

How to write a grant proposal

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Introduction

There are many potential perks to being awarded with external funding. If you are a researcher on a fixed-term contract, external funding can add time to your contract. If you are an academic on a permanent contract, external funding can pay to reduce your teaching workload, so that you have more time for research. You can also seek external funding to temporarily take on a position with another research group at another university, to extend your connections. External funding also provides important prestige, because it suggests that your research ideas were deemed more promising than those of others, by a review panel of your peers. Being a member of a research team, either as a Principal Investigator or Co-Investigator, is a rewarding experience that can greatly enhance your research and leadership skills.

In the UK, funding is available from many sources. You might be eligible for funding from one of the UK Research Councils (soon to be brought together with Innovate UK, under UK Research & Innovation), the British Academy, and various charities such as Leverhulme or Cancer Research UK. With any luck, UK institutions will remain eligible for funding from the European Union.

To learn more about potential funding opportunities, you might check [Research Professional](#). Your institution's Research and Innovation Office should also be able to provide you with more information about potential funders. Moreover, they may be able to provide you with examples of proposals that have successfully been submitted to that funding scheme in the past, and to put you in touch with people who have written successful proposals.

Writing a proposal for research funding is a very specific skill. Unfortunately, many academics have never received training in writing research proposals. The format and writing style of research proposals and journal articles are quite different. However, in both cases, the practicalities of writing can be learned through guidance and practice.

It is also important to plan ahead and get the timing right. Your grant proposal will look stronger if you first take the time to publish any relevant research you have already done. If you are new to grant writing, then you may need to allow several months to work up an application.

Below, I summarise what I learned from my many years of proposal writing - or what I believe I have learned. Of course, there are many other ways of writing successful proposals, but my advice is based on what has worked for me, and for the various people on my team.

Each of the tips presented below is supplemented by comments from [Gabriella Eriksson](#), [Căzilia Loibl](#), [Simon McNair](#), [Yasmina Okan](#), and [Natalie van der Wal](#) – all of whom I have helped to write successful grant applications.

1. **Apply your expertise to solving a real-world problem**
2. **Involve relevant project partners**
3. **Involve colleagues from other relevant disciplines**
4. **Propose a limited set of research questions**
5. **Create a budget before you start writing**
6. **Explicitly address all of the funder's criteria**
7. **Write the proposal in clear language**
8. **Seek lots of feedback**
9. **Don't give up**

1. Apply your expertise to solving a real-world problem

Like many academics, you may have only thought about your topic of expertise in theoretical terms, and conducted your research mainly in the lab. You probably have thought a lot about the studies you might do to advance theoretical knowledge in your field. But you may not have thought as much about the real-world relevance of your research. Yet, most funders in the UK want to support grant proposals that bring the promise of solving an important real-world problem, in addition to propelling scientifically grounded research.

Perhaps you have argued, at an abstract level, that your research is indirectly relevant to a real-world problem. For a grant proposal, that argument needs to become concrete. Funders are awarding taxpayers' money, and would like to see that you give something back to these taxpayers.

Before you start writing your proposal, it is therefore of the utmost importance that you think of a real-world problem that your research might solve. Your grant proposal can then start with the description of that real-world problem, including statistics that hint at its scale and importance. Subsequently, follow with a description of how your expertise can be applied to potentially solve this problem. Ultimately, you want to be able to argue that your proposed research might save lives, save money, improve people's well-being, or contribute to society in some other important way.

Actual examples.

Gabriella Eriksson: For my EU Horizon2020 Marie Curie Fellowship, I am applying behavioural decision research to study drivers' perceptions of speeding risks. I joined the University of Leeds' Centre for Decision Research from Swedish Transport Agency (VTI). In my proposal, I argued that my work would ultimately help to reduce speeding, improve road safety, and save lives.

Căzilia Loibl: My EU-funded Marie Curie [project focused on helping older consumers in financial distress](#), by applying theories and methods from the field of risk communication. My argument was that financial pressures on older people are increasing, undermining their financial security, food security, health and overall well-being. This argument was well positioned when we submitted in 2012, because

that year was the “[European Year for Active Aging and Solidary between generations](#)” and aging was a key focus of the then new [Europe 2020 Strategy](#). I joined the University of Leeds’ Centre for Decision Research from The Ohio-State University, US.

