



# How to write a successful grant proposal!

EPSRC ICT ECR Workshops – Sheffield and Cardiff 2017

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## Part 1: Writing a strong proposal

- Principles of grant writing
- Some common pitfalls
- Group exercise - elevator pitch

## Part 2: Writing a strong review response

- Dos and Don'ts of rebuttals
- Approaches for success
- Group exercise – reviewer response



There is no magic formula. Remember, the standard is very high. The typical success rate (number of funded applications vs total number of applications) is relatively low. (Between 10-30%)

From EPSRC perspective, a grant should:

- ■ ■ Be high quality science/engineering
- ■ ■ Have appropriate levels of risk and ambition
- ■ ■ Align with the UK's strategic priorities (Understand what they are!)
- ■ ■ Contribute to the health of the UK's existing research base (Who else is in this space?)
- ■ ■ Show a realistic pathway to high impact (Note the emphasis on pathway)
- ■ ■ Aim to provide good value for money (Appropriate resources)
- ■ ■ Request enough but not too much (Too little and you lack credibility)
- ■ ■ Demonstrate the necessary track record and skills needed to deliver the grant

These are a minimum! Grants which do not meet these criteria risk being rejected prior to peer review!



## Ambition and Vision

- ■ ■ A good idea is necessary, but it is not sufficient on its own
- ■ ■ Don't just respond to a call – try to address a real problem
- ■ ■ Explain why your proposal is ambitious, challenging and high quality
- ■ ■ Explain why this work is important to society, the research community and yourself
- ■ ■ Get the level of ambition right and be clear about what your project will address
  - ■ ■ You aren't going to solve the world energy storage problem with a chemistry project about fundamental chemistry!



## Developing your Ideas into a Proposal

- ■ ■ Make sure you are doing this work because it is important to you
- ■ ■ Give adequate time to all parts of the proposal including Pathways to impact, which are a way to explain and sell your idea
- ■ ■ Read as many others' proposals as you can get your hands on
- ■ ■ Understand your target community and build relationships with them
- ■ ■ Allocate time to establish and curate partnerships before submitting the proposal
- ■ ■ Attend seminars, and present your ideas and get critiques
- ■ ■ Act with Integrity
- ■ ■ Embrace Diversity



## Method and Resources

- Put as much thought into your methodology as your hypothesis
- If appropriate, demonstrate that your methodology is novel
- Decide carefully what level of resources are needed to address the problem
- Cost what you need and can justify, not what you can get away with, and not as cheaply as possible
- Provide evidence to show that you have the skills to address the problem, or that you will work with collaborators who have these skills



## Impact and Importance

- Take time to write an impact plan that is exciting and the pathway to delivering it
- State clearly the problem which is being addressed and why it is important to strategic priorities
- From the first page, the problem being addressed and its importance should be clear



## Nuts and Bolts

- ■ ■ Carefully proof read your document
  - ■ ■ Typographical errors, poor English, poor grammar and rushed presentation irritate the reviewers and reflect badly on the applicant and can cast doubt on the quality of the work
- ■ ■ Throughout the proposal, ensure you are writing with clarity of expression
- ■ ■ Ask senior colleagues to critique everything you write
- ■ ■ Get as many people to critique your proposal as possible
- ■ ■ Test your hypothesis with colleagues
- ■ ■ Seek constructive criticism from peers (senior and equal) on the idea and on the written proposal





## Approaches for long-term success

- ■ ■ Understand that no one has a 100% success rate, but that a good idea is worth pursuing
- ■ ■ Learn from your mistakes and don't focus on the panel results
- ■ ■ Develop your ideas independently from your successes or failures; decide what is important and do it
- ■ ■ Upcycle rejections (remember that direct resubmissions are not allowed, but the same core idea may be reused)
- ■ ■ Use the reviewers' comments to improve your work



■ ■ ■ In table groups, led by helpers

As a group, come up with a 1 minute elevator pitch for a proposal that you could defend at a competitive panel of similar pitches.

You should explain:

■ ■ ■ The aim and vision of the project

■ ■ ■ The importance of the proposal

■ ■ ■ The plans for making an impact

Time: 15 minutes



## General Advice:

- ■ ■ Rebuttals should be addressed to the panel, (not the reviewers)
- ■ ■ Maintain a positive tone, avoid aggressive or dismissive comments at all costs
- ■ ■ Don't blame or attack the reviewers. Their criticisms are valuable feedback from an outside perspective
- ■ ■ Respond to all of the criticisms
- ■ ■ Do not waste time repeating the positive points, the panel can read the reviews!
- ■ ■ Even highly positive reviews can contain negative points or questions that need to be addressed



Specific response examples:

*“The novelty is not clear”*

Good Response:

Plainly and clearly explain the novelty of this project and where it differs from other key work in the field. Quote from the proposal text if it clearly supports your point.

Bad Response:

Attacking the reviewer

Insisting novelty without evidence.

Unable to succinctly explain differences with other work.

Restating sentences from the case for support.



*“This is over-ambitious”*

Good Response:

Refer to the workplan, explain the risks and how they will be managed, explain how the impacts will be made throughout the grant, explain why the ambition is necessary for this project.

Bad Response:

Insist that all research requires risk or high ambition.

Ignore or dismiss the criticism.



*[Reviewers have conflicting views]*

Good Response:

Consider both perspectives and offer a balanced argument against the negative comments, using the positive ones for support.

Bad Response:

Point to the positive reviews and dismiss the negative ones.  
Complain that the reviews are inconsistent.



■ ■ ■ In table groups, led by helpers

As a group, discuss some “good” and “bad” approaches to responding to the following criticisms:

*“The nature of the models and what they will actually do is unclear.”*

*“I don't see why the trip to France is justified within the current proposal”*

*“The proposed questions appear to be of a rather incremental nature”*

*“Engagement with ARM is missing and would probably be feasible”*

*“I think the pathways are a little weak. I was hoping to see something more interesting”*

Bonus question: how would you avoid these criticisms in the first place?

Time: 15 minutes



Summing up, we have covered:

Part 1: Writing a strong proposal

- Principles of grant writing

- Some common pitfalls

Part 2: Writing a strong review response

- Dos and don'ts of rebuttals

- Approaches for success

Remember: there is no magic formula. Grants are competitive. Success rate is 20-30%

