

# Tips for Writing Competitive Grants

Metin Çakır

University of Minnesota

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# First Tip: Write to Your Audience

- There are a wide variety of funders across different fields of economics (USDA, NIH, EPA, NSF, Pepsi Co., Cargill, Gates Foundation, etc.) and types of institutions (public, private, non-profit, etc.)
  - ▶ Visit [grants.gov](https://www.grants.gov) for the announcement, listing, and documentation of federal grants.
- How you write the grant proposal will differ widely. Key questions:
  - ▶ Who are you writing it to?
  - ▶ What are their mission and priority areas?
  - ▶ Why should they care about your research questions?

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## Second Tip: Follow the Directions

Carefully read the Request for Applications (RFA)

An RFA describes the program and provides detailed information on

- priority areas
- eligibility criteria
- funding amount
- specific requirements: formatting, page limit, section and subsections, bio, conflict of interest, current/pending funding and commitments, attachments, etc.
  - ▶ **Failing to comply with formatting requirements will likely result in rejection without review**

USDA NIFA Example

- An approach from specific to general

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## Third Tip: Pay Attention to the Evaluation Criteria

Write the proposal while having the evaluation criteria in mind. Major points to check

- Relevance to program area priorities
- Clearly stated objectives
- **Clearly stated feasibility with strong preliminary data**
- Realistic work plan (timeline, personnel, budget allocation)
- Overall merit
  - ▶ Why is it important? i.e., it must be well-motivated
  - ▶ Is it innovative? i.e., the contribution must be clear
  - ▶ Is it rigorous? i.e., methods must be appropriate and cutting-edge
  - ▶ What is the impact? i.e., it must benefit stakeholders (note that stakeholders are funder-specific)
- Well organized and thought-out, written clearly, concisely, and flows well. **But substance matters the most not the style.**
- It must be technical - not necessarily filled with math.
- Reviewers are likely not those who are in your field.

After the writing, apply the rubric yourself

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# Examples of Reviewer Comments

**Strengths:** The proposal is topical, addressing relevant problems related to slow economic growth and high poverty rates in X. The objectives are feasible. Constructing IO tables using publicly available data is practical and has significant potential for being adopted by researchers. The research team is well-qualified, and collaboration with local academic and government experts is a strength.

**Weaknesses:** The proposal can be bolstered by elaborating on the importance of IO tables in policy and market research and their potential impact. Another weakness is that the proposal does not clarify to what extent there is an overlap with the government's efforts to create the same information. Furthermore, even though the proposal claims that the IO tables will be publicly available and adopted by other researchers, there isn't a detailed outreach plan. The proposed general equilibrium analysis does not seem innovative, although it seems practical and appropriate.

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**Strengths:** The proposal is topical, addressing the impacts of salinity intrusion in a region disproportionately impacted by climate change or frequent extreme weather events. The proposal is well-written. Objectives appear to be feasible. Hydraulic models are appropriate, and incorporating machine learning algorithms to adjust crop calendars is novel. PDs are highly qualified and have vast experience in the field and knowledge of the study area.

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## Fourth Tip: Budget Consistent with the Narrative and the Feasibility of Objectives

Main items are

- Personnel costs (PI, post-doc, graduate RA)
- Data access or purchase
- Field experiment
- Equipment
- Travel

The budget amount is usually not a matter of significant consideration with USDA grants as long as it is within the limit. The merit of the proposal is what reviewers are charged to evaluate.

# Other thoughts

A funded grant proposal is a commitment to work on a research topic for a long while. So, the research drive must come first, funding incentives second.

Build collaborations meaningfully. PD and co-PD expertise matters. I work on policy-relevant issues; hence, in all of my NIFA grants, I have a collaborator from USDA ERS.

Collect and submit support and reference letters

- Planning on collaborating with an institution: add a letter from that institution
- Planning on obtaining or accessing data: add documentation
- The proposal is directly impacting some stakeholders of the funder: get a support letter from that group



Funders may also have tips

Check out grant-writing tips from NIFA

Questions and Comments

Thank you!