version of your timeline. For less complicated research, a table summarizing the timeline for the project will help reviewers understand and evaluate the planning and feasibility. See [Example #2](http://writingcenter.unc.edu/handouts/grant-proposals-or-give-me-the-money/#example2) at the end of this handout.

For multi-year research proposals with numerous procedures and a large staff, a time line diagram can help clarify the feasibility and planning of the study. See [Example #3](http://writingcenter.unc.edu/handouts/grant-proposals-or-give-me-the-money/#example3) at the end of this handout.

**REVISING YOUR PROPOSAL**

Strong grant proposals take a long time to develop. Start the process early and leave time to get feedback from several readers on different drafts. Seek out a variety of readers, both specialists in your research area and non-specialist colleagues. You may also want to request assistance from knowledgeable readers on specific areas of your proposal. For example, you may want to schedule a meeting with a statistician to help revise your methodology section. Don’t hesitate to seek out specialized assistance from the relevant research offices on your campus. At UNC, the ~~[Odum Institute](http://www.odum.unc.edu/odum/home2.jsp)~~ provides a variety of services to graduate students and faculty in the social sciences.

In your revision and editing, ask your readers to give careful consideration to whether you’ve made explicit the connections between your research objectives and methodology.

* Have you presented a compelling case?
* Have you made your hypotheses explicit?
* Does your project seem feasible? Is it overly ambitious? Does it have other weaknesses?
* Have you stated the means that grantors can use to evaluate the success of your project after you’ve executed it?

If a granting agency lists particular criteria used for rating and evaluating proposals, be sure to share these with your own reviewers.

**SOME CLOSING ADVICE**

Some of us may feel ashamed or embarrassed about asking for money or promoting ourselves. Often, these feelings have more to do with our own insecurities than with problems in the tone or style of our writing. If you’re having trouble because of these types of hang-ups, the most important thing to keep in mind is that it never hurts to ask. If you never ask for the money, they’ll never give you the money. Besides, the worst thing they can do is say no.

**UNC resources for proposal writing**

Research at Carolina
[http://research.unc.edu](http://research.unc.edu/)

The Odum Institute for Research in the Social Sciences
[~~http://www.irss.unc.edu/odum/jsp/home.jsp~~](http://www.odum.unc.edu/odum/home2.jsp)

The GrantSource Library
<http://research.unc.edu/grantsource/>

UNC Medical School Office of Research
http://www.med.unc.edu/wrkunits/1dean/rschofc/

UNC School of Public Health Office of Research
<http://www.sph.unc.edu/research/>

**Other Resources for Proposal Writing**

Grantwriting Tips from the Donors Forum of Wisconsin
http://www.dfwonline.org/page9123.cfm

Proposal Writing Online Short Course from the Foundation Center
<http://fdncenter.org/learn/shortcourse/prop1.html>

Guide for Writing a Funding Proposal by S. Joseph Levine
<http://www.learnerassociates.net/proposal/>
Detailed guide to proposal writing for the social sciences.

**EXAMPLE #1. SAMPLE BUDGET**

|  |  |  |  |  |
| --- | --- | --- | --- | --- |
| **Item** | **Quantity** | **Cost** | **Subtotal** | **Total** |
| **Jet Travel** |  |  |  |  |
| RDU-Kigali (roundtrip) | 1 |  | $6,100 | $6,100 |
| **Maintenance Allowance** |  |  |  |  |
| Rwanda | 12 months | $1,899 | $22,788 | $22,788 |
| **Project Allowance** |  |  |  |  |
| Rearch Assistant/Translator | 12 months | $400 | $4800 |  |
| Transportation within country |  |  |  |  |
| –Phase 1 | 4 months | $300 | $1,200 |  |
| –Phase 2 | 8 months | $1,500 | $12,000 |  |
| Email | 12 months | $60 | $720 |  |
| Audio cassette tapes | 200 | $2 | $400 |  |
| Photographic and slide film | 20 | $5 | $100 |  |
| Laptop Computer | 1 |  | $2,895 |  |
| NUD\*IST 4.0 Software |  |  | $373 |  |
| Etc. |  |  |  |  |
| Total Project Allowance |  |  |  | $35,238 |
| Administrative Fee |  |  |  | $100 |
| Total |  |  |  | $65,690 |
| Sought from other sources |  |  |  | ($15,000) |
| **Total Grant Request** |  |  |  | **$50,690** |

