

PROPOSAL WRITING INFORMATION

Proposals for sponsored activities follow generally a similar format, although there are variations depending upon whether the proposer is seeking support for a research grant, a training grant, or a conference or curriculum development project. The following outline and explanation concern chiefly the components of a research proposal. This section concludes with a discussion of certain variations in format required if one is seeking support for other kinds of academic programs.

Research Proposals

Typical parts of a research proposal are:

Title (or Cover) Page

Abstract

Table of Contents

Introduction (including Statement of Problem, Purpose of Research, and Significance of Research)

Background (including Literature Survey)

Description of Proposed Research (including Method or Approach)

Description of Relevant Institutional Resources

List of References

Personnel

Budget

Inquiries to Private Foundations

Proposals to foundations have a better chance of succeeding if they are preceded by an informal contact. This contact is usually a brief (not more than two pages) letter outlining the proposed project, suggesting why the foundation should be interested in it, and requesting an appointment to discuss it in further detail. Such a letter permits an investigator to make inquiries to several foundations at once and gives an interested foundation the chance to offer suggestions before receiving the formal proposal.

This letter of inquiry is crucially important, and in preparing it investigators should avail themselves of the advice and help of the Division of Research Development and Administration. The project representative responsible for liaison with foundations is Julie Feldkamp (763-4522), feldkamp@umich.edu. She has information about most foundations and can advise about which foundations are most likely to support a particular project, as well as about timing, approach, budgetary matters, whom to contact, and so on. Sometimes she can also refer investigators to others within the University who have had experience with certain foundations, and she can help ensure that the proper University offices are kept informed about proposed approaches to foundations. Contacting Development's Corporate and Foundation Relations office for help in approaching and coordinating activities with foundations is always a good idea, as well. Contacts with some foundations are controlled by CFR and others are coordinated, and in any case, CFR can provide valuable consultation. Assistance in writing or editing letters is available from DRDA . These two DRDA offices will help investigators prepare effective inquiries.

Most foundations have specific areas of interest for which they award funds. It is essential that the grant seeker identify those foundations whose interests match the proposed project. Seldom will a foundation fund a project outside of its stated field of interest. DRDA has resources to help investigators identify the appropriate foundations.

The initial letter of inquiry should demonstrate that the investigator is acquainted with the work and purposes of the particular foundation being approached and should point out a clear connection between these and the proposed project. A letter so generally phrased that it could be a form letter is almost certain to be disregarded. An effective letter will discuss the significance or uniqueness of the project: Who will benefit? Who cares about the results? What difference will it make if the project is not funded? It will give enough indication of step-by-step planning to show that the project has been thought through and that pitfalls have been anticipated. It will demonstrate the writer's grasp of the subject and his credentials to undertake the project. It will emphasize at the same time that this is a preliminary inquiry, not a formal proposal, and that the investigator will send further details if the foundation wishes, or, better yet, will visit the foundation to discuss the project in depth. (Travel funds for this purpose are usually available through DRDA.) It is unnecessary in the preliminary inquiry to include a detailed budget, although an overall cost estimate should be mentioned.

A good letter, then, might begin something like the following: "Because of the interest the _____ Foundation has shown in _____, I am writing to solicit its support for a project that will _____." This should be followed by a sentence describing the program, the institution, and another one or two concerning the need for and uniqueness of the project.

The body of the letter should consist of three or four paragraphs giving the context or background of the project, its scope and methodology, the time required for its completion, the institutional commitments, and any special capabilities that will ensure the project's success. A separate paragraph might be given to some of the major categories of the proposed budget, including a rounded total direct cost estimate, and mention of any matching fund or cost-sharing arrangements, either in dollars or in-kind contributions.

The last paragraph could be patterned along these lines: "If the _____ Foundation is interested in learning more about this program, I will be happy to travel to _____ to discuss it in detail, or to submit a full proposal outlining my plans. My phone number in _____ is (____) _____ at work, and (____) _____ at home. I look forward to hearing from you soon."

In directories and other general sources of information, foundations often indicate their areas of interests in such broad terms (e.g., higher education or social welfare) that the investigator cannot tell with any confidence whether his project will be likely to interest a particular foundation. More detailed guidance can be gleaned, however, from the foundation's annual reports and from the list of projects that the foundation has actually supported. In general, foundations are interested in innovative projects that are (1) relevant to pressing national or regional problems, (2) relevant to new methods in education, (3) capable of serving as a model or stimulus for further or related work in its general area, (4) capable of being continued after the end of the funding period without further assistance from the foundation, and (5) not eligible for funding by governmental agencies or the investigator's own institution. The letter of inquiry should highlight whichever of these characteristics best fit the project at hand.