Simon McNair: For my Leverhulme Early Career Fellowship, I will be [developing an intervention that aims to reduce the psychological distress experienced by people with large debts](#). Ultimately, that should help them to feel better, but also allow them to focus more on taking practical steps to tackle their debt.

Yasmina Okan: During my Cancer Research UK Population Research Fellowship, I will be using insights from the cognitive science of graph comprehension and from the applied science of [risk communication to improve web-based communications about cervical cancer screening](#). Doing so will ultimately help women to make more informed decisions about screening and save women’s lives.

Natalie van der Wal: For my EU Marie Curie Fellowship, I will aim to [improve emergency evacuations](#), through insights from agent-based computer modelling and risk communication. I mentioned in my proposal that the EU research agenda specifically aims to promote prevention and management of emergencies. I will test strategies for speeding up emergency evacuations, which should ultimately save lives. I look forward to joining the University of Leeds’ Centre for Decision Research from the Vrije Universiteit Amsterdam in 2018.

2. Involve relevant project partners

To make it more likely that your research will have impact, it is important to involve an organisation that is tasked with addressing the specific real-world problem. If, like Gabriella Eriksson, you say that your research aims to reduce speeding, then involve car companies or road safety organisations. If, like Yasmina Okan, you seek to inform patients’ decisions about cancer screening, then involve health practitioners and agencies that communicate to people about cancer.

It is not enough to say that you will present your findings at the end of the project, in a meeting with the project partners. If you do so, your research may end up being well-designed for testing your theories, but not for benefiting the real-world problem. To increase the promise of real-world impact, project partners have to be actively involved from the start, to ensure that the research is designed in a way that is relevant to their practice, and could actually be implemented by them if it turned out to be effective. In fact, it is even better to involve project partners in the proposal writing, so that the proposed research already reflects everyone’s expectations for the project.

You may find the idea of contacting potential project partners daunting. To avoid having to make cold calls, it may be helpful to ask your academic colleagues as well as staff in your Research & Innovation Office to introduce you to anyone they know at relevant organisations. Even if no one can introduce you, do not hesitate to reach out to the leadership of any organisations you would like to involve. Think about what you are offering. If you get funded, you will give your potential project partners an opportunity to improve their practice at no cost, on the basis of the best available science. You are providing expertise that most project partners do not have in-house, and that they may otherwise not be able to afford.

Of course, potential project partners may not have time to spend hours in meetings with you – because they are busy with their actual jobs. Very rarely would a grant pay for their staff time. When you contact them, you may therefore offer varying of levels of involvement. At a minimum, you may want them to look at your research ideas before you start, and provide insights about how to implement findings. To formalise this type of advisory role, you could ask your project partners to serve on an advisory board for your project. You could also ask your project partners to help you with the dissemination of your findings after you're done. Your grant may pay for those efforts, including travel to meetings, and production of communication materials. You may need your project partner to provide access to their employees and their networks. If your project partners want to be more involved, then by all means, give them the opportunity to do so – perhaps even to the extent that they become co-authors. Your research will be better for it.

To show the funder that your project partners are committed to the project, you may need to ask for a so-called 'letter of support'. That letter needs to be printed with the letterhead of the project partner's organisation, and signed by your contact person at that organisation. Examples of letters of support should be available from your Research & Innovation Office. The letter should state:

- the name of the project and the main researcher(s) involved
- the project period
- a description of the project partner's organisation and what it is that they do
- the usefulness of the project from the project partner's point of view
- the contributions that your project partner agrees to make and might additionally make.

I often provide my project partners with a draft of such a letter, which they can then adapt as they see fit. Even if the funder does not require a letter of support, it might be a good idea to ask for one. By the time your project gets funded, a few months may have passed. Your contact person may have forgotten the details of your agreement. Or they may have left the organisation. The letter of support will serve as a useful reminder.

Actual examples.