**Jet travel $6,100**This estimate is based on the commercial high season rate for jet economy travel on Sabena Belgian Airlines. No U.S. carriers fly to Kigali, Rwanda. Sabena has student fare tickets available which will be significantly less expensive (approximately $2,000).

**Maintenance allowance $22,788**Based on the Fulbright-Hays Maintenance Allowances published in the grant application guide.

**Research assistant/translator $4,800**The research assistant/translator will be a native (and primary) speaker of Kinya-rwanda with at least a four-year university degree. He/she will accompany the primary investigator during life history interviews to provide assistance in comprehension. In addition, he/she will provide commentary, explanations, and observations to facilitate the primary investigator’s participant observation. During the first phase of the project in Kigali, the research assistant will work forty hours a week and occasional overtime as needed. During phases two and three in rural Rwanda, the assistant will stay with the investigator overnight in the field when necessary. The salary of $400 per month is based on the average pay rate for individuals with similar qualifications working for international NGO’s in Rwanda.

**Transportation within country, phase one $1,200**The primary investigator and research assistant will need regular transportation within Kigali by bus and taxi. The average taxi fare in Kigali is $6-8 and bus fare is $.15. This figure is based on an average of $10 per day in transportation costs during the first project phase.

**Transportation within country, phases two and three $12,000**Project personnel will also require regular transportation between rural field sites. If it is not possible to remain overnight, daily trips will be necessary. The average rental rate for a 4×4 vehicle in Rwanda is $130 per day. This estimate is based on an average of $50 per day in transportation costs for the second and third project phases. These costs could be reduced if an arrangement could be made with either a government ministry or international aid agency for transportation assistance.

**Email $720**The rate for email service from RwandaTel (the only service provider in Rwanda) is $60 per month. Email access is vital for receiving news reports on Rwanda and the region as well as for staying in contact with dissertation committee members and advisors in the United States.

**Audiocassette tapes $400**Audiocassette tapes will be necessary for recording life history interviews, musical performances, community events, story telling, and other pertinent data.

**Photographic & slide film $100**Photographic and slide film will be necessary to document visual data such as landscape, environment, marriages, funerals, community events, etc.

**Laptop computer $2,895**A laptop computer will be necessary for recording observations, thoughts, and analysis during research project. Price listed is a special offer to UNC students through the Carolina Computing Initiative.

**NUD\*IST 4.0 software $373.00**NUD\*IST, “Nonnumerical, Unstructured Data, Indexing, Searching, and Theorizing,” is necessary for cataloging, indexing, and managing field notes both during and following the field research phase. The program will assist in cataloging themes that emerge during the life history interviews.

**Administrative fee $100**Fee set by Fulbright-Hays for the sponsoring institution.

**EXAMPLE #2: PROJECT TIMELINE IN TABLE FORMAT**

|  |  |
| --- | --- |
| Exploratory Research | Completed |
| Proposal Development | Completed |
| Ph.D. qualifying exams | Completed |
| Research Proposal Defense | Completed |
| Fieldwork in Rwanda | Oct. 1999-Dec. 2000 |
| Data Analysis and Transcription | Jan. 2001-March 2001 |
| Writing of Draft Chapters | March 2001 – Sept. 2001 |
| Revision | Oct. 2001-Feb. 2002 |
| Dissertation Defense | April 2002 |
| Final Approval and Completion | May 2002 |

**EXAMPLE #3: PROJECT TIMELINE IN CHART FORMAT**



**WORKS CONSULTED**