Crafting a proposal for graduate-level funding is a competitive and complex undertaking. This guide provides general insight and advice regarding the proposal writing process and is intended to be used as a starting point. Please note that a variety of types of support are available and proposal requirements vary significantly by agency and discipline, so you must pay close attention to the application directions and follow them exactly. Presenting a complete and articulate proposal is equally important to the success of your application as making a sound and convincing argument for your project.

Before You Start Writing

• Start early, approximately 2-3 months in advance of the deadline. Prepare to put a significant amount of effort into planning, organizing, writing, and editing the proposal. Don’t rely heavily on a proposal you have completed for another funding opportunity, as it will need to be changed significantly to incorporate all requirements of the current application.

• Carefully read the mission statement of the funding organization and plan to provide evidence of how your project relates to and supports these goals. Prepare to explicitly address how various parts of your proposal fit with what the organization is looking for; the more specific, the better.

• If available, read review committee criteria to determine desired proposal qualities.

• Seek advice from individuals who have been successful with the proposal writing process. Review proposals which have been awarded funding to gain an understanding of the characteristics of a successful application. Seek advice from individuals who have served on proposal review committees.

• Contact the funding agency with any questions you have, if permissible.

• The proposal title should be understandable to a wide audience; make it as clear as possible. The title must also succinctly indicate your proposal objectives. A witty/clever title is not advised.

• Meet with your advisors and colleagues to refine your ideas. Make an outline and share it with your mentors to determine if you are on the right track.

• If applicable, submit your recent work for publication in a scholarly journal. Relevant publications demonstrate that you have some expertise related to the project for which you are seeking funds.

• Execute a pilot study, if appropriate. Any preliminary research should show how your current research questions relate to the results of your pilot/preliminary study.

Letters of Reference

Include endorsement letters from faculty in and outside of your department to demonstrate support for your project, if required or permitted. Contact potential recommenders well in advance of the proposal deadline (minimum of 2-4 weeks). Ask if they are willing to write on your behalf and if so, provide them with the following information/materials:

• The website that contains a description of the grant and the requirements, including how to submit a letter of support and the deadline

• A copy of your project proposal and any other relevant materials such as a prospectus or cv

• An addressed, stamped envelope for the purpose of mailing their letter of recommendation (in the rare case that you are required to submit hard copies of your application materials)

As the application deadline approaches, gently remind your recommenders to submit their reference letters.
Writing the Proposal

Format/Organization
There is no standard format for proposal writing. You should structure your proposal according to the requirements of the specific grant you are applying for, the type of project you are pursuing, and/or your planned approach. The document may be organized into headings and subheadings, paragraph format, or another layout depending on application requirements. Proposal length varies from 5-15 double-spaced pages plus a list of references cited. Follow all guidelines for font size, margins, text/page limits, etc. These requirements are strictly applied; proposals that do not comply will not be reviewed.

Style
Write as clearly and concisely as possible. The proposal must be well-organized, readable, and logical. Use an active voice throughout, using terms such as “I will” instead of “I hope to”. Avoid abbreviations and spell out acronyms the first time you use them. Bold key concepts and themes, write in succinct paragraphs, and keep your sentences short.

Know who you are writing for. The target audience of the proposal varies depending on the specific type of support you are applying for. Check the application instructions to determine the makeup of the review committee. If you are instructed to communicate to a multidisciplinary audience, write in such a way that your ideas are understandable to a scholar in any area, making sure to avoid the jargon and idiosyncrasies of your discipline. If you are writing exclusively for professionals in your field, you should use discipline-specific terminology in a succinct manner. Limit the use of jargon because professionals in your field may not be experts on your specific topic/area of interest.

Strategy
Aim to convince the readers that your project is important and unique, and therefore worth pursuing. View the proposal as an argument which is intended to convince the readers of the merits of your project and that you are prepared for and capable of executing your plan. The project must be well reasoned, built on existing work, and feasible. Also ensure that your central question is focused and manageable. The stated research question(s) should be explicit and flow directly from the information you provide in the proposal. Overall, the proposal should persuade the review committee that you should be supported as an individual, that your work is novel and compelling, and that your project makes a contribution to your field of study.

Content
The proposal must address the who, what, when, where and how of your project. Provide a sufficient amount of detail throughout, but don’t overwhelm the readers with information. Below are possible categories and suggestions for content. Please note that organization and content will vary according to discipline, type of support, and the sponsor’s guidelines.

• Abstract/Summary
The abstract gives reviewers their first impression of your project. Write this section last. Concisely and accurately summarize your proposal by explaining your hypothesis (if applicable), objectives, approach, plan and potential significance of your results. Make sure to relate back to your original problem.
• **Hypothesis/Question/Objectives/Background**
This section should include a brief statement which explains the issue(s) your project will explore, the concepts you plan to use, and your anticipated outcomes. Make sure to include the precise question(s) your project will address. Indicate specific objectives in sequential order and state priorities.

Outline your main argument(s). Identify the limitations of your project, any assumptions you are making, and the theoretical framework in which your project exists. Include definitions of key terms.

Provide information on the strategies you will use and the reasons for using them. Include information and data on any work that has already been completed for the project. Delineate your goals and how they relate to the design of your project.

Indicate the significance of the project within the context of existing knowledge in your area of study. Provide a critical review of other studies conducted on the topic and why you feel a different approach is warranted.

