

1

Introduction

The Purpose of the Book

The purpose of this book is twofold. First, to help those seeking external funding to pursue high-quality initiatives by way of well-developed ideas expressed as fully developed project proposals. Second, to help those who have received funding successfully manage their projects with efficiency and effectiveness.

Let us unpack that a bit by way of three imperatives:

1. The endpoint is a successful proposal.
2. The starting point is an idea.
3. The point of connection between initiative and idea is the proposal.

What ties these points together is quality: The better developed the idea, the easier it is to more fully develop a proposal that anticipates, informs, and contributes to a quality project. Clearly, quality has its costs and benefits.

Costs are measured in time and effort, and indeed, it takes time-consuming reflection and dedicated effort to develop an idea and transform it into a thoughtful proposal and well-conceived project. Thank goodness, the benefits are substantial. In addition to making a more compelling case, a quality proposal based in a developed idea rewards its proponents with the level of clarity necessary for successful project implementation. In all, we believe that proposal development costs can be reduced and the benefits enhanced by following the guidance offered in this work.

It may be useful to take a second approach to unpacking the chapter's first sentence: The purpose of this book is to help those seeking external funding to pursue high-quality initiatives by way of well-developed ideas expressed as fully developed project proposals. To do so, we must unpack the logic of our approach.

The Logic of Our Approach

Our approach to the drafting of a research proposal—whether it is a dissertation or a National Institutes of Health (NIH) application—can be simply stated: *Achieve rigor in steps; achieve precision in stages.* We try to segment the process so the parts are manageable and the outcomes enjoyable and useful. We begin with an idea, then address funding, then turn to the writing of the proposal itself. The internal logic is to begin with what you care about and derive from it as much as you can. Once you have developed your idea in itself and all that flows from it, then and only then begin to take account of the resources, interests, and work of others.

For us, this first step toward implementing your idea should be to consider the resources and interests of funders who think programmatically about topics, and what they consider important and fundable may link in varying degrees to your interests. Their views of resources will help you scale—or rescale—your project. It follows for us that the last segment of our three-part approach is writing the proposal proper. One key section—the literature review—brings your idea right up against the work of others. At this point, with your developed idea in mind, you have already come to terms with one literature—the funding literature—and now you are better equipped to come to terms with the scholarly literature. Resource needs, alongside additional intellectual possibilities, may come from a deep dive into the academic work of others. Ideas that are yours from the start come from a wide array of sources, only some of which can be fully identified. You must ultimately turn to the professional literature if only to determine that your idea and the work you propose can be a contribution to knowledge.

You start with your idea. Focusing only on the idea, you produce sketches of

- the idea itself,
- what it can produce (knowledge, practice),
- a broad estimate of project costs,
- a first cut at project scale,
- a preliminary sense of project timeline.

Moving on to the funding literature, you focus on both on your idea and on the approaches, and resources of funders. Consider the following factors and write down your thoughts:

- What aspect(s) of your idea(s) are funders generally supporting?
- What may be necessary—what may be acceptable—to accommodate your idea to the approaches of the funding community?
- What changes may follow for what your idea can produce, both immediately and in the longer term?
- Taking account of order of magnitude, what changes in your initial estimates of project costs, scale, or timeline must you entertain?

Moving to the proposal, focus on your idea as strengthened by its encounter with the funding literature. You now search the academic literature and come to terms with it as you sketch the following sections of the semi-standard proposal format:

- *Core idea*: What you are proposing, why, with what benefits to practice or knowledge?
- *Context of your idea*: What is its relationship to the work of others (literature and other reviews)?
- *Methods*: How will you know?
- *Activities*: What will you do?
- *Products*: What will be the immediate outputs and longer-term outcomes?
- *Budget/timeline*: What costs (effort/dollars) over what periods of time?

To summarize, the logic of our approach is to start with one's idea and, in stages, move to take account of the approaches and work of others. Because we think of funding as an activity that collectively produces a literature and because it is in some ways easier to search that literature and come to terms with it, we make a review of funding prospects the second step. The last step is to take what we gained from idea development and the kinds of emphases the funding literature might introduce and pour the results into the semistandard categories one encounters in proposals. The core idea will carry over in the largest part. Costs, scale, and timeline might change. Taking account of intellectual context—by thoroughly reviewing the academic literature and professional work of others—will help infuse additional rigor into our thinking.

All told, the clearer we are about our core interests, our core idea, and what follows from it—and the more we understand about the funding and intellectual contexts and traditions in which our idea resides—then the more honestly and usefully adaptive and flexible we can be in pursuing our proposed work in a rigorous and precise academic fashion.