Gabriella Eriksson: For my project on speeding risks, my project partners are Volvo Cars, the [Swedish National Road and Transport Research Institute](#) (VTI), and the [Swedish Transport Administration](#). I was a PhD candidate at VTI and I have worked with industrial partners and policy making agencies through my role at the institute.

Căzilia Loibl: For my project on financial distress in older age, a long list of partner agencies in the UK, Germany and the Netherlands were recruited to serve as project partners. I have found it amazing how quickly leaders of various organisations responded to my requests for collaboration and provided names of the right people to work with. My project partners came partly from the Centre for Decision Research's wide network of governmental and industry relations, including [AgeUK](#), the largest association for older adults in the UK. In the Netherlands, we recruited project partners from the academic, industry, and governmental network members at the Network for Studies on Pensions, Aging and Retirement (Netspar), with whom Wändi and I were acquainted. In Germany, project partners were recruited from the German government's network for consumer research at the [Federal Ministry of Food, Agriculture, and Consumer Protection](#), the German network of consumer protection agencies, and the

German members of the [Financial Planning Standards Board](#), the international institution granting the [Certified Financial Planner™](#) designation.

Simon McNair: For my project on reducing financial distress among clients of debt advice agencies, my project partners are the [Citizens Advice Bureau](#) (CAB) - one of the main [debt advice agencies in the UK](#). I have been working with the Bradford and Leeds offices – among two of the busiest in England and Wales. My partnership with CAB came as a result of my getting involved at a grass-roots level with local debt advocacy groups in Leeds. I approached these organisations to ask if I could come along to their meetings and talk about my research interests, and to learn more about what work was being done in the city. CAB were also involved with these groups, and I approached them in person at these advocacy group meetings to put forward the idea of a grant proposal partnership. I made it very clear how the partnership would be mutual. To avoid coming across as “*I’m here to do this project to show you how you can do your jobs better*” I stressed that I am not an expert in debt advice but could provide insights based on my field that could be beneficial to them. I’d say that it was also incredibly important to involve my project partners in the proposal writing, so that we were all fully clear on what the required logistics might be.

Yasmina Okan: For my project on cervical cancer, I have been working with St James’ University Hospital, [Cancer Research UK](#), and the [Spanish Association Against Cancer](#). I first got in touch with St James’ University Hospital and with Cancer Research UK by giving presentations about my research at their organisations. I continued discussions with Cancer Research UK to learn more about their research priorities and mission. I first got in touch with the Spanish Association Against Cancer via email. After some enquiring I was able to get in touch with the right person in the right department, who expressed an interest in collaborating in my project.

Natalie van der Wal: For my project on emergency evacuations, my project partners include emergency responders in the Yorkshire area and elsewhere, as well as crowd science expert Professor Keith Still and crowd movement consultancy company [Crowd Dynamics](#). I met some of these experts during a course on crowd science. I emailed others to request a meeting. I prepared for these meetings by envisioning how the project partner would benefit from this research, to create a win-win situation for both of us.

3. Involve colleagues from other relevant disciplines

As noted, many funding agencies in the UK seek to support ground-breaking research that will solve a real-world problem. Most real-world problems cannot be solved from the perspective of one single discipline. Other disciplines may offer a different take on potential solutions, with each discipline having its strengths and its weaknesses. Interdisciplinary research is often considered novel, because the insights from each discipline can contribute to the other. Even if you think that your field provides the most useful insights, the review panel working for your funder may not think so. Your proposal will therefore be stronger if it involves a team of researchers from different, relevant disciplines.

Your team should be the best team for the proposed research. Therefore, think hard about what your ‘dream team’ would look like. Who would add to your expertise? If you could ask anyone, who would you ask? Is there someone who you have always wanted to work with? This is your time to ask! Your funding

scheme may allow you to pay for some of their time. Even if you can't pay for their time, your funding will allow you to conduct the research in ways that might otherwise not be affordable, or to collect unique data through the involvement of your project partner. Most likely, some of the people you would like to involve on your dream team will gladly say 'yes' to such an exciting opportunity.

Actual examples.

Gabriella Eriksson: For my project on speeding risks, Wändi and I involved [Natasha Merat](#) from the University of Leeds [Institute for Transport Studies](#). She has helped me to get in contact with researchers in transport, engineering and other disciplines.

