



Proposal Writing Tips for Newcomers

Mission statement

The Research Authority serves to promote excellence in science and to help foster the next generation of researchers and scientists. Our core task is twofold: to encourage high quality research and to help secure the necessary funding for the projects our scientists want to embark on.

Research Funding: How? When? Where?

For many people, research money at first is like the proverbial pot of gold at the end of the rainbow: you know it's **there**, but you can't get to it! In reality, the road may be bumpy but it is a lot easier.

When you start looking for research money, two things come in handy:

- (1) a research idea that is innovative, top-quality & realistic, and**
- (2) a lot of enthusiasm, or, if you want: ambition!**

The idea has to be truly special because competition is stiff, and the ambition will prove crucial to help you push the whole thing through to a successful end.

What you do next is wrap up your research idea as professionally as you can and look for someone to sell it to. The wrapping is called **research proposal**, the people you try to interest in it are **research foundations**.

For academic research you will be mostly applying to what we call **competitive research foundations**, often set up through government involvement and together generally covering



all academic fields of research. To mention only three of the most relevant ones:

- **ISF** — The Israel Science Foundation: www.isf.org.il
- **BSF** — The US-Israel Bi-national Science Foundation: www.bsf.org.il
- **GIF** — The German-Israel Foundation for Scientific Research & Development : gif.org.il/Pages/default.aspx

Then there are **independent foundations** created by not-for-profit organizations to promote a specific goal, such as

- **The Edmond De Rothschild Foundation:** edrf.org.il/programs/

or **private foundations**, i.e. foundations whose assets derive from the gift of an individual or family (often with a charitable purpose), or from a commercial company (with an altruistic streak). Examples are, respectively:

- Autism Speaks Inc., www.autismspeaks.org
- The Volkswagen Foundation: www.volkswagenstiftung.de

Either you try and target a suitable foundation yourself or you respond to the **calls for proposals** that established funding agencies publish at regular intervals.

Make extra sure to get hold of a research fund that has a clearly stated interest in the kind of research you are doing, i.e., consult the foundation's **guidelines**.

If it doesn't prove all that easy to locate a foundation that matches your original research layout, you can sometimes try and reformulate (or even redesign) your proposal and submit it to another foundation: even though likely to operate in a (slightly) different research area, it may offer you a better chance of success.

At the RESEARCH AUTHORITY it is our job to help smoothen your way through the whole bureaucratic process. Right now there are close to 500 active funding sources for which you can directly download forms and guidelines via our website.

What's (in) a Proposal?!

Basic Structure

Keep two questions in mind you when you start writing:

WHAT do my reviewers expect to find &



WHERE do they expect to find it?

Put everything in the right place and half of the battle is won. Luckily, most research proposals systematically break down into the following 7 main items:

- Title
- Abstract
- Scientific background

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| <ul style="list-style-type: none">• Objectives & expected significance ◀ start here & then: ▲&▼ |
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- Methodology
- Bibliography
- Budget

1. TITLE

The most important single string of words in your whole proposal!

It's the first thing people will see and your first chance to herald that you're offering something new, different. **But keep it for last:** should match your research question and ideally also offer a hint of how your project stands out from the crowd.

Key words: select these super carefully so as to help insure your proposal lands on the desk of the right kind of reviewer!

2. ABSTRACT

usually ca. 150-250 words —and after your title

your second chance to grab the attention of the people who will be evaluating your proposal!

It should speak directly to scholars in your own and related fields but sometimes also to lay people. Make sure to include, as briefly as you can, a description of (1) objectives, (2) methodology and (2) significance of your research.



3. SCIENTIFIC BACKGROUND

Show how your Research Objectives (RO) are **grounded in the state of the art** (SOTA) and how your project will take a **significant step beyond that**. It helps if here you simply

- survey a select group of studies that provide the basis for your proposal—they'll go into your bibliography
- highlight how they contribute to your study, help give shape to the main objectives of the project you're submitting, and
- outline in what way(s) your project will go beyond them

If you've just gotten your PhD or are lucky enough to have already one post doc behind you, **use this section astutely to reinforce your own scholarly profile**, especially if you don't have all that many publications yet (and how could you?!).

People can tell a lot from the way you deal with the literature. For example, you'll be making decisions about what and who to include and who and what to leave out. If there is a controversy, spell out your own stance towards it. If already here you have a chance to show you made a significant contribution to the field, e.g., in your PhD or a forthcoming article, drop the "we" and use "I".

