

# Write a winning research proposal

How do you write a research proposal that convinces reviewers and funders that your research should be funded?

This leaflet outlines the essential components of a winning proposal – whether you're applying for specific grants, open calls, scholarships, or other funding opportunities. Follow these guidelines to develop a compelling and fundable project.



## 1. Start with a strong, compelling idea

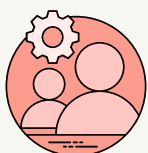
Catch the reviewers' attention with a strong idea that convinces them it's worth funding. Two things must be communicated clearly and convincingly:

- The importance of the research;
- and your/ the researcher's competence to execute it successfully.



## 2. Connect to existing research

Make a clear contribution to existing research by filling a theoretical gap, addressing an unresolved puzzle, or challenging conventional wisdom. Begin by describing a framework that places your research within a tradition of inquiry and a context of related studies. Knowledge is not created in a vacuum, you need to relate what you do to the scientific community.

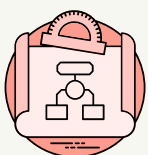


## 3. Ensure societal relevance

Choose a topic with societal relevance. Consider the following questions:

- Who is interested in this field?
- What do we already know about the topic?
- What has not been adequately answered in previous research and practice?
- How will this new research contribute to knowledge, practice, and policy in this field?

This does not just mean responding to existing public agenda items; it can also involve setting the agenda by highlighting the significance of the research.



## 4. Develop a convincing research design and methodology

A convincing research design and a solid methodology are based on a thorough literature review. A solid literature review will enable you to:

- Demonstrate the underlying assumptions behind the general research questions.
- Demonstrate your in-depth knowledge of related research and the intellectual traditions that inform and support the study.
- Identify gaps in existing research and prove that the proposed study will fill a demonstrated need.

The research design should show:

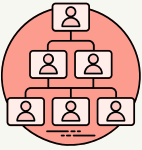
- How your project is logically built up.
- How the research questions and overall objectives will be answered.
- What data sources and data collection methods you will use.

You also need to identify possible ethical challenges and potential risks and how to mitigate these.



## 5. Plan with realistic goals

Establish a feasible plan of implementation and a realistic number of outputs. Show the reviewers that you have carefully considered what can be achieved within the defined research period and the proposed budget parameters. This implies a credible number of people involved in the research and an appropriate number of publications and dissemination activities. Show how you will organise the research – for example in thematic work packages or sub-teams, with a realistic time schedule for activities and deliverables.



## 6. Build a diverse, capable team

Build a solid and balanced research team and network of partners. Establish yourself as a credible project leader – do not be shy about your credentials and experiences that make you the perfect principal investigator. Think of how you can have a gender-balanced team, include different disciplines and approaches, ethnic/racial and age diversity. Remember that you will be collaborating and working with the team if you receive funding. So make sure you select individuals not just for their name or background, but also because you genuinely want to collaborate with them.



## 7. Develop a clear dissemination strategy

Develop a convincing plan of dissemination and communication, with defined target groups.

- **The dissemination and communication plan should reflect societal relevance and overall research objectives.**
- **Clarify who your audience is, and how you will disseminate and communicate your findings to them.**
- **Be creative, but realistic when deciding which communication methods to include, ensuring they fit within the available time and budget.**
- **Consider creating and incorporating new communication outputs and dissemination platforms beyond traditional publications, seminars, and workshops.**



## 8. Make your proposal error-free and readable

Create a technically correct document with accessible and accurate language.

Proofread the final text to ensure there are no spelling errors or unclear formulations, and that citations are correct and included in a list of references at the end of the document. A proposal that is both easily readable and formally impeccable significantly enhances the likelihood of securing funding.



## How to get there

- Think **building teams**, both in developing the proposal and in the project itself. Letting others read and comment on the proposal will help you to develop a good application.
- Be willing to **challenge your ideas** and invite others to give feedback. Make sure that you also have the time for reworking the draft after feedback.
- **Read other applications** to get a grasp of the format and the jargon. Ask colleagues who have submitted to the same or similar calls if you can see both their proposals and the assessment of their proposal (for both funded and not funded projects). Be mindful not to copy from others.
- **Know your audience** – who are the evaluators/reviewers, are they specialists or generalists? This is particularly important if the calls are on specific topics or research fields, or if the funders are looking for research to fill defined research gaps. For open calls with many different evaluation panels, make sure that you send your proposal to a panel with relevant scholars from the same field as yours.
- Demonstrate that you are **well-established within your field** (that you have succeeded before), but that you are open to learning something new (your previous success makes it convincing that you can learn something new). To prove this, you should work on **your CV** (often included as an attachment to the proposal). Your CV can demonstrate project leadership, publications, and other relevant previous experience.



## The crucial first page

### Make the first page shine!

Imagine you are a reviewer reading through many proposals in a short time. After reading several, it can be hard to stay focused. Because of this, the first page of a proposal receives the most attention and is crucial for quickly determining whether the project deserves funding.

**The main aim** of the project should be presented clearly and compellingly, ensuring the reader fully understands what the research is about. This can be formulated as a research question and/or as an overall objective.

### 1. State the research objective right away

Present the research question/overall objective as quickly as possible, preferably in the first paragraph. Do not make the reader impatient by only getting to the overall project objective at the end of the first page or later.

### 2. Highlight the methodology and team strength

Briefly present how the selected methodology and research team will make the research both possible and excellent.

### 3. Explain how your research fits the field

Situate the research question/overall objective within the field (gap, puzzle, agenda) and its societal relevance, and answer the questions in the call (if there is one).