How to write a successful grant proposal?

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Dean of Research
## Funding organisations

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Philosophy

**DFG**
- Bottom-up, self-governed, science-driven

**BMBF**
- Mostly Top down calls with defined topics

**EU**
- Top-down: Horizon 2020
- Bottom up: ERC (Start-up grant, advanced grant)

**Foundations**
- disease-related, group-specific

**Industry**
- Product specific / pre-competitive
Successfull proposal: Know your status!

**Beginner** (no publications yet):
- Research programmes for young academics (foundations, industry, intramural…)
- Important: get a first authorship publication!

**Already some publications**
- Junior proposals, foundations

**(Some) good publications**
- DFG

**Some good to very good publications**
- ERC
Outline of the proposal

- Summary
- State of the art
- Goal
- Work programme
- Financial plan and time schedule
- Other requirements
Summary

- Write the summary at the beginning, and then again when you have finished the proposal!
- Some reviewers only read the summary, therefore it has to be concise and every word has to be on the right place!
- Keep in mind the requested length of the text
  max. 15 lines
  => 2 lines introduction
  => 7 lines aims
  => 3 lines methods
  => 3 lines outlook
State of the Art

- Discuss the current literature (to show that you are familiar with the topic)
- Never cite only your own work and neglect competitors
- Never neglect literature, that is not fitting to your hypothesis
- Be as short as possible, but as detailed as necessary
- Diagrams are very helpful
Previous work / Aims

Your own preliminary work

- Attach important papers
- Attach your progress report in case of a renewal proposal

Aims:

- Concise presentation of aims / clear hypothesis
  (what do you want to show or falsify or find out and why)
- The question/hypothesis should be new and original
Work programme

- **Most important part of your proposal** (50% of the volume)
- Is the work programme original and new, but not overloaded?
- Workpackages, as described in „aims“, should be apparent
- Logical composition and clear arrangement of your proposal
- Do not forget to refer to your time schedule
- Show alternatives: what will happen, when your hypothesis is failing? Show escape strategies
Work programme - weak points

- Your work plan is too ambitious
- There is no graphical timeline
- No milestones
- „Wishful thinking“
- No risk assessment
- Problems not seen or no alternatives shown
- Unclear methods (advantages or disadvantages not discussed)
- Interdisciplinarity not shown
Requested costs

- **Personnel costs**: are there experienced candidates for the applied position?
- **Scientific hardware**: attach offers of tender
- **Consumables**: apply for realistic amounts of consumables
- **Core facilities**: apply for extra money for animal housing or other core facility services (microscopy, sequencing, etc.)
- **Travelling costs**: on average € 1,500 per year and scientist
- **Publication costs**: max. € 750 per year
- **Other costs**: p.e. costs for test persons or for animal housing
Requested costs - questions

- Are the financial demands in a **realistic range**?
- Are the personnel costs and all the other costs well justified and **correspond** to your work programme?
- The DFG is funding project-specific supplementary staff, but **no basic equipment** (e.g. computers)
List of publications

- **No mix** of different types of publication styles
- Specify peer-reviewed original publications, abstracts of talks, abstracts of posters, and contributions to books **separately**
- **Point out** publications relevant to your proposal
Additionally required documents

- **Letter of Support** from your advisor and/or host organisation
- **Cooperation agreements of** project partners
- **Acceptance from the Ethics commission** (human material, stem cells, experiments with animals, data protection)
- Some **documents** have to be **signed** (dean, head of the institute/clinic)

keep enough time buffer!
Formalities

- Follow the current (!) forms and data sheets
- **Language?** (English or German?)
- Paging and headlines for a better structure
- Consider the **font size** and the **line spacing** (should be easily readable)
- **Charts and diagrams** for a better visualisation
- Consider the **form of submission** (electronic, number of paper versions)
- Absolutely keep in mind: **deadline**
Formalities

- **Re-read** the grant proposal carefully
- **Assume the role of a reviewer** and try to make his work as easy as possible
- In case of questions: **ask the funding organisation**
- Stay within the word count (do not cheat!)
- Control typography and grammar
- **Keep it simple!**
- Use clearly marked subheadings
- Be careful with the method to apply for two position to be sure to get one granted
Common criticisms

- No clearly defined hypothesis, „fishing“
- „descriptive“
- overambitious, not feasible to the requested funding
- „Wishful thinking“: no risk management
- Proposal does not fit to the career stage of the applicant
- Proposal is written sloppy
Tipps, tricks, failures… (DFG)

- When do I call the DFG? ➔ Every time I have a question.
- How do I find out who my contact person? ➔ DFG-Homepage
- When am I ready to submit an application? ➔ If you have published preparatory work, a hypothesis-driven work program with an appropriate duration of the research project and you have been in contact with your DFG contact person.
Tipps, tricks, failures… (DFG)

- **Applicants**: who and how many? ➔ Every applicant has to provide a substantial contribution to the proposal and must prove experience for the research field; there have to be very good, comprehensible reasons for more than three applicants.

- **Length of the proposal?** ➔ as short as possible without neglecting important information; in general not more than 25 pages.
Tipps, tricks, failures… (DFG)

- The proposal should be submitted in a **final version**; during the review process there is no chance for amendments.
- What you can hand in later are **newly accepted papers** or very important new scientific results.
- The reports of the reviewers and the review boards will usually be forwarded to you by default after the decision.
- A rejected proposal can be **resubmitted** but only in a form that responds to points of the reviewers.
If your proposal has been rejected...

- Don’t be discouraged!
- Consider the forwarded reasons for the refusal and refer to them in your revised proposal
- Suggest possible reviewers; you can also ask for the exclusion of reviewers
- Never engage in reviewer-bashing (openly)
Useful information DFG

In general:
Funding programmes  http://www.dfg.de/en/research_funding/programmes/index.jsp

Research careers:  
http://www.dfg.de/en/research_funding/research_careers/index.html

Call für proposals:  
http://www.dfg.de/en/research_funding/announcements_proposals/index.jsp

FAQs:  
http://www.dfg.de/en/research_funding/faq/index.html
Good Luck!