Cäzilia Loibl: For my project on financial distress in older adults, Wändi and I involved our existing network of colleagues at academic and government institutions in the United States and Europe.

Simon McNair: For my project on reducing financial distress among clients of debt advice agencies, Wändi and I are the main academics. However, we work closely with our project partners, who provide expertise in finance and debt advice.

Yasmina Okan: For my project on cervical cancer, I am working with Wändi and colleagues from health sciences and other disciplines throughout the University of Leeds. I first got in touch with colleagues in health disciplines across the University by giving presentations about my research at their departments, or by meeting them at external workshops they also attended (eg organised by Cancer Research UK). I also involved US-based colleagues we already knew.

Natalie van der Wal: For my project on emergency evacuations, my interdisciplinary team involves Wändi and other researchers from across the University of Leeds. I contacted these other researchers on the basis of advice from Wändi and the person in charge of Marie Curie applications at the University of Leeds.

4. Propose a limited set of research questions.

It is a common misunderstanding among first-time applicants that promising a lot of work will make your research proposal look better. However, promising less work may be better. If you promise a lot of work, the funder may be concerned that your project is not feasible for the proposed budget and time period. It may also be difficult for the reviewers to see what the most important contribution of all of that work will be.

My preferred way of focusing the topic of a grant proposal is to present a limited set of research questions. For a 2-3 year project, I recommend having at most 4 research questions. If you can propose 3, that might be even better. I typically write my research questions so that they clearly require one study each, with the entire set reflecting a range of methodologies relevant to the topic. To aim for a coherent proposal, I tend to design each research question so that it leads to an insight that is necessary before proceeding to the next question. If one research question does not seem to fit the sequence, then reviewers may question whether it is necessary. My final research question tends to lead to the most

important insight, and preferably, provide some initial evidence of the real-world impact that was promised.

For each research question, it is important to present a justification based on the literature, as well as a research plan and a list of planned outputs. Specifically, the literature review should make the case that each research question will contribute a new insight that is relevant to both theory and practice. The research plan should provide enough detail about the methodology for each research question, but without getting lost in confusing technical details. You want to present just enough information so that the funder can be confident that you know what you will be doing, that the proposed methods are appropriate for answering the research question, and that your approach is grounded in the literature. The planned outputs should include one publishable paper for each research question, following the argument that each research question makes a contribution to the literature.

Even after you have proposed 3 research questions, you will find that you will barely have enough space to provide an adequate literature review, a research plan, and a list of planned impacts for each. This is another reason to provide no more than 4.

There are, of course, other ways to organise your grant proposal, and to ensure that the scope is appropriate. As noted above, you may therefore want to contact academic colleagues and staff at your Research and Innovation Office to ask for examples of successful proposals.

Actual examples.

Gabriella Eriksson: For my project on speeding risks, I proposed 3 research questions to be addressed over 2 years. I proposed to answer these research questions with samples from both Sweden and the UK. It made the proposed research more extensive without mixing in too many research questions.

Căzilia Loibl: For my project on financial distress in older adults, I proposed 4 objectives (instead of research questions) over 2 years. I made sure to use action words and avoid technical terms in the research questions, so they were easy to understand. The order of the research questions followed an established sequence recommended in the [risk communication literature](#). The objectives were:

- expert interviews to 'characterise expert knowledge' about older consumers' financial distress
- interviews with small samples of elderly consumers to characterise their financial distress
- a follow-up survey with larger samples to examine the prevalence of interview-identified factors relevant to financial distress
- to develop recommendations for addressing any identified factors contributing to financial distress in the elderly

Simon McNair: For my project on reducing financial distress among clients of debt advice agencies, I am in the process of addressing 3 research questions over 3 years. I have found that 3 research questions is more than enough, as inevitably things go wrong or get delayed, through no fault of our own. Fortunately, with 3 research questions, there has been enough room in the project timeline to meet our deadlines.

