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# Grant Writing Tips for Success

## “Ten Things You Must Do”

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# Background and Introduction

- **My perspective on grantsmanship**
  - ◆ experience as applicant, awardee, reviewer
  - ◆ ideas from experienced colleagues
  - ◆ approaches from successful applicants
- **Emphasis on information for the novice**
  - ◆ a refresher for the more experienced
  - ◆ new ideas for old hands



# Background and Introduction

- **Acronyms & terms used in this presentation:**
  - ◆ RFA = Request for Applications
  - ◆ RFP = Request for Proposals (= RFA)
  - ◆ Program Announcement = RFA, RFP, solicitation or call for proposals
  - ◆ NIFA = National Institute of Agriculture
  - ◆ AFRI = Agriculture and Food Research Initiative



# Ten Things You Must Do

## 1. Find the right program for you and your idea

- ◆ Main purpose of program (funding priorities) – does idea fit in mainstream or on the fringe?
- ◆ Don't waste time applying to the wrong program... square pegs don't fit in round holes!
- ◆ Eligibility restrictions?



# Ten Things You Must Do

## 2. Become a “student” of the RFA

- ◆ Understand the main goals of the program
- ◆ Understand the instructions outlined in the RFA on how to assemble the proposal
- ◆ Read the RFA !!!



# Ten Things You Must Do

## 3. Develop a timeline for proposal preparation

- ◆ Develop timeline that allows for completion of proposal 4 weeks before submission deadline
- ◆ If you rush preparation of the proposal, it will show – reviewers will notice and not be kind



# Ten Things You Must Do

## 4. Understand criteria for evaluating proposals

- ◆ RFA normally contains the criteria that will be used by reviewers to evaluate your proposal
- ◆ Understand these criteria **BEFORE** you begin preparing your proposal - provides better understanding of where to put greatest efforts during proposal preparation





# Ten Things You Must Do

## 5. Understand review process and reviewers

- ◆ Reviewer may be assigned 10 to 20 proposals
- ◆ Following directions in RFA helps reviewers; not following directions makes them work hard
- ◆ Preparing proposal logically and clearly helps reviewers; not doing so makes them work hard



# Ten Things You Must Do

## 6. Write the proposal logically and clearly

- ◆ Organize proposal according to outline in RFA or evaluation criteria, whichever is most logical
- ◆ Following the prescribed format makes reviewers happy and more generous
- ◆ Making reviewers work hard hurts you



# Ten Things You Must Do

## 7. Prepare budget with a strong justification

- ◆ Unreasonable budgets hurt proposals – create skeptics within reviewer ranks (credibility)
- ◆ Keep budgets within guidelines in the RFA – they are judged on degree of reasonableness



# Ten Things You Must Do

## 8. Obtain critical input from experienced and successful colleagues. Someone who....

- ◆ Talks frankly, bluntly and clearly – don't want someone who beats around the bush
- ◆ Has little sympathy for your ego
- ◆ Has been successful in obtaining grants



# Ten Things You Must Do

9. Fill out forms completely and correctly

10. Allow time for intramural administrative requirements – submit on time

◆ A deadline is a deadline is a deadline!



# Miscellaneous Tips

## 1. Use acronyms sparingly and identify them

- ◆ Acronyms conserve space at expense of clarity
- ◆ Consider including an acronym “key” to which the reader can easily refer



# Miscellaneous Tips

## 2. Write clearly and concisely

- ◆ Avoid words with multiple meanings – e.g., say “because” instead of “since”, “that” instead of “which”, “may” instead of “might”
- ◆ Avoid redundancy except where it is critical – e.g., hypothesis, goals, or outcomes



# Miscellaneous Tips

## 3. Use highlighting of text sparingly, judiciously

- ◆ Bold, italics, underlining, all capitals, etc.
- ◆ Use consistently and primarily when critical to focus the reader on that text





# Miscellaneous Tips

4. Use tables and figures to help illustrate important points
5. Avoid writing narratives “densely”
6. Omit use of external links – proposals must be “self contained”



# Miscellaneous Tips

## 7. Write for both the expert and the novice

- ◆ Not all reviewers will be experts on your proposed topic, but will some have expertise to contribute
- ◆ Write to show the expert that you are an expert and up-to-date on the topic
- ◆ Write so the novice can understand the proposal and to show how important your proposed work is



# Miscellaneous Tips

8. Learn about the review process – best way is by experience (i.e., serving on panels)
  - ◆ Review RFAs to identify programs for which you have expertise
  - ◆ Contact the Program Leader to volunteer – provide a very brief description of your expertise and CV
  - ◆ Repeat annually, as needed



# One Final Thought

A proposal is not a mystery novel !!!

Get to the point....

quickly, clearly, concisely, logically



# One Final Thought

**A proposal is not a mystery novel !!!**

First sentence of the proposal should state what the problem is and why it is important



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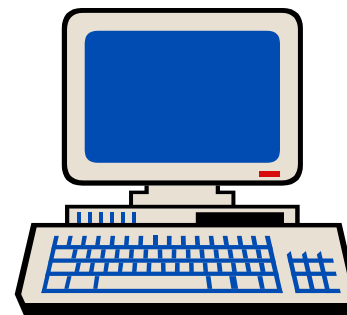
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# What to Do if You Have Questions?



Contact the  
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# The Review Process for NIFA Competitive Programs



# The Review Process

Review process is designed to be:

- Fair
- Impartial





# Peer Review of Competitive Programs

Review by peers and other experts:

- Provide written and / or verbal evaluations



# Proposal Review

## Guidelines for review:

- Ground-rules for Review
- Evaluation Criteria
- Confidentiality
- Conflicts of Interest (COI)



# Panel Manager

## Roles:

- Select panelists
- Assign reviewers to proposals
- Chair the panel meeting
- Assist National Program Leader (NPL) with budget decisions



# Review Panel Members

## Basis of selection:

- Expertise to cover portfolio of applications
- Diverse representation



# Review Panel Members

Balanced to represent breadth of applications:

- Discipline and Commodity
- Geography
- Institution Size and Type
- Professional Rank
- Under-represented groups

Continuity: experience in the review process



# Peer Review

## Proposal assignment for peer-review:

- 3 panelists - 1<sup>o</sup>, 2<sup>o</sup> and 3<sup>o</sup>
- 0 to 6 external *ad hoc* reviewers – used on limited and as-needed basis



# Review Panelists

## Roles:

- Review 10 to 20 proposals
- Provide constructive, unbiased evaluation
- Protect confidentiality
- Avoid conflicts of interest



# Review Ratings

Reviewers provide summary rating:

- Excellent
- Very Good
- Good
- Fair
- Poor





# Panel Review

During review panel meeting:

- Primary reviewer summarizes proposal
- Primary, secondary, and tertiary provide evaluation and critique in order



# Panel Review

During review panel meeting (cont.):

- *Ad hoc* reviews (when obtained) are summarized
- Ratings available to all panelists (except those with COI)



# Post Panel

Return of “review package” to applicant:

- Cover email
- Individual reviews
- Panel summary
- Relative Ranking



# Post Panel Funding Decisions

## Briefing to Supervisor:

- Recommendations made by NPL and Panel Manager
- Generally follow panel's ranking
- Exceptions are very rare and must be strongly justified



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