

Top Tips for Grant-Writing for Postdocs: dos and don'ts

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Overview of presentation

- Our role
- Applying for a research grant (UK funders; EU)
- Dos and Don'ts
 - Things to consider when applying for a grant
 - How to structure case for support
 - Grantsmanship
- Questions

Research Facilitators: What we do

- Meet with people at all career stages to discuss research ideas/plans & explore potential ways of funding them, advise on schemes
- Provide detailed constructive feedback on how to strengthen grant applications, pathways to impact statements
- Feedback on responses to peer reviewers
- Participate in mock interview panels
- Coordinate internal processes for schemes with institutional cap on numbers or when required to manage demand
- Funding opportunities bulletins
- Grants workshops & ‘drop-ins’/‘surgeries’
- Research initiatives (strategic)
- UCL - Arts & Humanities, Social & Historical Sciences, Laws, School of Slavonic and East European Studies and Institute of Education

Henriette's background

- MA, PhD
- 3 years as a lecturer
- 7 years working for a funder
 - More than thousand research grant applications
 - Thousands of referee reports
 - Funding recommendations on a couple of hundred applications
 - Funding Committee meetings

Jacob's background

- 4 years in research consultancy & research ethics
- 5 years working for a research funder (bioethics & medical humanities)
- 6 ½ years in the university sector (across esp arts, humanities & social sciences, plus environmental & health sciences)
- Experience also in doing & thinking about public engagement

Before applying for a grant

- What do you plan/want to do (think feasibility!) – for *most* postdoc grants, should not be (or look like) continuation/extension of PhD
- How much do you need/want?
- Pick your (potential) funder and scheme carefully
 - Open account with funder
 - Help notes/instructions
 - Scheme notes/docs
 - FAQs

Key things funders are looking for

- An excellent research idea/project, with potential to make significant contribution to knowledge/existing scholarship
- A (very) good fit with what funder looking for (remit, particular scheme, particular call)
- An excellent person/team, with right expertise & experience
- The right host institution(s)
- A well-written proposal, making a compelling case

Team: Typical roles on a grant

- PI (Principal Investigator, Principal Applicant)
- Co-I (Co-Investigator, Co-Applicant)
- RA (Research Assistant – postdoctoral)
- PhD student
- Collaborator
- Consultant
- Advisory board/stakeholder committee

Practicalities: Application timetable

- Institutional deadlines – the funder’s deadline is unlikely to be your only deadline
- Colleagues (costing, feedback, etc.)
- Staff availability
- Funder’s procedures
- Decision process
- Earliest and latest start date
- Recruitment

UCL procedures for Research Grant Applications

- Head of Department and Departmental Administrator
- Sponsor/mentor
- Department
 - Research Committee
 - Internal peer review
- Research Services
 - Pre-Award Administration
 - European Research and Innovation Office
- Dean/Vice-Dean (Research)
- Office of the Vice-Provost (Research)
- Research Facilitators

Funder's procedures

- Outline/full application
- Eligibility check
 - Applicant & application
- (Shortlisting panel)
- Peer review
- (PI response to referee reports)
- (Interview)
- (Need to attend meeting/event)
- Panel meeting
- Funding decision
- If successful, reporting back to funder
- Assessment of reports on funded applications

How to lay 'case for support' out

1. **Aims** in terms of seeking to advance knowledge & understanding & make ground-breaking/significant contribution to state of art (existing scholarship)
2. **State of art/research context**, existing scholarship, other research in area & **what contribution will make** to advancing knowledge
3. **Detailed research Qs/hypotheses/issues/problems** that will address in course of research, **objectives**
4. **Research methodology & methods** to answer/engage with/test research Qs/hypotheses/issues/problems
5. **Outputs & outcomes**
6. **Project management**

How to structure a case for support

- Research project and context
 - 25-30%
- Methodology, methods, sources and analysis
 - 60-65%
- Outputs, audiences and impact
 - 10%

Aims, research Qs, objectives

- You need to have a v clear idea about aims & objectives of research & present these v clearly
- It is critically important to clearly articulate research question(s)/hypotheses/clearly define research problem – one key overarching question, small number of 2° Qs (no ‘fishing expeditions’ or ‘tie-racks’)
- Aims vs objectives
- Do you have **SMART** objectives – **S**pecific, **M**easurable, **A**chievable, **R**elevant, **T**ime-limited?
- Think carefully about **feasibility**
- **Put research questions at** – or v close to – **start**
- Provide **some background** to the subject, **keeping in mind b/g of audience** (funder, peer reviewers)

Why does it matter?

- **What is funder looking for?**
- **Crucial to point to existing body of knowledge** (consider other literatures beyond own)
- Very important to **discuss this literature**
- Who are key authors? What are key points?
- **Key gaps? How engaging with existing scholarship, challenging work, making significant contribution to filling key gaps (no 'gap-filling')?**
- Is there **an important non-academic need?** (e.g. practice/policy)

Methodologies & methods

- **Methodology** – more than methods – **your intellectual/theoretical f/w & overall approach** - whose work/ideas/ways of conceptualising and approaching things will you draw on to develop your own? – can be continuation of literature discussion
- **Methods** – **what will actually do** – data, sample sizes & sampling methods, analytic techniques, lab work, surveys, interviews, focus groups, sources, archives/collections, data analysis etc.