Yasmina Okan: For my 3-year project on cervical cancer, I proposed 3 research questions. Even with only 3 research questions, it was difficult to provide enough detail about what the associated research

would involve. An earlier version of my proposal was rejected by another funder because the reviewers complained that specific information concerning the state of the art and planned methods were missing, even though I had no space left to address additional details. When I resubmitted my proposal, I managed to add this information without losing any of the original application content, which was a difficult task involving careful editing.

Natalie van der Wal: For my 2-year project on emergency evacuations, I proposed to work on 3 research questions. I had so many ideas and needed Wändi's help to cut it down to just 3. I would not have been able to describe the relevant details, or conduct the proposed work, if I had actually proposed to do everything!

5. Create a budget before you start writing

To ensure that your research fits within the available budget, it is important to create a budget before you start writing. Because it requires specific expertise to create a budget, it should be created by the Research and Innovation Office, if your institution provides such support. At the Leeds University Business School, the professionals in the Research and Innovation Office have extensive experience in creating budgets for grant proposals. If you tell them about all of the activities involved in the proposal, including the proposed research, the planned meetings and so on, they will be able to estimate how much it will cost. They have records about how much it will cost to conduct interviews or online surveys, and will remind you of materials you may need to complete the research. They have estimates, for example, on how much it will cost to go to a conference in the US to present your findings. They will also know what your funder will (and will not) allow you to cover.

If your proposal involves a collaboration with other institutions, you and staff at your Research and Innovation Office will also need to take a careful look at the proposed distribution of funds. Especially as Principal Investigator, you need to be sure that you do not end up with a large amount of responsibility with only a small share of the overall budget. For everyone involved, the funding needs to match the assigned responsibilities.

If your estimated budget is under the available limit, you may not have thought big enough. Reconsider your plans and ask yourself whether they could be better. For instance, it is a common tradition among psychologists to recruit our own students as research participants so as to cut research costs. However, nationally representative samples will allow you to generalise to the overall population. Select the best methods for your research. Also make sure that your proposed sample size is large enough to answer your research questions and that you have included funds to cover every activity for which you have planned, including meetings with your project partners, the maintenance of your project website, or open access publishing of your papers. Another good use of your funds is to plan for end-of-project meetings to share your findings with academics, policymakers, practitioners, and members of the general public. Staff at your Research and Innovation Office can help you to develop the associated budget.

If your estimated budget is over the available limit, you may be proposing too much. Depending on how much you are over, you may need to check that all costs are accurate and reflective of what you need. You may need to remove a research question, or limit the scope of your proposal. Promising less

can actually improve the quality of a proposal, by making it more focused on the main activities, and by making it more feasible to be completed within the available time. Hence, having to cut down is not necessarily a bad thing. While cutting down on costs, do keep in mind that you want to have enough budget to complete every proposed task well. After all, you want to maximize the likelihood of generating useful findings for addressing the real-world problem you have identified.

Actual experiences

Gabriella Eriksson: Reviewers are looking for projects that are realistic to accomplish within a certain time and budget. There is no point in making promises that you will not be able to keep. For my project, I was interested in using driving simulator data. The budget of the project was not big enough to cover those costs. So, I realised that I needed to write a proposal without simulated driving. It is definitely worth creating the budget first, so you do not get stuck re-writing the proposal!

Căzilia Loibl: I believe that it is helpful to draft the budget along with the research questions. It not only makes you think in financial terms, but also forces you to think more logically about the specific tasks needed to complete the project.

Simon McNair: Setting out the specifics of how you will spend your available research budget is another good way of constraining the scope of your proposal. It's therefore a really good idea to think clearly about this at around the same time as you are developing the key research questions. Be mindful not to under-budget for research activities!

Yasmina Okan: For creating my budget, I received excellent help from staff in the Leeds University Business School Research and Innovation Office, who advised me on what I could and could not cover from my budget. They also reminded me to include budget items for travel to present findings to project partners and other institutions interested in our work.

Natalie van der Wal: For my project, I found it useful to start planning the budget early in the process. It helped me to be explicit about the design of my experiments and to figure out what I could achieve within the available budget. Because my funder requested it, I also included contingency plans. For example, if my proposal to study emergency behaviour in actual evacuation drills were to fall through, I proposed to study emergency behaviour in virtual reality environments. Colleagues with a virtual reality laboratory agreed to help me with such a study and to partially cover participant recruitment if needed.

