

Make Your Case for Value-Added Benefits

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How well you describe the value-added benefits and impacts of your proposed research to the mission of the funding agency and/or the research field will be a principal factor in the decision to fund or not fund your proposal. Regardless of whether your proposed research is basic or applied, or to which federal research agency you submit your proposal, your funding fate will be determined by ***how well you make a compelling and convincing case for the value-added benefits of your research.***

Sometimes research agencies are very explicit in characterizing the meaning of “value-added benefits,” while in other cases their importance will be addressed more generally in the review criteria. In still other cases, the importance of addressing value-added benefits in the research narrative will be implicit in the mission of the agency itself, e.g., from reports, strategic plans, workshops, funding patterns, etc.

In all cases, a competitive research narrative needs to present a thoughtful, convincing, and informed case for the value-added benefits of the proposed research. ***There are typically four overarching backdrops or domains to which you will map the value-added benefits description in your research narrative: (1) agency mission, (2) research context/state of the field, (3) research synergies, and (4) broader impacts/dissemination, the latter meant in the generic sense and not necessarily in the NSF “broader impacts” specific sense.***

Moreover, mapping your value-added benefits description to one or more of these core domains is not a trivial task, although it need not be an onerous one if you have a thoughtful strategy for organizing your key arguments. Too often, however, ***proposals are declined for funding as the result of failing to address the value-added benefits requirement at all, i.e., it is simply overlooked,*** regardless of whether that requirement was explicit or implicit in the solicitation. In other cases, the value-added benefits discussion in a declined proposal were inadequately addressed, ***most commonly by overly general narrative claims unsupported by sufficiently convincing details and specifics.*** This is a common error in grant writing overall-- ***making generalized claims without convincing validation grounded in specificity.***

Excessive narrative generalizations lacking specifics are a tell-tale sign that the author(s) has not done the hard work of conceptualizing the proposed research in the ***core value-added/impacts contexts*** defined above, or is unable to do so. Either way, absent a credible and convincing value-added benefits description in the narrative, program officers and reviewers will find little reason to fund the research.

The four components above ***form a narrative platform or structure for your value-added benefits descriptions in your research narrative*** and each requires a thoughtful and informed response to be compelling and convincing to program officers and reviewers.

For example, at mission agencies, the value-added benefits of your proposed research to the agency’s mission are ***paramount in the funding decision.*** Unfortunately, many proposal authors fail to become ***sufficiently informed about the agency mission.*** And it stands to reason that it will be impossible to make a convincing case for the value and impact of your research ***if first you do not clearly understand the agency’s mission-critical research priorities to which***

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your proposed research must map. To belabor the point, since it is an important one to funding success, if you don't understand the mission of the funding agency, ***how can you possibly indicate how your proposed research advances that mission?***

This is a surprisingly common oversight, given the simplicity of resolving it, i.e., take the time to read through the solicitation and the review criteria carefully to understand the reasons the agency is funding the proposed work and what motivates the solicitation itself. In addition, review any referenced documents, reports, technical workshops, agency or program area strategic plans, etc., noted in the solicitation and seen by the agency as important influences on why the research is being funded and further elaborating on its importance to the agency mission.

Agencies reference documents in solicitations for a reason—they want you to knowledgably propose research that will advance their mission in some important way(s) and ***not waste your time or theirs on writing and reviewing proposals that have no significant relevance to the agency mission.*** For example, those submitting a preliminary proposal October 23 for an NSF ERC, at least those who will be competitive, will likely be well versed in the Engineering Grand Challenges promulgated by the National Academy of Engineering, along with other references in the solicitation.

At both mission agencies and basic research agencies, the value-added benefits of your proposed research will often have to be described in the ***research context/state of the field***, i.e., your proposed research must advance, impact, or transform the research field in some significant way. Similar to understanding an agency's mission in order to make claims about how your research brings value-added benefits to that mission, in this case you must be sufficiently knowledgeable about the research context/state of the field in order to make credible claims about how your proposed research advances the field in some important ways.

A common requirement in research solicitations will state that ***the agency will only be funding research that is novel, innovative, and transformative.*** Implicit in this statement is the requirement that the author(s) of the research narrative do more than merely echo, without detailed elaboration, the agency language about proposing novel, innovative, and transformative research. Making unsubstantiated claims for the novelty of the proposed research is a common failing of declined proposals. Think of program officers and reviewers as all being from Missouri—the Show Me State, or the elderly lady in the Wendy's commercial that asks "***Where's the beef!?***" ***Merely claiming your research to be novel does not make it so.*** You must demonstrate why the proposed research is novel in a credible way, ***including appropriate references to the literature.*** Here again, you cannot make a credible claim that your proposed research is novel and at the frontiers of your field, as NSF likes to describe it, without knowing the state of that frontier and the context in which your proposed research fits.

In other cases, the value-added benefits of your proposed research lie in the ***research synergies*** created. Success in research funding is all about being able to convincingly describe the research synergies that will occur if your research is funded. Moreover, keep in mind when writing your description of the ***value-added benefits derived from project synergies***, that ***research synergies occur at various scales.*** For example, first and foremost, particularly on interdisciplinary research and team proposals, you must clearly describe the project's core synergies that come about from multiple research strands that, in aggregate, comprise your overall research goals and objectives. Of course the common flaw in unfunded proposals is that

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the research strands are siloed rather than integrated in a way that promotes the value-added benefits of synergy. At the next scale, you may describe how these research synergies impact the agency mission, the field, and possibly other fields. ***Convincing descriptions of research synergies at multiple scales make for a very compelling research narrative and one likely to be funded.***

Lastly, the value-added ***benefits that accrue from your description of the broader impacts of your proposed research cast a very broad net*** that goes well beyond the direct benefits to the agency, the field, and the research synergies, and encompasses such domains as STEM education, societal benefits, training and innovation, among many others that you will argue are specific to your proposed research.

Thinking about the value-added benefits of your proposed research in a structured, well organized, specific, and detailed way when writing the research narrative will go a long way towards ensuring you funding success.