More on methodologies & methods

- **Pick methodologies & methods clearly suited to answering research questions**
- **Justify choice of methodologies & methods – justify everything – refer to academic/methods literature – approach/research design, case studies, countries/sites, time period, sources, archives/collections, sample sizes & sampling methods, analytic techniques, study population/ interviewees/ survey respondents, data analysis, etc.**
- **Think carefully about multi-/cross-disciplinary work – need to be clear about value, how will work in practice**
- **Specify v clearly, in as much DETAIL as possible**
- **Is it feasible? Think about resources, project mgmt.**
- **Research ethics, vulnerability, data protection, etc.**
- **Data sharing, data management plans**

What to say in account of research design & methods

- **Start with outline of research design/overall approach to achieving your aims/objectives, including methodologies**
- **If adopting multi-/inter-/cross-/trans-disciplinary approach, say this at start of methods section, being clear about what mean, which disciplines (think carefully about how will work in practice)**
- **If mixed methods, again state clearly at start of methods section**
- **Justify choice of research design, approach, methodologies**
- **Once have outlined overall approach, then specify methods – what you will actually do – v clearly, in as much DETAIL as possible**
- **Is what you are proposing feasible given who's involved & resources?**
- **Set out clear timetable/workplan, outline key activities/tasks & when will do them**
- **If appropriate, research ethics, vulnerability, data protection, etc.**

Level of methodological detail

- For historical research
 - Time period, why
 - Locations, countries, sites, communities, why
 - (Kinds of) material, sources, archives/collections, locations, visits, why
 - Oral history – who, how many, why, recruitment, interviews, Qs, data analysis
 - Languages, linguistic expertise
 - How will draw on material, what kinds of insights
- For philosophical/theoretical research
 - Key material, theories, sources on which will draw, why
 - If appropriate, languages, linguistic expertise
 - How will begin to develop particular line(s) of argument, e.g.s

Level of methodological detail

- For social research
 - Locations, countries, jurisdictions, sites, communities, why
 - What kinds of data, sources, why, access
 - Study population, research participants, why
 - Sampling methods, sample sizes, numbers, why
 - Recruitment of research participants, access
 - Data collection tools – surveys, questionnaires (how developed, tested, how will develop, test), interviews, FGDs, Qs, participant observation (what?), etc., why
 - Languages, linguistic expertise
 - Data analysis methods/techniques, models, why...
 - Ethics, vulnerabilities of particular groups/individuals, safety of research participants, show awareness/sensitivity to issues, how will manage
 - Own/team's safety
 - Data protection
 - Data management, data sharing

Project management

- As appropriate, describe **team, roles & responsibilities, who will do what**, relationships between team members, **management structure**
- Advisory board – who, role, how often will meet
- **Mechanisms for communicating**, sharing data/material etc. – frequency of meetings, what will happen in them, electronic forms of communication
- **Work plan**, workpackages, workstreams, Gantt chart
- Objectives, tasks, deliverables, milestones
- **Timetable**

Outputs & outcomes

- **Outputs** tangible ‘things’ produced **vs. outcomes**
- **First & foremost, peer dissemination plans**
 - Articles in peer-reviewed journals – no., which journals
 - Books – who will/might publish?
- **Then (as appropriate for funder) ‘impact’ beyond academy**

UK Research Councils' Definition of Impact

- **Academic impact**: contribution to existing scholarship in one or more academic disciplines
- **Impact beyond academy**:
'the **demonstrable contribution** that excellent research makes **to society and the economy**'
 - Creative economy
 - Public engagement
 - Quality of life, health & wellbeing, environment
 - Effectiveness of public services & policy
 - Economic performance & competitiveness, new products, new businesses

Further guidance on what 'Impact' is

- **UK ESRC categorisation of 'Impact'**
 - **Instrumental** - influencing dev of policy, practice or service provision, shaping legislation, altering behaviour
 - **Conceptual** - contributing to understanding of policy issues, reframing debates
 - **Capacity building** - technical & personal skill development

Pathways to Impact

Key questions:

- 1) Who will benefit?
- 2) How will they benefit?
- 3) What will you do to realise these benefits?

Possible activities:

Publications (e.g. policy briefs, professional magazines), talks, workshops, websites, training, secondments, schools, plays, exhibitions, 'user' involvement in project design from outset, advisory committees, etc., etc.

Top tips:

- **Make it project-specific**, not generalised
- **Show clear understanding of contexts & needs of users**
- **Tailor activities to users' needs**; evidence of appropriateness?
- **Engagement** rather than dissemination
- **Include evidence of existing engagement with users**, key contacts & collaborations on which will build, **prior experience**
- **Outline planning & management of activities**, incl timing, who will do what, resources, budget
- **How will evaluate** whether have achieved benefits/impacts?

The application form

- Complete sections – do not ‘copy and paste’
- Reverse chronological order (CV, e.g. qualifications, appointments, publications)
- Attachments – required/optional, format etc

Presentation/grantsmanship

- Why should your application be funded?
- Convince peer reviewers and funding panel
- Writing 'I' is fine, especially in applications for personal awards (a team: 'we' or 'my team and I')
- Positive and confident statements (but not: 'I am the leading researcher in my field')

How to say the same thing in a different way

Instead of

- The project will study ...
- The project will fill a gap
....
- It is hoped that the project
will ...
- The proposed project ...

Why not write

- I will study ...
- I will undertake the first
ever study of
- I will
- My project ...

Presentation/grantsmanship

- Keep the audiences in mind
 - Peer reviewers
 - Panel members
 - Funder
- State the obvious
- Read information and follow guidelines
- Be kind to the readers (some repetition fine, signposting, ‘to the point’)
- No jargon
- No typos – sloppy application = sloppy research
- Feedback on drafts – peers, research support staff, friends & family

Typical key assessment criteria

- Calibre of applicant/team and track record
- Importance of project, dissemination and impact
- Skills required to carry out the project
- Appropriate institution
- Appropriate sponsor/mentor (if needed)
- Institutional support
- Fit to funder and scheme
- Quality of application/grantsmanship (including methodology/methods & feasibility)
- Value for money

Thank you!

Questions?