

Writing a successful Research Grant Application (Case for Support)

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Outline

Funding depends on four propositions

How does the case for support make the four propositions?

Who decides and how; what properties are required in the Case for Support?

How do you give the Case for Support the required properties?

Speed readable.

Easy to read quickly.

Easy to remember.

Easy to reconstruct.

How do you write the Case for Support?

What do you do if your application is rejected?

Further Reading

Funding depends on four propositions

- ▶ A Grant is a speculative investment in a research project.
- ▶ The Grant Application makes the case that a project deserves investment because it will solve an important problem.
- ▶ Typically the case consists of four propositions.
 - ▶ **IMPORTANCE:** The research problem is important to the funder, as defined by their remit.
 - ▶ **SUCCESS:** The project offers a realistic promise of a solution
 - ▶ Research Design
 - ▶ Dissemination
 - ▶ **VALUE:** The resources requested are:-
 - ▶ Necessary
 - ▶ Sufficient
 - ▶ Appropriate to the scale of the problem
 - ▶ **COMPETENCE:** PI, team and institution are capable of carrying out the project.
- ▶ The Case for Support must contain evidence to support these four propositions.

How does the case for support make the four propositions?

1. Explain the research question (IMPORTANCE)
 - ▶ Give evidence that it is important.
2. Describe the research project (SUCCESS)
 - ▶ Explain methods.
 - ▶ Show that the project answers the question
 - ▶ Explain what will be done with the answer.
3. VALUE proposition is supported by describing how resources are used in the project
 - ▶ Show you need what you are asking for
 - ▶ Show you have everything else
4. COMPETENCE proposition is supported by
 - ▶ Describing (and citing) own contribution to development of question and research methods
 - ▶ Citing own papers that use the research methods.
 - ▶ Application may require a separate description of the team.
 - ▶ Application may require a CV for each member

Who decides and how; what properties are required in the Case for Support?

- ▶ The Grants Committee will be world-renowned experts - BUT
 - ▶ They will know much less than you do about your research.
 - ▶ They will have Very Limited Time
 - ▶ They will have many other applications to consider
- ▶ Referees have more time and expertise.
 - ▶ They will assess the evidence in more detail
 - ▶ Refs reports can sink a grant but they can't get it funded
- ▶ Designated members present application & recommend score
 - ▶ Committee discusses & scores: applications are ranked by score
- ▶ In order to communicate effectively the case for support must have the following properties
 - ▶ It must be speed-readable.
 - ▶ It must be easy to read quickly.
 - ▶ It must be easy to remember.
 - ▶ It must be easy to reconstruct,

Speed readable.

- ▶ Front-load each paragraph with its message (ASSERT then JUSTIFY)
 - ▶ First sentence of para ASSERTS (message sentence)
 - ▶ Remainder of para JUSTIFIES
 - ▶ This where you cite literature
 - ▶ This is how you avoid citing too much literature.
- ▶ Use simple, consistent structure
 - ▶ Question (background) has same structure as answer (project)
 - ▶ This also helps the SUCCESS proposition
 - ▶ Summary has same structure as case for support.
- ▶ Clear, consistent layout
 - ▶ Headings & Subheadings convey structure
 - ▶ Consistent terminology

Easy to read quickly.

- ▶ Front-load the document.
 - ▶ Introduction gets the 'Foot in the Door' and makes the whole case very briefly
 - ▶ Pre-uses message sentences from later sections.
 - ▶ Uses exactly the same words and phrases
 - ▶ Sentences are in the same order
- ▶ Use simple language
 - ▶ Short sentences (short paragraphs; short words)
 - ▶ Consistent terminology and phrasing
 - ▶ No synonyms
 - ▶ No abbreviations
- ▶ Use simple, consistent structure
 - ▶ Question (background) has same structure as answer (methods/project)
 - ▶ Introduction sets out structure
 - ▶ Summary has same structure as case for support
 - ▶ And pre-uses message sentences

Easy to remember.

- ▶ Repetition
 - ▶ Important things should be said several times
 - ▶ Always use same words if possible
 - ▶ Repeat main message sentences 3 times
 - ▶ Embed tag phrases in message sentences
- ▶ Lists of no more than 4 items
 - ▶ Always use same list order when you repeat the lists
- ▶ Signposts & links
 - ▶ Link announces next list element
 - ▶ Signpost points to corresponding element in subsequent list
- ▶ Label list elements
 - ▶ Use tag phrases in labels
 - ▶ Use labels to link related elements in different parts
 - ▶ We need to know + tag phrase + signpost
 - ▶ This will tell us + tag phrase
- ▶ Create the Summary from the Case for Support
 - ▶ Re-use message sentences
 - ▶ Keep the order consistent

Easy to reconstruct.

1. Introduction 'Foot in the Door'

- ▶ Gets attention
 - ▶ Question - in the 1st sentence - and its importance
- ▶ Sets out the whole structure of the proposal in brief
 - ▶ Split question into (about 4) subquestions that "we need to know/understand/characterise.." + tag phrase
 - ▶ List project activities saying what "this will tell us" + tag phrase

2. Background 'We Have a Problem'

- ▶ States the question and gives evidence that it is important.
- ▶ Breaks it down into about 4 sub-questions - we need to know.

3. Description of the Project 'The Solution'

- ▶ General research approach/methods
- ▶ Work packages that answer the subquestions in order
 - ▶ What will be done, how, when, by whom, with what resources
 - ▶ Which resources will be provided by the grant
 - ▶ What this will tell us and how findings will be derived
- ▶ How findings will be disseminated

How do you write the Case for Support?

1. Description of the Project (at least 50% of total)

- ▶ Describe the general research approach
- ▶ State what each work package will tell us.
 - ▶ What will be done, how, when, by whom, with what resources
 - ▶ Which resources will be provided by the grant
 - ▶ How findings will be derived and disseminated
- ▶ As you describe each work package,
 - ▶ Choose a 'tag phrase' and draft the corresponding sub-heading for the background section
 - ▶ Check the project for completeness, coherence, feasibility, cost

2. Background (No more than 30% of total)

- ▶ Overall question
- ▶ Why it is important
- ▶ Sub-sections that correspond to the project work-packages
- ▶ NOTHING ELSE

3. Introduction (No more than 20% of total)

- ▶ Ensure that the Background and Project Description sections are in 'assert then justify' style.
- ▶ Copy message sentences verbatim into the Introduction

What do you do if your application is rejected?

1. Don't take it personally and don't get depressed about it.
 - ▶ It's not a reflection on your research:
 - ▶ it's like not winning the lottery.
 - ▶ Conversely, getting funded should be viewed as a one-off piece of good fortune.
2. The most important thing is to apply again as soon as possible.
 - ▶ Get an unbiased assessment of your proposal before you resubmit it
3. To avoid depression the follow-up application should precede the rejection.
4. Can a number of different projects be based on the same big question?
 - ▶ Think about different ways of breaking it into sub-problems
 - ▶ Think about different pieces of research that will tell us similar things

Further Reading

Book: The research Funding Toolkit, by Jacqueline Aldridge and Andrew Derrington, Sage 2012

Blog: <http://www.researchfundingtoolkit.org/gfol/>

These slides are available on the resources page

<http://www.researchfundingtoolkit.org/resources/>