

Seeking Funding:
A Manual for Faculty
in Theological Education

*Writing Effective Proposals:
Candid Suggestions for Theological
Faculty Preparing Grant Proposals*
by **Judith Berling**



The Association of Theological Schools
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by Judith A. Berling

Over the past twenty years, I have had a range of experiences with the joys and frustrations of faculty seeking funding for their research. While I was dean of the Graduate Theological Union (GTU), we established the first Faculty Grants Office in a freestanding theological school. The GTU Faculty Grants Office served our community for five years, and then became the Faculty Resource Center of ATS, for which I served on the initial Advisory Committee. Serving on selection committees for five competitive fellowship programs has provided me with another perspective about what makes for a solid grant proposal. Applying for grants to support my own work has given me considerable experience as an applicant, sometimes successful, sometimes not. This essay is intended as practical advice and candid reflection on what I have learned from seeing the faculty grants process from all sides.¹

Most faculty are comfortable with and proficient in the academic genres of their particular sub-field, be it biblical studies, church history, or womanist theology. Each of these sub-fields has its distinctive conventions for academic writing and a set of issues that are addressed by the field.

The challenge for many faculty is that grant writing is a separate genre, with a distinctive audience. Unless one has served on selection committees, the nature and characteristics of the audience for grant proposals is unknown, making decisions seem more mysterious and arbitrary than is the case. Faculty are often well aware of the audience of their project, but they are less certain about the audience for their proposal. Because effective communication always entails writing for one's audience, it is important to consider the audience of the proposal and the context in which the proposal will be read. What follows is common sense, offered with the hope that it will provide some specific notion of the practical context of the genre of the grant proposal.

¹ In writing this article, a useful resource was "On the Art of Writing Proposals: Some Candid Suggestions for Applicants to Social Science Research Council Competitions" by Adam Przeworski and Frank Solomon, published by the Social Science Research Council. I wish to acknowledge its role in inspiring and shaping my own reflections. I also wish to thank Cheryl Tupper Brown, Maija Beattie, and Kathleen Kook, three respected colleagues who read this essay in draft form and provided valuable comments and suggestions.

The Audience and Context of a Grant Proposal

A. The selection committee is broader than a sub-discipline.

When faculty give papers within highly specialized sub-disciplines, submit articles or reviews to highly specialized newsletters or journals, read books in their fields, or attend specialized colloquies, they are moving within narrow worlds of shared vocabulary and theoretical assumptions. Faculty have fine-tuned academic voices for a particular stream of academic discourse.

However, virtually all research grants are broader than a sub-discipline. To be successful grant writers, faculty must articulate the substance and significance of their work in a broader context. Theological faculty apply for grants for which selection committees will represent one or all of the following: a broad range of theological disciplines, scholars from many theological backgrounds, and scholars from the humanities and/or social sciences. Members of selection committees are chosen for their excellence as scholars and for their interest in a range of intellectual and scholarly issues, so that they will not simply be “advocates” for their own discipline or sub-discipline. Yet even those with broad interests cannot be specialists in all the sub-disciplines, because they do not know or share the technical vocabularies and the epistemological biases, nor do they have knowledge of the “important issues” in a sub-field, the state of debates in the literature of all the sub-disciplines, or a consensus about the direction of a sub-field.

Clearly, to write for a selection committee, applicants must make clear and explicit what they assume or merely make reference to in writing for their own sub-fields. A grant proposal must orient its readers succinctly and pungently to the issues in which the proposal is grounded and their significance both for the sub-field and for a wider academic audience.

B. Selection committee members read a great many proposals in a brief period.

This obvious and even banal fact has important consequences, as any faculty who has worked intensively through a large stack of papers already knows.

Effective grant proposals are memorable and begin with something engaging and significant. An engaging introduction grabs the attention of the reader and provides a momentary peak in hours of reading. Clarity and directness of style are also much appreciated by readers who must read dozens of applications; there is no time to spend excavating shards of insight from turgid prose. Grant proposals need to be written in a fluid, even scannable style, so that a reader can quickly locate a key point, in order to defend the proposal in committee deliberation. The effective proposal will not only communicate its substance, but also garner the interest of a reader from another field.

C. Grant competitions are often highly competitive.

With an increase in the number of faculty applying for a steady or shrinking number of grants, some grant competitions are very competitive. In some cases, staff review applications and eliminate those which they deem not competitive, without sending them on to the selection committee. In other cases, the committee does this work itself.

