Proposal Development Best Practices & Other Tips

Find the right place to send your proposal (e.g., NSF, NIH, DoD, DoE, NASA, corporate or private foundation, etc.).

Sign up for new funding opportunity notifiers or check manually and regularly for new announcements.

Read the proposals of other investigators in your field. Look at the strategy of the proposals, especially the successful ones! But look at unsuccessful ones, too, especially if you have access to the reviews.

Start modestly. Program directors are looking for well-defined proposals that are within your capability and that have realistic budgets. Larger schemes come with experience. Re-read the proposal through the eyes of the reviewer and rework the proposal until it is absolutely clear.

Seek advice from senior colleagues who have grant experience. Ask them to read and criticize your proposal. See if they understand what you are going to do, as well as why and how you are going to do it, and what the end result will be.

Follow agency-specific guidelines when preparing your proposal.

Address potential show-stoppers upfront. Don't try to hide them or pretend they don't exist. Show you have a "Plan B" to deal with obstacles.

Some organizations require pre-registration, or require a nomination or invitation. Pay attention to these deadlines too, not just the proposal deadline.

Imagine the reviewer on an airplane to D.C. with 30 grants to read in 8 hours
- Reviewers first look for a reason to throw you out
- Follow the directions
- Do NOT cheat on page limits or fonts
- Don't be sloppy: spell correctly & use written (not spoken) rules of grammar
- Tell the reviewer WHY your work is important

Self confidence is as important as the science
- You do not have to be a senior investigator
- Be confident in your abilities and the wording you use
- Do NOT give up after rejection
- Learn how to respond to a negative review

Attend workshops and webinars.
Prepare a checklist of tasks; assign deadlines for yourself and others
Start early & plan to submit early.
Create a proposal production schedule (timeline).
Keep a notebook or file handy for notes.
Contact the program officer (but do your homework first).
Line up colleagues in advance to review drafts.
Allow plenty of time to write the abstract (or project summary).
Understand the review process & review criteria.
Don't write the application for yourself (unless you are going to fund it yourself!!).