6. Explicitly address all of the funding criteria.

Your funder will most likely send your proposal to a group of reviewers, who will be asked to rate your proposal on a set of criteria. Those criteria will be described in the funding call. If reviewers are finding it hard to understand how your proposal meets the funding criteria, you will get a lower rating. In the past, I have found that reviewers gave me a low rating on criteria that I believe I did address. They would complain that I did not address a *certain* issue in a *certain* section of the proposal – even though I did address the issue in another section of the proposal. This is how I learned that some reviewers might skim parts of the proposal, and that I need to repeat how I address the funding criteria in each and every

section of the proposal. If you do not make it very obvious for reviewers how the proposal addresses the funding criteria, they may not think you have addressed it – and reject your proposal.

To make it very explicit that your proposal meets the funding criteria, I recommend the following three approaches.

- a. Use headers that refer to the criteria. If your proposal will be rated on ‘the novelty of the approach’ and ‘grounding in the literature’ then include headers that use those words. Even if a reviewer skims the proposal, the headers will make it more likely that they will find the text they need to read to rate the proposal on these criteria.
- b. Write the text so that it explicitly shows how details fit with the criteria. If your proposal will be rated on ‘contribution to the literature’ and ‘appropriateness of the methods’, then write sentences such as ‘this proposal will make a contribution to the literature because...’ and ‘the methods are appropriate because...’. If there is more than one reason that, say, the proposed work will make a contribution to the literature, then you might write ‘the proposed work will make a contribution to the literature for three reasons. First, ... Second, ... Third’
- c. Do not hesitate to repeat yourself. Because reviewers may be skimming parts of the proposal, they may miss an important argument for why your proposal meets a specific criterion. I therefore try to mention how my proposal meets the funding criteria in each section of the proposal. I do so in a way that is fitting with the section, so that the literature review section focuses more on the contribution to the literature, and the method section more on the appropriateness of the methods. However, I might also briefly write something in the literature review section about how the methods deemed appropriate in the literature are the ones I will use – as I also might in a journal article. In the methods section I may repeat how, by using a specific method, I will be able to make this new contribution to the literature.

Actual examples.

Gabriella Eriksson: For my project, I repeated some key points and certain achievements that I really wanted the reviewers to notice. I think arranging text under headers is helpful not only to the reviewer, but to the writer. This way, it’s easier to keep track of what you have covered under each criterion. You can also highlight the key points using *italics* or **bold letters**.

Cäzilia Loibl: I think that this is one of the most important tips. If the reviewers can’t figure out how your proposal addresses the funding criteria, then they will give you a low score and reject your proposal.

Simon McNair: For my project, the structure of the proposal was up to the applicant. My application set out specific objectives, then referred back to those objectives throughout the remainder of the application when introducing the methods, the potential impact, and so on. Repetition of headings is a great way of ensuring your overall application is coherent and constrained.

Yasmina Okan: The funding call for my project included guidelines on the structure of the proposal and aspects to be addressed under each section. For example, it was stated that a section entitled ‘purpose’ should describe the relevance of the expected results to cancer. I covered every aspect listed for each section and made this as explicit as possible. That is, I said that my findings would result in “*graph design guidelines [that] will be practically relevant for practitioners and health communicators who*

aim to improve people's understanding about cancer screening and empower them to make informed choices".

Natalie van der Wal: In every section of my proposal, I repeated how each of the funding criteria was addressed. I also cross-referenced between sections, adding "(see section 2.1)" to recognise that I made a similar point before.

7. Write the proposal in clear language.

Once you have decided on a real-world problem to study, built a team of project partners and interdisciplinary colleagues, compiled your 3-4 research questions, and reminded yourself of the funding criteria, you are ready to start writing your proposal. Although you may have written general project descriptions for your potential project partners and colleagues from other disciplines, many of the details were probably not fleshed out until now.

The proposal should be written in easily accessible language and assume that the reader is not an expert in your field. Most funders will send your proposal to a team of reviewers, who will likely have PhDs but may be trained in a variety of fields. Reviewers may also include practitioners focused on your real-world problem.