• **Methodology/Procedures/Design**
Clearly and precisely describe your intended methodology and procedures and why you have selected these particular approaches. Indicate how your planned research design will help you meet your objectives. State the resources and materials (i.e. documents, personal interviews, newspaper articles, surveys, observations, databases, etc.) required to conduct the project. Demonstrate that you have the ability to begin with an abstract thought, determine and implement ways to analyze a case study, and obtain results that relate to the original abstract concept.

• **Significance**
Relay what will be addressed and learned that is not already known. Be sure to frame your work within the paradigms, discourses, and current approaches of your field. Seek to answer the following questions, if applicable: how will your work contribute to a debate or work towards solving a problem?; how will the project impact both the academic and policy communities?; how is your work relevant in fields outside of your own and/or how does the project relate to other disciplines?; What are the broader impacts of your project?

• **Timeframe**
Create a detailed timeline in which your project will occur, giving yourself a comfortable and realistic margin of error. Set time limits for individual components of your project and indicate the person(s) responsible for specific tasks. You must convey to the reviewers that you are undertaking a project that is feasible (not too wide or too narrow in scope) within the specified time period.

• **Sources/Resources**
Provide information on the sources you plan to use and where and how you will access them. Show that you have permission to access the resources you need to carry out your project. Indicate any previous experience you have working with these sources.

• **Bibliography/References**
Create a bibliography for all references using the appropriate format. If a format is not specified, use the reference style accepted in the primary journal in your field. The bibliography allows you to demonstrate that you are well-read in your discipline and that you have a current and thorough understanding of the
field. Reviewers are likely to notice if you have not cited literature that is explicitly pertinent to your project.

- **Other Information**

Depending on the agency you are applying to, additional categories and/or appendix materials may be required. These may include, but are not limited to: budget, dissemination plan, Human Subjects or Animal Care approval (more information available at [http://research.binghamton.edu/compliance/](http://research.binghamton.edu/compliance/)), list of recommended external reviewers, other funding received or pending, project and institutional credentials (Principal Investigators and other researchers), and/or project evaluation plan.

**Additional Content Tips**

- For your first draft, write in very short sentences. This will make it easier to rearrange your proposal and will help you to create a logical structure in subsequent drafts.
- Create an overarching theme throughout the proposal that demonstrates the value/necessity of your project.
- Indicate your previous experience with the topic. Explain how your methodology will be similar to or different than your previous approach(es). Indicate how this project will expand upon your earlier work.
- Address why and how you are qualified to execute the project. Begin by stating the broad problem, explain how other researchers in your discipline have approached the issue, and then express how you as an individual are specifically equipped to explore the topic. Indicate the connections between your professional goals and the project. Show that you are passionate about your work and that you have the skills and expertise to successfully carry out your project. This is important because the reviewers will evaluate you separately from your project to determine “fit”.
- Demonstrate how your project can be tested for validity and feasibility.
- Incorporate anecdotes, vignettes or examples in the proposal to provide points of reference for the reader.
- Use relevant graphics and charts. Include any essential supplemental information in the appendices, if allowed (some agencies do not allow appendices).

**Before You Submit the Proposal**

- Review your work. Be sure to revise the proposal multiple times before submitting a final copy. Check and double check your writing, including grammar.
- Ask faculty members and other colleagues both within and outside of your field to review your proposal and provide feedback. If possible, also ask non-academics to read your work to ensure that the language is understandable.
- Check that you have compiled all of the necessary information and materials.
- Confirm that the requested budget is reasonable and realistic by comparing it to the range of funding offered by the sponsor.
- Submit the proposal on time. If possible, turn in the application several days in advance of the deadline to avoid potential issues, such as differences in time zones, disruptions in delivery services, system crashes, etc. Note that additional materials, including letters of recommendation, will likely not be accepted after the deadline.
Proposal Review
Review committees may be composed of a multidisciplinary group of readers from a variety of professional backgrounds or they may be made up of individuals solely in your discipline. Regardless of composition, the review panel will assess your proposal based on a specific set of criteria set forward by the agency you are applying to. Proposals which fail to address any of the selection criteria will likely be returned without review, so it is extremely important to follow the guidelines and include all required information in your proposal.

It may take several months before you are notified of the result of your proposal. Make sure to account for this lag in your proposed funding timeline. If your application is unsuccessful, you are encouraged to apply again in the future heeding any feedback provided to you by the review committee.

Proposal-Writing Resources

• General
  - “10 Tips for Writing a Successful International Research Fellowship Proposal”
    http://www.irex.org/news/10-tips-writing-successful-international-research-fellowship-proposal
  - Grant Writing Resources-Binghamton University Office of Sponsored Programs
    http://research.binghamton.edu/SponsoredPrograms/
  - “Writing a Grant Proposal: Writing Tips and Application Forms”
    http://www.cumc.columbia.edu/dept/gsas/ac_programs/writing.htm
  - “Writing Fellowship and Grant Proposals” List of Resources
    http://gsrc.ucla.edu/gwc/resources/writing-fellowships-and-grant-proposals.html

• Humanities & Social Sciences
  “Components of A Successful Proposal” USIP- Jennings Randolph Program for International Peace
  - “Research Proposal Guidelines”
    http://www.binghamton.edu/sociology/graduate-program/Graduate%20Handbook%20-%202013%20wgm%20version.pdf
  - Wenner-Gren Blog: “How to Write a Grant Proposal”
    http://blog.wennergren.org/category/how-to-write-a-grant-proposal/
  - “Writing Proposals for ACLS Fellowship Competitions”

• Math, Science & Engineering
  - National Institutes of Health, “Writing Your Application”
    http://grants.nih.gov/grants/writing_application.htm
  - NSF “A Guide for Proposal Writing”