

The Background Researcher on Proposals

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Many large and center-level research solicitations reference documents, reports, technical workshops, conferences, and the like, either internal or external to the funding agency, that form the underpinnings for the agency initiating and funding the research program. This is particularly the case for large, research center solicitations sponsored by NIH, NSF, DOE, DOD, and NOAA, among others, that represent major agency investments over five, ten, or more years, in topic areas critical to the agency mission. Reviewing and understanding the often numerous documents referenced in a solicitation can be a time-consuming but important task. Such a review can give the researcher a competitive advantage in a well-written and well-argued research narrative. Researchers often overlook this opportunity to enhance their competitiveness by hesitating to invest the time it takes to review referenced documents and cite them in their own research narrative where such references can bolster the case for funding.

Of course, references cited in the solicitation by the funding agency play an altogether different role in the research narrative than do the references to cited articles authored by members of the research team. These can convince program officers and reviewers of the experience and capacity of the research team to perform. Clearly, references to cited articles authored by team members, particularly those demonstrating a history of collaboration, are the more valuable. But arguments woven into the research narrative demonstrating the research team's understanding of its research within the broader context of the funding agency's motives can provide an additional competitive advantage in the review process.

After all, all grants, but particularly center-level and center grants, are highly competitive and so every opportunity must be taken to gain every possible competitive advantage, both large and small. While a brilliant idea and the capacity to implement and manage the research forms the essential core of a successful proposal, a multitude of other competitive advantages must be seized to ensure success in a highly competitive environment. ***No competitive advantage is too small to ignore in planning, developing, and writing a competitive proposal.***

An informed understanding of all the referenced documents in the research solicitation is one such area that offers another way to write a more complete, and hence successful, project description. Given this, someone needs to assume this role, particularly in the case of solicitations in which the funding agency embeds significant background references. This task can be performed by someone on the research team or by an experienced research development staff member. Regardless, the person in this role must have the capacity to ***translate a review of the documents referenced in the solicitation in a way that extracts relevant knowledge that can then be woven into the project narrative*** to clearly demonstrate the team's nuanced understanding of the role their research can play in advancing the goals and objectives of the funding agency.

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While many possible ways can be found to determine who might best play the role of researching the solicitation references for relevance to the research narrative, it is important that this role be fulfilled. The selected person should pursue this information early in the planning and development of the proposal so that the results can be seeded into the research narrative to make the project description stronger and better argued. Failing to perform this step represents a potential competitive advantage lost.