

# The Dos and Don'ts of Proposal

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## Writing

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### The Dos

#### Familiarity Process: The Research before the Research

- ❖ Start early. Know the grant and understand it. This involves a lot of pre-writing research. Spend quality time researching the targeted grant-making organization's mission and funding priorities or interests.
- ❖ Know who funds what in what fields. Get a list and data base on funders.
- ❖ Pay attention to funding cycles for specific themes and projects (where applicable). Example: IFRA – funding cycle for Urban Violence in Africa Project (1993-1995); funding cycle for Youth, Culture and Urban Violence in Africa Project (1993 -1997).
- ❖ Many of the proposals we declined did not pay attention to slight shifts in the funding cycle.

#### Your Best Friend: The Funder's Website

- ❖ This is a compulsory do and its aim is more specific than your initial preliminary research.
- ❖ Here, your target is to determine if the funder's website houses an archive of past winners and accompanying titles and abstracts of previous winning proposals.
- ❖ This is also where you determine the funder's focus.
- ❖ Find the funder's templates for proposals and use them
- ❖ It's ok to contact past winners where contact addresses are provided

## Know the program administrator for the grant

- ❖ The best websites don't always have all the answers. Major funders have program administrators for specific grants. Contact him or her for more information.
- ❖ If you choose to contact the program administrator – phone or email – ask concise and specific questions related to the grant

## Instructions and Guidelines

- ❖ Now you're done with your preliminary research; you have reviewed the funder's website thoroughly and have contacted the program administrator for further help. You are ready to:
- ❖ Review the program's focus in order to ensure that your proposed project fits in.
- ❖ Review the evaluation criteria thoroughly and where available. Ensure that you have addressed each criterion.
- ❖ Pay meticulous attention to formatting requirements: font, page numbers at the required corner of the page; follow requirements for the placement of citations, tables and charts.
- ❖ Example of sorting and gatekeeping at IFRA and IDRC (interns and low-level employees using checkboxes often do the sorting)

## Eligibility Dos

- ❖ Look into citizenship requirements where applicable
- ❖ Ensure compliance with location requirements where applicable. Many grants require grantees to be based in specific continents or specific regions/countries within a continent.

- ❖ Pay attention to nuance when determining your eligibility. Location in the thematic focus of the grant does not always mean you are eligible. Example: IFRA Great Lakes project in the 1990s – we received proposals from scholars based in the Great Lakes region who were not necessarily working on Great Lakes issues.

## Deadlines and Internal Requirements

- ❖ Some grants require internal institutional compliance review which can take several weeks and move through several institutional review rungs. Be sure to give yourself enough time to meet your institutional deadline.
- ❖ The deadline of the funder remains the most important deadline. Check the funder's website frequently for updates as you work on your proposal. Sometimes, they extend the deadline.

## Accessibility and Audience

- ❖ Your proposal must have an educated but broad audience in mind. You must remember that your assessors may not come from your academic field. Avoid abstruse, field-specific jargon as much as possible. (Imaginariness, Chromatism, Chronotope)
- ❖ Clear communication is essential. Your assessors must have a firm handle on the what, where, when, why, and how of your research as quickly as possible.
- ❖ While avoiding abstruse language, be familiar with the current language of grantpersonship: M&E, impact assessment, goals, results, outcomes.

## Highlight your skills

- ❖ Provide specific details about particular sets of skills that could enhance the project. If you have language skills, explain your level of competence relative

to conducting interviews, reading archival documents, and conversing with professionals.

## Sell your affiliations

- ❖ Point out any affiliations with professionals or institutions that you have created in your proposed research location. It enhances the competitiveness of your proposal.
- ❖ Forming alliances and linkages should be an active part of your academic life. Don't wait for conferences to start. Tips on forming partnerships.
- ❖ Many funders are interested in ideas that can have immediate practical applicability to a social or scientific problem. Bear this in mind when sourcing partners and forming alliances.

## The Don'ts

- ❖ You don't pay the piper
- ❖ Don't try to make the funder bend to your ideas. Work within the organizations stated mission and guidelines.
- ❖ You'll be amazed by the anecdotes that program administrators share behind the scenes about applicants phoning and trying to make them bend rules. When you do that, you're marked.

## Solicited versus unsolicited

- ❖ Some organizations like Carnegie operate more on solicited applications and invitations.

## Jargons and phrases

- ❖ Sometimes, discipline-specific phrases and jargons are unavoidable. If you must use them, try to explain them in appositional phrases.

## Political Correctness

- ❖ The use of English in Africa still suffers from insufficient attention to political correctness. Try as much as possible not to use politically incorrect language, especially in the area of gender and identity.

## Recommenders, referees

- ❖ Don't wait until the last minute before approaching your recommenders and referees. Give them ample details.

## Don't be vague, don't exaggerate

- ❖ Experienced grant readers will detect vague, exaggerated or grandiose descriptions.
- ❖ Write clearly, simply, and directly
- ❖ If you use qualifiers such as “significant”, “excellent”, “extremely”, justify them with accessible and verifiable examples.

## Any of these other “don'ts” could undermine your proposal

- ❖ Inadequate literature review.
- ❖ Inadequate description of proposed activities
- ❖ Disparity between proposed activities and relevant literature
- ❖ Underestimation of time-lines, duration, and human resources needed
- ❖ Narrow project team relative to activities and goals proposed.
- ❖ Inadequate description of the roles and tasks of team members

- ❖ Inadequate attention to measurements and metrics: what does success mean to your project and to the funder? Is your definition of success in line with the funder's definition of it?