Writing Competitive, Outstanding Proposals

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5 Easy Steps to Great Proposals!

1. Develop a Good Idea
2. Do Your Homework
3. Develop a Strategy
4. Prepare the Proposal
5. Understand the Probabilities
#1 Develop a Good Idea

- Must have an exhaustive knowledge of the relevant academic literature
  - In my view, most overlooked aspect of proposal development
  - Ridiculously easy to locate relevant literature with today’s electronic resources
- Deliberately cultivate a creative mindset
  - Read trade journals, farm magazines, popular articles
  - Attend extension or industry meetings
  - Visit farms, companies and organizations to talk to people
  - Place yourself in a “hypothesis rich” working environment
Invaluable References on Creativity and Research


Noticing, recognizing, and experiencing surprise aid scientific discovery
(Ladd, 1991)
#2 Do Your Homework

- First understand the nature of the competition
  - Subject matter focus
  - Basic or applied research orientation (NRI vs. RMA tools)

- Visit grant decision-makers in advance
  - USDA officials in DC; commodity organization state board or director
  - Obtain intelligence on key points of emphasis or subject matter areas
  - Signals seriousness to granting agency

- If at all possible, find out the makeup of the review panel
  - Background
  - Views
  - Reversing the jury selection process!
**Do Your Homework**

- Obtain and thoroughly examine winning proposals in the most recent rounds of competition if at all possible
  - Models are often very useful
- Attend grant workshops
  - Many campuses offer NIH, NSF workshops
  - CSREES/USDA is offering 2 grant writing workshops in 2005-06
#3 Develop a Strategy

- Have a list of ideas to draw upon
  - How can my ideas fit the research call in the RFP?
  - What new ideas do I need to think about given the research call in the RFP?

- Understand your personal comparative advantage and focus on RFPs that are the best match
  - I have never received an NRI grant
  - Almost all of my grants are more applied and outreach oriented

- Carefully develop partnerships
  - Within your own department
  - Other departments

- THINK BIG!
  - Maybe except for assistant professors
#4 Prepare the Proposal

- Follow the format in the RFP as closely as possible
  - Organization
  - Length
  - Formatting
- Make the job of the reviewer as easy as possible
- Get the details right for all parts of the proposal
  - All forms filled out correctly
  - Submit forms in the correct order
  - Little things may have a disproportionate influence at the margin
  - Just as in journal article publishing, a quality signaling problem
Writing the Proposal

• Well-written and carefully edited proposals are a must
  – Often not the case due to time pressures, so start writing early
  – Have colleagues review if possible

• Reference I find helpful on writing:
#5 Understand the Probabilities

- Behavioral psychologists have clearly shown that we are all over-confident
  - If acceptance rate is 20%, expect to submit 5 proposals before 1 is accepted
- A “Matthew Effect” likely operates that makes it difficult for young or unknown researchers to obtain funding
  - Teaming up with better known colleagues to start out may be helpful
- BE PERSISTENT
  - AgMAS project: More than 10 proposals rejected before first large grant