

FUNDING YOUR BEST IDEAS: A 12-STEP PROGRAM

Joan Straumanis,
Former FIPSE Program Officer

Part I: Before Writing

1. Innovate-and if you can't think of anything brand new, do something unexpected. This is your angle; now feature it.
2. Do your homework. Find your niche. What are others doing about this issue? Show that you know, and place your project within this context.
3. Build a team. Mix things up. Build and cross bridges-among departments, disciplines and schools and colleges. Include students and administrators. Be generous: share work and ownership. Appoint an advisory committee of famous people in your field-to get a head start on dissemination-but don't give them much work to do, and you won't need to pay them very much.
4. Find the right funding agency. Know agency interests, culture, and style. Submit applications to more than one agency (but, of course don't accept multiple grants supporting the same activities).
5. Use the phone. Call a program officer, briefly summarize your idea, and prepare specific questions. Take the program officer's advice very seriously, but exercise your own best judgment. Some agencies are more directive than others.

Part II: While Writing

6. Use a journalistic writing style. Use the "W" words of journalism: *Who, what, when, where, why, and how*. Also use bullets, lists, outlines, diagrams, tables. Don't obsess on any topic, even if important. Make it interesting; let every sentence do a job. Assume that your reviewer is reading in bed, falling asleep-which is very likely true.
7. Follow guidelines to the letter. Keep them before you as you write (but don't quote them back to the agency). Match headings in the proposal to headings in the guidelines so the reader doesn't have to hunt for needed information. Use "signposts": *I am about to explain why . . . I have just argued that . . .*
8. Build in continuation, evaluation, and dissemination. Factory installed, not an add-on and not postponed to the last year. Continuation plans are an indicator of institutional commitment. Evaluation should be independent and objective, but doesn't need to meet standards of the Journal of Psychometrics-use common sense. What would you want to know about the success of an idea before you would consider adopting it? Evaluate "politically" - i.e., with an eye toward later publicity. What would you want to see in headlines? Note the difference between passive and active dissemination. (The first disseminates admiration, not innovation.)

9. Watch the bottom line. Share costs. Know how to cut costs without hurting the project: request replacement salaries instead of released time, charge actual instead of estimated benefits, follow agency recommendations on indirect costs.
10. Leverage funds. Solicit funds from third parties, contingent on grant funding. This can be done in advance (to beef up cost share and make proposal more attractive), as well as after project is funded.
11. Get a sharp (toothed) reader. Best: someone unfamiliar with your field, your project. Not an editor/proofreader. Have them read final draft without taking notes. Then ask them to tell you—from memory—what the project will do, how it will do it, why it is significant, and how it is different. Rewrite proposal if these answers aren't clear and correct, or they don't flow effortlessly.
12. Write the abstract last. Put in your key innovation. Write 3 versions: one page (first page of proposal, whether requested or not), one paragraph (if requested), and one line, the proposal title—which you should think of as a mini-abstract (descriptive and intriguing). Don't repeat abstract or proposal text. Prepare for the possibility that some sleepy reviewer might read only the abstract.

Other good advice:

- Request reviews. Use the phone to ask agency staff why the project was or was not funded. If you are rejected, you can always try again.
- If you get funded, let your agency help you. Brainstorming. Troubleshooting. Running interference with administration. Leveraging funds. Making you famous.
- Help your agency.