It is worth repeating that the target audiences of this book are doctoral and postdoctoral students and research faculty. All three need to share a deep appreciation of a workable approach to proposal development and project management if (a) a doctoral student's dissertation or postdoctoral student's research application is to succeed easily and fruitfully with advisers' help or (b) a faculty researcher's project is to succeed with graduate and/or postdoctoral assistance.

Demystifying Proposal Development

We seek to demystify the proposal development process by maintaining a steadfast focus on a well-developed idea as the starting point for a fully developed proposal and project. Standard proposal advice begins with the requirements

of the proposal and a clear understanding of the funder's guidelines. We insist that the first steps taken toward a fully developed project proposal starts with an idea and its exploration.

In an idea reside linkages with past work and connections with useful and desirable outcomes. Only with a well-developed idea in hand can we make the highest and best use of the discipline and structure of the proposal to fully elaborate the idea as an initiative that can be implemented in a reasonable period of time with sensible expenditure of funds and effort.

We present methods for developing an idea that are straightforward. We employ verbal sketches to help you learn what you truly think before linking your idea to a funder's interest. With your sketches in hand, you are in a position to know early on whether your interests and those of funders intersect or whether you are twisting yourself into pretzel shapes in the hope of gaining financial support.

An Aside The Nature of a Sketch

A sketch captures in broad strokes the essence of a topic. It is purposely incomplete yet substantial enough to yield the shape and form of an idea. It proceeds with a story told in a casual way about the origin of an idea. The result is a nugget or two around which we can build a more complete story line and from which we can derive implications for other aspects of a proposal, which we can also sketch.

For those who encounter difficulties with writing—or, more precisely, trouble beginning to write or trouble sustaining a written piece—a sketch is a way to express thoughts as statements that make general sense. For those who insist on outlining an idea, a sketch can be viewed as an incomplete description that focuses on up to three major dimensions or considerations and begins to fill in some detail under each. While not a full outline, a sketch yields a proto-outline, or a way of putting forth some tentative notions that are, to begin with, partially described and easily altered. Our basic point—stated elsewhere and repeated here—is that we pursue rigor in steps and precision in stages. For most all of us, there is an innate ability to work better with a partially complete statement in hand rather than try to fill in all the details from the start.

As you make your way through this book, you will find that we present sketches of ideas and other project elements, including products, scale, cost, timeline, and so on. Because sketches are pliable, we can inflect them with applied and pure characteristics as well as by a larger or smaller scale. These

are two ways in which a sketch, because it is easily altered and because it seeks rigor and precision over time, aids in the always necessary reformulation of ideas. We can entertain alternatives systematically as we pursue the formulation and definition of a project to which we will dedicate considerable thought, time, and effort in its execution and completion.

The Key Role of Ideas

In emphasizing the idea as the starting point, this book does intersect some with the extant literature on proposal development. We agree that you need to establish both your idea and its context. We concur that you need to pay attention to presenting your idea in the required format. However, we begin to diverge from conventional wisdom when we emphasize the need to start with your major strength—your good idea—and drive that idea toward implementation in proposal sections that are progressively more detailed. The idea you start with gets visited and revisited from a number of vantages, all in an effort to develop and elaborate context and methods, timetable, and costs. In this process, both the proposer of the idea and the idea itself mature.

To be fair, in emphasizing ideas, this book finds itself taking exception to some of the conventional wisdom offered in the literature. An overwhelming number of works on proposal development write to the lowest common denominator by attempting to develop the proposal, not the person and ideas. We do not believe that it is useful to simply say to proposal developers, “Be specific!” To fully develop your idea, you need to be general and encompassing, self-aware and cognizant of the work of others, attentive to project choices and alternatives, and mindful of both generally and specifically required resources to launch a successful initiative. Each proposal topic requires appropriate treatment. You will need to be clear both generally and specifically at several levels of abstraction if the funder is to understand your project’s progression from rounded idea to budgeted and evaluated effort.

All of the following need clarity as individual proposal sections and, overall, as an integrated initiative:

- The essence of your idea and its intellectual, academic, and/or applied contexts
- The idea made more specific and palpable in the outlined description of methods and proposed activities
- The idea revisited from the vantage of staffing and other budgetary and program-related needs

The principles and guidelines we offer in Chapter 2 (Ideas) and in Chapter 4 (Proposals) will make these points real and readily attainable. The guidelines we present in Chapter 3 (Funding) will help make our ideas and our proposed projects a reality. The guidelines we present in Chapter 5 (Managing a Funded Project) will help your idea produce successful outputs and outcomes.¹ Funding starts with an idea; thus we turn to Idea Development in Chapter 2.

¹ While the terms *outputs* and *outcomes* are unnecessarily clunky and arid, they are terms that are widely used and accepted in evaluation practice, which is precisely why we use them in this book.