

Research Development & Grant Writing News

Optimizing the Proposal Planning and Development Process

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If you think of your available time and resources as investment capital and the writing of a proposal as an expenditure of time and resources, then faculty and those assisting them, will want to pursue an efficient proposal development process. Too often, faculty fail to anticipate in a detailed and realistic way the time and resources needed to develop and write a competitive proposal. Finding the time and resources needed to produce a competitive proposal represents a significant time management problem not only for faculty already committed to teaching, research, and service but also for the research offices that may assist them in this process.

Of course, “competitive” is the operative word here, as any time and resources invested in a noncompetitive proposal have been squandered. Therefore, developing an accurate and realistic assessment of the time and resource expenditures required to develop and write a competitive proposal is a critical step in deciding whether or not to pursue a solicitation. In this context, a competitive proposal is one that is reviewed positively enough to produce either a recommendation for funding or a recommendation sufficiently close to the funding boundary to encourage a resubmission.

How should faculty incorporate time for proposal development and grant writing into their other academic obligations? To make a reasonable estimate of the requirements for developing a competitive proposal, the faculty member must learn how to develop an accurate sense of the time required to write a competitive grant. If that time is not available, then any time committed to a likely noncompetitive grant is wasted. Submitting a proposal is easy, but submitting a competitive proposal that will rank in the top ten or fifteen percentile of all reviewed grants is difficult. So the decision to submit or not submit must be based on a realistic assessment of the time and effort available to complete the task at a high level of effort.

You can arrive at a reasonable estimate of a proposal’s time requirements by determining how long it will take to write one page of a competitive proposal based on a review of the solicitation. This procedure will help whether you are writing every page of a 15-page proposal or writing a 5-page contribution to a 25-page proposal. If you use this method and adapt it to your personal performance metrics, you will converge over time on a fairly accurate estimation of how much time you will need to write or participate in the writing of a competitive proposal.

Of course, determining the unit of time required to produce one submission-ready page of a competitive proposal will be a ball park estimate, but it should be possible to answer with more certainty than the question that perplexed medieval theologians wondering how many angels could dance on the head of a pin. If you are the PI and principal author of a proposal, it may be prudent to plan to spend eight hours to produce one page of research narrative.

This may seem inflated, but the unit of time you assign to producing each page of the research narrative will be filled by answering many questions unanticipated when estimating your proposal production time. Keyboard skills are not relevant to this calculation, but many

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other factors are, including the time you spend before even putting a word to the first page of the project description. For example, you must be prepared to

- analyze the solicitation and any referenced documents,
- discuss the solicitation with possible research partners,
- make the decision to submit or not to submit,
- configure any research collaborations,
- hold research development meetings,
- identify your research vision, goals, and objectives and map them to the solicitation,
- work with research and sponsored project offices,
- plan, organize, and develop the proposal production schedule, and
- outline the proposal as a template that fully responds to all of the solicitation's questions, objectives, and review criteria.

Simply answering these common questions laying the groundwork for writing the research narrative may require an investment of two hours per page, thereby leaving perhaps six hours per page for the remaining tasks required to finalize a competitive proposal. This remaining six hours of time per page will likely be consumed by completing such remaining key tasks as, for example,

- using the proposal template to draft responses to all the solicitation requirements,
- writing the initial complete first draft of the project narrative from this template,
- sending the draft out for review and edits and rewrites,
- writing a second complete draft of the project narrative based on review comments,
- sending the second draft out for review, edits, and rewrites,
- writing a near final draft of the proposal and continuing to fine tune iterations until due,
- writing the project summary,
- writing and compiling components required in supplemental documents, e.g., letters of commitment, data management plan, postdoc mentoring plan, biographical sketches, current and pending support, required support data, etc.,
- compiling references,
- completing the budget, and
- writing the budget justification.

Using the above examples, you can see many of the hidden costs that must be identified and accounted for before accurately determining the time it actually takes to produce one page of a research narrative. However, with experience, you will converge on your own personal metric of the time commitment you must make to either lead or participate on a proposal. For example, if you are serving as the PI of the proposal and the sole or principal author, you may have to increase your time unit cost per page of final narrative. Additionally, your allocation of this time commitment must account for other academic obligations as well, and must be scheduled over sufficient time to ensure that the proposal development activities do not distort your other obligations.

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However, it is also important to realize that if you are a coPI on a proposal and responsible for a narrative contribution of several pages addressing the role your research will play in the project, you may need to increase your assessment of the time required to bring competitive value-added benefits to the proposal. In this situation, an off-the-shelf-contribution of something you have written in the past, perhaps as part of another proposal, to explain your research topic will likely not represent a value-added benefit to the success of the proposed effort. In this situation, the hidden time costs of your participation as a team member bringing added value to the proposal may include:

- reading and understanding the solicitation and referenced documents,
- attending proposal development meetings,
- working with other coPIs to fully understand the role of their research in the project,
- understanding how your research complements and contributes to the proposed research,
- understanding how the research of other coPIs complements your research,
- drafting narrative text contributions written specifically for the current effort,
- making other contributions to the project as required for competitiveness, and
- providing high quality narrative and other contributions to the project on schedule.

As General Colin Powell once observed: “Everyone has a plan until they are shot at.” While no one is actually shot at during the writing of a research proposal, it may nonetheless feel as if you are being targeted during the process. Everyone will likely use different personal metrics to describe the actual unit cost of time per page of final text. To ensure that you have accurately assessed your own metric, identify the hidden time costs associated with developing and writing a successful proposal and avoid the temptation to underestimate the time required. To stop production on a proposal or to submit a proposal that clearly cannot compete represents opportunity and time lost.

Determining your time cost per page for developing and writing a competitive proposal is one helpful strategy for optimizing your proposal planning and development capacities.