

DISCO/PODS 2022

Proposal Writing &
Reviewing

The Basics

- A proposal starts with a question or an idea, not a deadline
- Know your audience (the agency/program, the reviewers, and the process)
- Don't wait until the last minute to submit – coordinate with your authorizing officials early on!



Proposal- versus paper-writing

- Persuasive versus expository writing
 - Paper: what you did, what it means
 - Proposal: what do you want to learn, why is it important, how do you propose to go about it (also: what if it doesn't work? What if it's different than I expect?)
- A proposal is not just a paper that doesn't have results and conclusions yet
- Revision/resubmission for proposals is generally not as linear a process as it is for papers

Funding Agencies/Programs

- Continuum of funding sources, with some overlap, from “send us your best idea” to “help us improve our services”
- Within a particular funding agency, multiple opportunities and proposal types exist
- Most agencies/programs have web sites listing recent and current awards – use this to get a “feel” for the program
- Talk to program managers if you have questions

The Review Process

- Most funding agencies conduct peer review using ad-hoc (“mail”) reviews and/or review panels
- The scientists reviewing your proposal are your main audience: understand who they are
- Other factors beside external reviews can also go into a decision, e.g. relevance to agency mission, portfolio balance...

Volunteer to be a reviewer, become part of the process

Where to find information

- Agency documents/proposal solicitation
- Your institution's sponsored projects office
- Program managers
- Your colleagues

Note this is an ordered list!

Putting together your proposal

- Lay out the main idea and goals early on. Be clear about how your study fits in to the big picture – ask, and answer, “So what?”
- Set up the problem with a strong background section to motivate the proposed work, but don’t overdo it – hyperbole is rarely rewarded
- Describe your approach; link your methods to your stated goals, hypotheses and science questions
- Don’t end abruptly after describing your methods. Circle back, remind the reader of your motivation, and explain how the work you’ve just described will lead to answers and scientific advances

Don't forget the rest

- Address additional review criteria and required sections (broader impacts, data management, relevance to agency mission, special solicitation requirements)
- Pay attention to all required components/documents – there is a reason for all of them
- Make sure the proposal budget is realistic relative to the statement of work, and the work plan can be accomplished within the proposed period of performance



Your reviewers

- Reviewers are busy – try to make their job easier
- Reviewers look for logical progression of thought and have little patience with random walks
- Not all reviewers will be experts in your field – this will be especially true of panelists, and in multi- or interdisciplinary calls
 - Don't assume they know why your work is important; help them understand
 - At the same time, don't drown them in jargon and details in 10 pt font
- Reviewers try to do their best – listen to what they are trying to tell you, even if it's not always nice

My proposal was declined: what next?

- The initial reaction is usually emotional – that's understandable!
- It is tempting to look for flaws in the reviews instead of objectively analyzing the feedback
 - Take your time
 - Start with the high-level feedback/advice; including information provided by the program manager
 - Focus on the comments not the ratings
 - Try not to take comments personally
- What about resubmission?

My proposal was funded: what next?

- Celebrate – this is great news!
- Read the reviews and other feedback – they probably contain useful advice
- Know your obligations
- Keep in touch!



When you are the reviewer

- Please respond to review requests, whether it's a yes or a no
- Don't be afraid to ask for extra time if you need it
- Ask us early if you have questions about conflicts of interest
- Review the actual proposal
- Be constructive
- Explain and back up your overall rating
- Ask us for feedback if you would like it