Because the reviewers will likely not be in your field of research, you should avoid the expert terminology that you would commonly use for academic publications. If you feel that you must use expert terminology, then make sure to introduce each term every time you use it. If the term is unfamiliar to reviewers, you will still run the risk that you confuse and alienate them – because by page 7 they may not recall that you introduced the term on page 3. In the meantime, they may have made a cup of coffee or answered a phone call, or gotten otherwise distracted. For the same reasons, it is important to avoid acronyms (e.g., write 'judgement and decision making' instead of JDM and 'Centre for Decision Research' instead of CDR).

[Research on reading comprehension](#) suggests that texts that are written in less complicated language are easier to understand and liked better, even among readers with higher levels of education. Texts become easier to read if you use shorter words, of 1-2 syllables, because those words tend to be less academic-sounding and less commonly used in everyday language. Most words of 3 syllables or more have shorter synonyms you could use instead. For example, you could write 'study' instead of 'investigate', 'plan' instead of 'propose' and 'test' instead of 'examine.' If you consistently use shorter words, you will also end up with more room to discuss the necessary elements of your proposal.

Texts are also easier to read if you use shorter sentences. Sentences that run over multiple lines, and go on and on, while using a lot of commas, like this one, are harder to read (!). As a rule of thumb, I recommend that you use no more than 2 clauses per sentence. If you have more to say, start another sentence.

Finally, texts will be more compelling if you 'show' as well as 'tell.' Do not say that your proposal is novel, but say *why* or *how* your proposal is novel. The fact that no one has looked at your topic before is

not sufficient evidence of its novelty. After all, it might be possible that no one looked at it before because they deemed it uninteresting. So, explain *why* your proposal is novel and interesting!

Actual examples.

Gabriella Eriksson: If you tend to write long sentences, you may worry that you are losing the gist of what you want to express by shortening sentences. Ask someone else to read it to test whether your message is getting through!

Cäzilia Loibl: I recommend hiring a technical editor to help smoothen the final version of the proposal. I did so for my project and thought it was totally worth it!

Simon McNair: Think about how you might explain your project to a friend, or family member. What level of depth would you go to, and what language would you use? Simplifying your expression can feel like you are foregoing detail, but a full breakdown of the specifics is not typically required for a grant proposal. Keeping sentences shorter also forces you to be more assertive in making your point.

Yasmina Okan: As a non-native English speaker, I was always keen to use complex academic English terms after I learned them. I thought that using those terms might help to impress reviewers! However, in the process of writing grants (and often also papers) I learned that this might achieve the opposite effect. After learning expert academic terminology, it is easy to forget that it might not be meaningful to colleagues from other disciplines. Therefore, I now always try to ask myself: could I write this in a simpler/shorter way?

Natalie van der Wal: A 'show and tell' example from my project proposal [with comments added]: "*Our unique team has the interdisciplinary and practical expertise needed to improve evacuations. [Natalie van der Wal] has expertise in state of the art 'agent-based' computer modelling of crowd movements [references to my work]. [Wändi Bruine de Bruin] has worked more than 20 years in risk communication, as applied to terror and other risks [references to Wändi's work]. An Advisory Group [consisting of project partners and interdisciplinary collaborators] will share experience in evacuation emergencies, ensuring that models and research are realistic and meet needs for improving real emergency evacuations.*"

8. Seek lots of feedback.

Even if you follow all the recommendations provided above, there might still be sections of your proposal that are unclear – at least to some. To strengthen your proposal, ask other people to read it. Don't just ask colleagues from your own field for feedback, because most likely they will share your views and be familiar with your arguments and your wording. Ask your project partners and your interdisciplinary team members to take a look as well. At almost every university, there are also people whose job it is to help with proposal writing. They will know what funders look for and how to improve your writing. Most likely, they will also know others in the university who have had success in writing proposals, and might be willing to provide feedback. For certain funding bodies eg ESRC and NERC, [your university will likely have a rigorous peer review process](#) in place, which you must follow.

