

Successful research proposals demand effective communication

The Grantsmanship Center's *Research Proposal Workshop*



“ I got it — \$239,000 for three years. It is big money to start and I consider this a clear signal that this workshop helps potential grantees in getting funded, at least it was for me. ”

— *Dario C. Ramirez, M.Sc, Ph.D.*
Free Radical Biology and Aging Research Program
Oklahoma Medical Research Foundation
Oklahoma City, Oklahoma

In the intensely competitive world of research grants, reviewers have only a limited amount of time to determine whether a proposal should be funded. Reviewers quickly look for the hallmark of a strong proposal: an innovative and focused research question with the potential for a significant contribution to the field and to society.

Even if the research design is logical and leads to an answer for the research question, most reviewers will not read the entire research proposal if they do not find the research question to be significant and compelling. When preparing a research proposal, the writer must immediately and concisely convey the excitement and importance of the proposed research project.

Readers must be able to move rapidly through the proposal and instantly understand the focus of the work, the readiness of the investigator and the feasibility of the plan. These are communication tasks that support a strong research approach.

Reviewers find their easiest work with proposals that are clear, logical and convincing. These may require little discussion among members of a review panel because they are obviously appropriate for funding. It does not take long for a reviewer to dismiss proposals that are illogical, have broad research questions, and don't make a strong argument for significance. These insufficient proposals are quickly dealt with in scientific review, often not reaching a full review panel.

The Research Proposal Workshop

For more than 35 years, The Grantsmanship Center has helped tens of thousands of proposal writers strengthen logical flow and argument in their grant proposals. In 2002, in partnership with Sigma Xi, The Science Research Society, The Grantsmanship Center used its grant proposal model to develop the *Research Proposal Workshop*.

This highly interactive workshop engages participants in active thinking about how to frame their research questions, discuss the significance of their work for society and their own fields, distill the proposal into an effective abstract, and clearly convey the skills of the investigator.

The curriculum is designed to train researchers to incorporate planning into their writing and to help participants draft viable proposals capable of being carried out by their organizations, which meet the needs of the scientific community and larger public. Often, success in obtaining grant funding is an essential career skill for faculty at research and academic institutions.



The Quest to Answer the Question. The workshop is customized to be intimate, hands-on, and focused on the research needs of the investigator. This approach has been shown to be effective for grantseekers in the bench and field sciences, clinical programs, social sciences, and other areas of research.

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It's official: I got the grant — first round of the Pathway to Independence awards too! If I hadn't learned how to focus my specific aims, my grant proposal could have been interpreted as a giant fishing expedition that no one would fund! I am deliriously happy and feel like I have just won the lottery.

Thanks for an excellent class!

— Michelle Block, Ph.D.
Department of Anatomy & Neurobiology
Virginia Commonwealth University Medical Campus
Richmond, Virginia

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The *Research Proposal Workshop* has been presented at universities, health organizations, and a National Institute of Health center. Participants have included researchers, university and college faculty, post-doctoral fellows and doctoral students. This workshop is specifically designed for those who seek funds to conduct research in areas of scientific and social significance.

Feedback from workshop participants has highlighted the importance of the workshop in:

- Articulating focused and manageable research questions
- Strengthening significance statements
- Improving strategies for identifying the skills and capacities of the investigator
- Organizing the proposal into a logical sequence of ideas that answer the questions reviewers will be asking
- Identifying potential funding sources, and understanding the need to respond to the demands of specific grantmakers.

The Grantsmanship Center Approach

The central concept of The Grantsmanship Center's approach to proposal development is that every research proposal will have a predictable set of components. These components, regardless of their specific order, reflect a well thought out research plan. Planning first, then writing the proposal, leads to effective proposals.

The *Research Proposal Workshop* leads participants through the process of examining how they can use these components to strengthen their planning and to ensure a logical flow as they develop proposals that will inspire funding.

The Question:

- What is the overall point of the research?
- What are the research aims?
- What hypothesis will be tested?

Significance:

- Why is the question deserving of study?
- Why is it important to the field?
- What is the broader significance?

Present Knowledge:

- What preliminary studies have been completed?
- What does the published literature document?

Research Design:

- What is the overall strategy for the study?
- Are the protocols for testing the question well known or innovative?

Methods:

- How will the design be carried out?

The Researcher:

- What publications or studies document the researcher's ability to carry out the study?

Resources:

- What equipment and laboratory facilities are available? Are enough subjects available for a social science study?

The Future:

- What will happen after the study?
- How will it be disseminated?
- What future studies might follow?

The Budget:

- What will it cost? Why will it cost that much?

Outline of the *Research Proposal Workshop*

The *Research Proposal Workshop*, a customized training, is adapted to the specific backgrounds, needs and experience of participants. The workshop addresses research proposals to obtain funds for scientific research, social research or both.

The workshop explores a number of fundamental issues:

- Using key elements (the abstract, title and research aim sections) in marketing crucial concepts
- The major factors that affect success in a competitive process
- How to strengthen each section of the proposal
- Review processes and how feedback leads to funding
- Developing relations with grant makers

The workshop engages participants in extensive small group work on projects brought by class members. These work sessions are supported with lecture, discussions and demonstrations.



Effective Training for Intense Competition. Research grant awards are a critical factor in the success of many trials and breakthrough discoveries. Our proposal writing workshop is team-taught by expert trainers who understand what can make a proposal more competitive and more likely to be completely reviewed.

Workshop staff

The *Research Proposal Workshop* is team taught, giving participants the greatest advantage in tangible, results-based learning. Our trainers are experienced grant professionals with substantive experience specifically in the field of research.

CHARLES R. PUTNEY, MA, who designed the workshop curriculum, has been in the grants field for more than 25 years and has taught for The Grantsmanship Center for two decades. He has held positions in higher education, mental health, cancer research and public health. As a consultant he has been involved in securing more than \$50 million in grant funds during the past 15 years.

CHARLES F. HOWARD, JR. PhD, did his graduate work at the University of Wisconsin-Madison followed by postdoctorate study at Brandeis University. He conducted research at the Oregon Regional Primate Research Center for over two decades, and then served as a research administrator at Western Michigan University and the University of Northern Colorado. During this time, he wrote grant proposals to governmental and private sources to support his own research, aided faculty, and taught workshops and classes on writing grant proposals, and has served as a reviewer for research grant funders. As a consultant, he writes grant proposals for governmental and nonprofit organizations seeking funds to conduct projects fulfilling their mission.



Customized training from The Grantsmanship Center focuses on particular subject areas or institutional concerns. Many groups—including colleges and universities; federal, state, and local government agencies; and nonprofit associations, coalitions, and umbrella groups—have sponsored customized training for staff and constituents. Customized training is generally conducted at the sponsor's site. Recent sponsors, including those for research:

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For more information about sponsoring the *Research Proposal Workshop*, contact:

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