What about people out there who think differently from you or even will disagree and who may get to read your proposal—think of a clever way to disarm or neutralize them, if you can: will you incorporate them here and include them in your bibliography? Give them a passing mention or pay them more attention (than you actually think they deserve)?

By the end of the Scientific Background section reviewers should have

- (1) **no doubt how and why your RO are special**, and
- (2) **formed an optimal idea of your own qualities as a researcher**.

Often, before reading Scientific Background, reviewers will first check out your Research Objectives: they **know** already **what** you're going to do—now convince them you're **the right person to do it!**



4. RESEARCH OBJECTIVES & EXPECTED SIGNIFICANCE

The heart of your proposal: start building from here and then work backwards and forwards. First, state the main goal of your project as clearly as you can. Break it down into the specific research objectives you want to investigate. Ideally, already your first sentence should alert reviewers that you're on to something novel....

Unless you're doing philosophy, keep your objectives concrete and achievable, and list them in approximate order of importance or potential contribution.

Make sure the **methodology** & **budget sections** that follow tie in exactly with your objectives: together they will help reviewers assess the **logic** and **feasibility** of your research project.

Significance:

In what crucial ways do you expect your findings or results to take the field beyond the state of the art?

What is the **novelty value** of your project for the particular call for proposals you're responding to or vis-à-vis the aim of foundation you are approaching? Crudely put: **Who needs it?!** And **why now?!**

5. METHODOLOGY

How you'll go about solving the problem you stated, validate your hypotheses, &c. As most of the funding you're asking for will go to these activities, reviewers are likely to scrutinize this section very carefully.

Whether you're doing quantitative or qualitative research, most items will be familiar, e.g.:

- procedure and data collection
- research design:
 - describe the specific methodology you've chosen
 - why it is suitable in your case
 - what are its strengths and limitations
 - whether experimental, case study, ethnographic, &c.
- data analysis
- power analysis (to calculate & justify sample size)



- instrumentation or apparatus:
 - survey questionnaires, scales; materials, &c.

Here especially it is helpful to have a trusted colleague you can turn to for a critical opinion.

6. BIBLIOGRAPHY

Will contain the references you've used throughout the proposal (see Scientific Background section above). The ISF asks you to indicate (*) which of these are of special importance to your research: again, a perfect chance for you to highlight scholars the foundation might approach as reviewers!

7. BUDGET

This of course is what you do it for: money! But don't go overboard. Try to be as realistic as you can when determining the costs of carrying out your research activities: you'll be asked to **justify your budget requests.**

Inflated budgets are liable to reduce your chances!

Most funding agencies set an upper limit. Find out what rules you'll have to stick to as to which costs you can charge to the project and which you cannot. Important, too, is whether you are given flexibility to shift funds among budget categories.

“More specifically”:

You yourself are 100% sure that the project you're submitting merits all the funding it needs. But how do you convince your reviewers—who by the time they get to your proposal may already have read 53 others, have become bored and tired and are liable take no more than a few minutes to make up their minds?

“Keep It Short& Simple”:

- **Make sure your language is direct and lucid**
- **Use active verbs as much as possible** (controversial: passive voice works fine when describing procedures, tests &c.: when describing your own work (pilots!), revert to active “I” voice!)



- **Break up long sentences**

Reviewers are liable to skip and skim a lot, so:

- **Make smart use of headings**
- **Start paragraphs with topical sentences**
- **Strategically repeat key phrases and words**
- **Use white spaces to set off significant items**

Your proposal will be read and assessed by experts in your own field of research, but relative "outsiders" may also be involved (check guidelines!) Reviewers for popular foundations are quite often overwhelmed by applications and tend to evaluate in rather a short time, therefore:

- **Make sure you get their attention from the start**
- **Present your ideas as clearly as you can**

Always keep in mind that you need to convince the foundation to throw their grant money **your** way! That is, besides innovative ideas clearly presented,

- **Your own competence as researcher must stand out:**
Be keen to highlight your own profile as scholar/scientist throughout the proposal: show you have full command of the literature (Background), highlight significant markers in your academic career so far (post-doc fellowships, pilot projects, &c.), make sure your CV contains the right items, &c.

Check them out:

A marvelous piece on scientific writing available as a free download is: **George D. Gopen & Judith A. Swan, "The Science of Scientific Writing,"**

www.ou.edu/englhale/gopenswanrev.ppt

The full article is attached too as a PDF file.

Crucial:

If you know you'll be submitting a research proposal somewhere in the future, get a few things down on paper already **now!** — elementary stuff that you'll be able to turn into a full proposal when your deadline is approaching:

- **Make sure you've got ample time for revisions!**
(nobody ever has...)