The more rounds of feedback you receive, the better it is. If you send everyone who has agreed to provide feedback the same version of your proposal, they might all catch the same typo or the same poor

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argument structure. Therefore, plan for multiple rounds of feedback from different people. Arrange ahead of time when each person will look at the proposal, and revise the proposal after each set of feedback. Make sure that you have planned your proposal writing efforts over enough time, so that you can have these multiple rounds of feedback.

Actual examples.

Gabriella Eriksson: I got feedback from colleagues in academia at an early stage. Wändi was very supportive through the whole process and she also put me in contact with the Leeds University Business School Research and Innovation Office and the University of Leeds EU funding team. We got great feedback and I owe a big THANK YOU to Margaret Credland and Kathryn Watson.

Cäzilia Loibl: The Leeds University Business School Research and Innovation Office and the EU funding team provided the most valuable feedback regarding the flow of the proposal and the content of each section. One of the officers read several versions of the proposal drafts and provided detailed, excellent feedback.

Simon McNair: I began by seeking feedback from colleagues with experience in writing successful proposals. Next, I sought feedback from other early-career researchers who I knew were also writing proposals - a process that was facilitated by the University of Leeds as part of the Leverhulme grant writing process. Finally, I got feedback from the dedicated people at the Leeds University Business School Research and Innovation Office.

Yasmina Okan: For my proposal I sought feedback from interdisciplinary colleagues at the University of Leeds and other international institutions. I also received excellent feedback from Kathryn Watson at the Leeds University Business School Research and Innovation Office.

Natalie van der Wal: I planned multiple rounds of feedback with Wändi Bruine de Bruin, as well as from people in the Leeds University Business School Research and Innovation Office and EU funding team who specialise in grant writing and research impact. These feedback rounds led me to rewrite the grant proposal from the start (twice), but it became so much stronger as a result. I like to add that it is important to develop a 'growth mindset' when writing a grant proposal. Don't get down or upset when you receive critiques, but aim to learn from them to improve your proposal and research ideas.

9. Don't give up

There is no guarantee that your proposal will be funded. In fact, it is more likely that it will be rejected than that it will be funded. However, as with a journal article, you might use reviewers' comments to improve your proposal and submit it elsewhere. Many of my funded proposals were not funded on the first try. As you can see below, many of my colleagues' funded proposals were not funded on the first try either.

Even if your initial proposal ends up not getting funded at all, the process of writing the proposal will not have been for nothing. You will have generated new research ideas that have expanded your horizons due to the involvement of project partners and academics from other disciplines. Your team will have gotten excited about the prospect of working together. My experience is that other projects will likely

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grow out of the investments you have made. Some of those projects might be easy to implement without external funding. Some of those projects might be implemented by funding through other means. If you are at the Leeds University Business School, you may be eligible for schemes such as Small Research Grants, Impact Support funding or Engagement funding. There may also be internal funds available from a project partner or another team member. As you develop those projects, you will improve your experience with interdisciplinary and impactful research, your publication outputs, and your research profile. Ultimately, that should help you to write stronger research proposals into the future.

Actual examples.

Gabriella Eriksson: My project on speeding risks was rejected at first. Based on the feedback I received, I improved the proposal and was funded on the second try. It was well worth the time and effort!

Căzilia Loibl: For my project on financial distress in older adults, I was funded on the first try. We were perfectly placed when we submitted in 2012 due to the EU focus on older adults' welfare.

Simon McNair: For my project on reducing financial distress among clients of debt advice agencies, I tried three different funders. Each rejection helped me to further fine-tune and amend the project proposal based on feedback from the funders. Despite the initial rejections, I wholeheartedly agree that preparing a proposal got me into the mind-set of thinking about what a three-year research agenda might look like for me. It also meant that I now had a relationship with an external organisation, so that even if the project was not funded, these relationships could yield other projects.

Yasmina Okan: Before my project on cervical cancer was funded, I wrote three different proposals on a similar topic. The feedback that reviewers provided on those previous proposals helped me to prepare a stronger funding application for Cancer Research UK.

Natalie van der Wal: For my project on emergency evacuations, I was funded by the European Union on the first try. However, I did have two rejections on previous proposals. You will improve your grant writing with experience.