

The Role of Context in a Successful Proposal

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([Back to Page 1](#))

A fundable idea will be compelling in its significance to the field and/or will bring important value-added benefits to the funding agency's mission. Funding agencies don't fund small ideas offering small advances to the field, or modest value-added benefits to the agency's mission-critical objectives. Agencies want to fund [pick your superlative: *exciting, game changing, big, novel, transformative, innovative...*] ideas.

You will therefore want to write the project narrative keeping in mind reviewers' interest in how your ideas could impact the field, and/or how they will bring value-added benefits to the agency's objectives. The reviewers will base their assessment of your proposal on your ability to demonstrate its significance or value-added benefits relative to those comprising the current state of the field, or the agency's mission context.

In this regard, keep in mind that significance and value-added benefits must be demonstrated within the context of an agency's mission and of the current state of knowledge in your discipline. They will not be demonstrated by bestowing glowing adjectives upon your own ideas, or by making unsupported claims about the novelty of those ideas in the current state of the field. If glowing adjectives appear at all, they should be found in the reviews, not in the proposal. Reviewers may bestow superlatives upon your proposal, but they must never be self-bestowed. The detail and specificity of the disciplinary and agency contexts within which you position your ideas will illuminate the importance of your proposed research far better than any undemonstrated claims you may make about its merits.

Moreover, it is common for authors of research narratives to over-write the general background narrative and under-write the research context narrative. While understandable, this tendency can seriously weaken a proposal. ***It is often easier to write a general introductory background to the research field than it is to describe the importance of the proposed research in the context of the current state of the field.*** The context that needs to be described in your research narrative and the place of your research in that context should reveal how your ideas lie at the cutting edge of the field. After all, research agencies fund projects that advance the field in some significant way.

Consequently, to increase the chances that reviewers will attach glowing adjectives to your research ideas, they must understand the place of your ideas in the context of the field's current state. This places several requirements on the author of a research narrative: first and foremost, the researcher must demonstrate a clear knowledge of the field's current state, or the current state of the agency's mission-critical objectives, and must be able to describe that current context clearly, succinctly, and convincingly to reviewers. It also requires that the author of a research narrative present a vision that advances the field in some important way, and to make that case to reviewers in a clear, succinct, and convincing narrative.

In turn, this requires the author of the research narrative to make several judgments: most importantly, the researcher must calibrate the description of the research context to the expertise resident on the review panel, both to individual reviewers and to the group as a

Research Development & Grant Writing News

whole. This calibration holds the key to success. If the description underestimates reviewers' backgrounds, it squanders valuable space in a page-limited project. However, if the description of the research context appears technically inaccessible to some or all of the reviewers, it will also diminish the proposal's competitiveness. The proposal's author must first make a reasonable assessment of the general level of research expertise on the review panel and then must describe for that review panel both the current state of the research field and the place of the proposed research in that context in clear and simply stated language.

Three items should appear in a clear statement of how the proposed research will advance the field: (1) a description of the principal investigator's fully integrated research vision; (2) a judicious number of citations woven precisely into that description; and (3) a clearly written statement illuminating the disciplinary context within which the research will be performed, revealing to reviewers how your research ideas will contribute to the field and therefore merit funding.