It is important that applicants take care so as to make this vital first cut. The primary criteria are:

1. Has the applicant supplied all of the required information by the deadline?
2. Does this grant meet the criteria of the program?

These two points seem easy to meet, and indeed they are. But it is the case that faculty sometimes pay insufficient attention to the preparation of proposals and thus miss the cut.

Grant deadlines are firm because the materials must be assembled and prepared for reviewers on a fixed deadline. If the competition is stiff, staff will not include applications that are incomplete as of the deadline.

The second point is even trickier. Faculty (and I am guilty of this myself at times) become so engrossed in the intellectual substance of their project that they spend inadequate time in the proposal demonstrating that it meets the criteria of the grant program. No matter how fascinating a project is, if it does not meet the criteria, it will not be funded. And, because of the large numbers of applications, reviewers have to be able to glance quickly at the proposal and verify that it meets the criteria.

A good rule of thumb is to share your proposal and the grant criteria with a few colleagues outside of your sub-field. Ask them if they can see that your proposal meets the criteria of the program, and whether they understand your explanation of the project.

D. The selection committee reviews and decides on the basis of the proposal.

This is a common-sense point, but one sometimes forgotten, particularly by faculty with an excellent research record.

The grant is not decided on the basis of the past reputation or accomplishments of the applicant. Even if those two factors are strong, it is this particular proposal that must carry the weight of the application. I have served on committees which, with some anguish, turned down applications from highly regarded faculty colleagues because the applicants had not given sufficient care to articulating their particular proposals. Despite

our respect for these persons, their proposals did not and could not compete with more carefully polished applications. Committees must decide on the basis of the proposal actually before them.

E. A well-prepared proposal requires an investment of time and takes the application process seriously.

When there are more “good” proposals than can be funded, the quality of preparation of a proposal can give it an edge over other worthy applications. A high quality proposal requires time to prepare, and faculty should begin the process well in advance of the deadlines.

The first evidence of care is that the applicant attended to all guidelines and provided all requested information. If this has been done well, it is evident that this application is appropriate for this competition and is not simply a boiler-plate proposal sent to multiple funders without attention to the guidelines of each grant program.

Second, the depth of preparation of a proposal is manifested in the following:

- There is a clear thesis statement for the project.
- It is clear how the project will proceed (methodology, timeline).
- Outcomes and products are specified, and these fit the grant guidelines.
- Significance and importance is stated: Who cares about this project? To what audience(s) will it contribute?

- There is evidence of why the applicant is the most appropriate person to do this project: how it builds on and grows out of his or her previous work, what particular tools and backgrounds the applicant brings.
- There is an awareness of how the project is located in terms of other scholarship and other scholars.
- There is a solid and thoughtful bibliography that helps to “place” the project within the world of scholarship.
- The budget has been thoughtfully prepared; it is realistic, matches the description of the methodology of the project, and follows the guidelines of the grant.
- Appropriate references have been listed.

Needless to say, such thorough preparation takes time. It is critical to begin well in advance of the deadline. Allow lead time for items often left to the last moment, such as budget and references.

F. Proposals are often reviewed within their larger context(s).

No project stands alone, and this is particularly true of a project for which funding is sought.

Reviewers are interested in the role this project plays in the applicant's ongoing work, or the work of others with whom she or he has collaborated or been in conversation. Applicants for small grants, in particular, often need to explore how this small grant helps build on (brings to completion or turns a significant corner on) an ongoing project, or how it is preparing the way for a larger project in the future. Applicants for larger grants are asked to place this project within their own writing trajectory or that of a larger field. In some cases, a project must be demonstrated to contribute to the "world" of the grant program itself, or the world which the program seeks to serve.

Conclusion

In this brief essay I have sought to provide practical advice on the art of writing effective grant proposals by focusing on the importance of recognizing the audience and context of this genre of writing. Each grant program has its own distinctive character; applicants are urged to research and attend carefully to the guidelines of programs to which they apply. Moreover, the various fields of theological studies differ markedly in terms of the grant programs to which one might apply and the specific strategies for success in those applications.

Grant proposals are written for a distinct audience quite different from that of standard academic writing. It is wise for faculty to ground themselves in the literature about grant writing and work to adapt to the requirements of the genre as they develop grant proposals.