The Grim World of Grant Writing

Writing the NIH Grant Proposal: A Step-By-Step Guide

By William Gerin

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Reviewed by Paul J. Silvia

Paul J. Silvia, Department of Psychology, University of North Carolina at Greensboro, P. O. Box 26170, Greensboro, NC, 27402-6170. E-mail: p_silvia@uncg.edu

Many senior faculty are perplexed by the mentoring expected by junior faculty. In "the old days," I have heard, professors were simply hired and expected to get to it—no new-faculty brunches, professional skills workshops, or mollycoddling mentors. Modern psychology's emphasis on professional development reflects the hard career environment faced by young faculty. It's harder to be a psychologist now. Compared to faculty hired in the 1960s, contemporary professors are expected to be enthusiastic teachers, cheery "departmental citizens," indefatigable researchers, sophisticated statisticians, prolific publishers, and successful grant getters. Publishing an article every 18 months was brisk in 1966; it probably won't get you tenure at a research-focused university in 2006.

Enter the class of "core skills" books, a recent trend in academic publishing. To help faculty deal with psychology's higher standards, professors have written books that offer advice on teaching (e.g, Dominowski, 2002), writing (e.g., Boice, 1990; Silvia, in press), and most other problems faced by modern faculty (e.g., Sternberg, 2003). Future historians of psychology will remark on the rise of these "self-help for psychologists" books, which reflect how high the standards have risen in the past few generations.

The need for help is most pressing for grant-writing. For modern researchers, grants are only partly about receiving money to fund research. Grants also raise one's status in the world of science, shore up a promotion-and-tenure dossier, and palliate agitated deans and provosts craving their next hit of indirect costs. Many researchers don't need grants to conduct their research—some knowledge comes cheap—but modern psychology's research culture prompts them to try. Nearly all research-focused departments expect new faculty to submit grant proposals; as a condition of

promotion, many departments now require new faculty to receive grants. Grant dollars haven't risen in line with the standards for grant writing, so researchers need all the help they can get.

William Gerin's *Writing the NIH Grant Proposal: A Step-By-Step Guide* is part of a cohort of help-you-get-a-grant books, and it appears during a grim time for grant seekers. Thin federal budgets have forced researchers to tighten their belts; a few researchers studying basic processes have had to go without pants entirely. It's bad form for a book reviewer to say that a book is a good, well-written book, but *Writing the NIH Grant Proposal* is a good, well-written book—it's practical and unpretentious. To provide advice, Gerin adopts the roles of cartographer and translator.

Cartography

This book's primary purpose is providing a map for developing, writing, submitting, and managing an NIH grant. Unlike other guides to grant writing, Gerin's book concerns grants from NIH only. This emphasis enables the book to delve into the tiny details of NIH proposals that frustrate and befuddle researchers. For much of the book, in fact, Gerin reprints NIH forms and explains how to complete the slots. Gerin tackles broad problems, too, like how to find reliable collaborators, write a compelling description of the proposed research, and deal with rejection and criticism.

Throughout his step-by-step guide, Gerin provides realistic words of encouragement and strategies for success. The book's central strategy, apparently, is "perfection." Unrealistic standards are bad, according to cognitive therapies, but they're adaptive when writing grant proposals. Throughout the book, Gerin emphasizes the necessity of (1) submitting a pristine, flawless proposal and (2) resubmitting a more perfect revision. It sounds obvious at first, but based on the slovenly proposals

submitted to funding agencies, many researchers haven't learned this lesson.

Translation

This book's secondary purpose is to translate the NIH guidelines into normal English. The NIH guidelines, currently embodied by the *Application Guide SF424 (R & R),* are disastrously written, as if they were composed by embittered tax attorneys. The writers of the NIH guidelines tried to be helpful—and trying seems to count for a lot in contemporary America—but they could have done better. Consider how they handled a simple task: telling people not to include too many references.

> Note this section (previously known as Literature Cited) should include any references cited in the Research Plan Component (see *Section 5.5* for details on completing that component). The reference should be limited to relevant and current literature. While there is not a page limitation, it is important to be concise and to select only those literature references pertinent to the proposed research (p. I-42).

Gerin, in contrast, writes like a normal person, which is a high compliment for a writer. Compare the NIH section with Gerin's sleek description:

> You know what the Literature Cited section is, and so you won't see this section in the example; it would not be useful to you. One comment, however: Although you are not constrained in terms of the length of this section, don't go crazy. Cite what you need to, and no more (p. 107).

Scrambling For Chairs

I suspect that many readers will come away from *Writing the NIH Grant Proposal* feeling

ambivalent about grant writing. While recognizing the many obvious virtues of grants, many researchers feel that psychology's scholarly culture has been perverted by its obsession with grant funding. When university administrators are more interested in research's profitability than quality, then hiring and promotion decisions become financial decisions. And if faculty are hired and fired based on grant funding, then some hard-to-fund areas of psychology (such as the history of psychology, for instance) will teeter upon extinction, threatened by the overpopulation of health, biological, and community psychologists. The table of scholarship is wide and wondrous—should we bar scholars who can't afford a chair?

References

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