

Demystifying the World of Funding

Written by Jennifer Wofford

The mystery, possibility, and anxiety associated with applying for funding can be traced in many situations directly to the grant writing process. Sometimes it seems as though *everybody else* is receiving some kind of external support – whether **travel stipends** for conference presentation or individual research, **graduate fellowships** that support pilot studies, or **extensive funding** for departmental research projects. This text has been designed to take some of the mystery – and some of the anxiety – out of finding funding for research.

The processes of knowledge sharing around grants and funding vary from discipline to discipline. Graduate students' dependence on outside funding is also differentiated based on academic field. Students in the natural and social sciences, for example, frequently work as research fellows under the direction of members of the faculty whose own place at Penn rests on their ability to self-support through grants. These students might learn the grant writing process much earlier than their peers in the humanities. Graduate students in History or English may not be compelled to seek grant funding until they begin the dissertation process or are hoping for a post-doctoral fellowship. However, regardless of discipline, there is typically no formal learning process for the graduate student in need of research support. As a result, those who succeed in getting their research funded seem somehow better informed, more advanced academically, *smarter*. But this need not be the case.

The grant process can be broken down into *before*, *during*, and *after* the funding of a research project. Funding has a lot to do with the social relationship between a researcher and a funding institution, on and off the page, at all stages of this process. As much rests on how this relationship is maintained *during* funding, as on how to propose research to get funding. During two- and three-year research projects, for example, funding organizations usually require timely reports on the progress of the research project before the remainder of funds will be distributed. This is particularly the case with government funding. The same applies to the period after a research project is completed as funding organizations frequently make long-standing commitments to projects or individuals. Therefore, there really is no *after* in the grant process if future funding is an issue.

Getting through the *before* - that is, the period before funding has been obtained - is the main objective of this CD. As you make your way through the different parts of the CD, it will be useful to keep two primary considerations in mind - grant funding as knowledge of a **genre** of writing, and grant funding as a **research process**. "Genre" here should be taken to mean structure, in much the same way 'structure' is used in literary analysis. Structure and content are inextricable on many levels, yet necessarily differentiated into parts of a whole; in this way separate elements of a literary work can be discussed in relationship to one another. As with some works of literature, a grant proposal is separated into distinct, often numbered sections. These sections have standardized names that are recognizable to fundraising and non-profit professionals. Although this separation into parts may be more artificial than with literary work, the

parts can work together in a well-written grant to form an organic “whole.” The objective of a grant proposal is persuasion, and when a grant is particularly well written, all elements of the structure work together toward this single effect.

In addition to understanding what information each section should contain in a grant proposal, proposal writers must also consider the rhetoric of persuasion, including issues of **ethos** (the author’s character as represented in the text), **pathos** (the emotions the proposal inspires in the reader), and **logos** (the rationale, or the logic of argument and outcomes, or questions of research design). Tied directly to the format of the proposal is its persuasive design, which incorporates all three rhetorical elements. Both aspects – format and rhetoric - comprise the ‘genre’ of the grant.

As a grant writer, I spent many months learning to interpret “**requests for proposals**” (RFPs), and the vocabulary of grant writing, while I was simultaneously writing grants and meeting deadlines. My experience as a grant writer contributes to my belief that the proposal itself is the dominant index of an applicant’s success in receiving funding. Applicants who do not follow an RFP’s specific instructions about proposal development may be considered unworthy or incompetent, unsound investments according to foundations and government funders. This electronic guide therefore facilitates the interpretation of RFPs, and focuses heavily on standard proposal formats and vocabularies.

In addition to the genre of grant proposals, a second important element of grant writing is an awareness of the **funding environment**. While in a grant writing office, I spent more time socializing myself to the funding environment than on learning the

grant genre. The cycle of deadlines, the various missions of each funding organization, and how to approach them, are all elements of the grant writing research process. The non-profit (government, foundation, university) sector is a dynamic field, and these constant changes prohibit any fixed authority or expertise.

For example, funding organizations such as the National Science Foundation (NSF) consider themselves **mission-based**. They design objectives aligned with their mission, and then ask researchers, educators, and scientists, to design proposals that will advance these objectives. Those individuals or teams who best persuade NSF program officers that the research or development route will reach the organization's goal will receive funding. Many times, this mission and its associated objectives will not change from year to year. Funding organizations often have sub-programs tied directly to an overarching institutional objective, and each sub-program publishes one or more RFPs annually. Based on this cycle, researchers begin to anticipate deadlines and rely on proposals and research designs from previous years to respond to new requests. However, just when the research cycle seems stable and a researcher tries to anticipate an impending deadline, the organization shifts its mission and focus; the research project is no longer relevant.

Added to this fluid dynamic is the reality that there is no single clearinghouse or database that provides access to every available RFP or funding opportunity. Hundreds of Internet sites exist with links and searchable databases that can provide insight into what's available, but no single link provides comprehensive access. This disconnectedness can sometimes be overwhelming and prevent students from

beginning the grant research process. That said, it is important to keep in mind that it takes years for researchers to feel confident that they are aware of all the opportunities available to them, and a grant writer's inability to grasp the whole need not be a reason for inaction.

Jennifer Wofford, Ph.D. is a graduate of the University of Pennsylvania's program in Reading/Writing/Literacy, and the Dean of the School of Continuing Studies at Chestnut Hill College in Philadelphia, PA. Jennifer's experience in grant writing includes working in a development office on corporate, foundation, and government grants, and designing curriculum to teach grant writing at the undergraduate and graduate levels. Jennifer's dissertation explores grant writing as an alternative academic literacy and curriculum for connections between classrooms and communities.