The PhD proposal is a crucial – often decisive – part of funding applications. This hand-out provides some tried and tested tips, but bear in mind that one of the most important criteria of an effective funding proposal is its originality. The following pointers provide guidelines only, and need not necessarily be tackled comprehensively or in this order. Always prioritise the guidelines supplied by the funding body over these and ensure that you stick to the word limit.

Get your (Proposed) Supervisor’s Input

If possible, ask for your supervisor’s input. He or she may be able to advise you on suitable theoretical / methodological frameworks and source material, and will almost certainly have some familiarity with the funding application process. Crucially, he or she may have a good understanding of how academic funding is allocated.

Title

The title should obviously indicate your main subject matter, but also hint at your approach or key research questions. Try to use words that correlate with your (proposed) supervisor’s field, your discipline and the funding body.

Significance

Ask yourself: what is the significance of my research topic? Why would anybody else be interested in it? This could relate to its academic significance – for example, it fills a gap in research or relates to materials that have never before been accessed or studied [from xyz perspective]. This could also relate to its wider public significance – perhaps your research could have tangible benefits to society, directly or indirectly (though perhaps less likely with Arts & Humanities research), or it relates to topics of current media, political or popular interest. For example, maybe your research could contribute to policy in some way. Try succinctly to sum up the general significance in a couple of sentences at the beginning, being as specific as possible about potential beneficiaries.

Research Questions

Give your main research questions (only a few max.) to indicate your line of inquiry. Explain why they are important questions to answer. Funders recognise the evolving and dynamic nature of the research process, and that these questions may change slightly or become more specific as you narrow down your research foci. But catch their attention with some sharp and concise themes that demonstrate your anticipated research direction. Ensure you identify clear and realistic parameters within which to research. It is also a good idea to indicate your hypotheses – what do you hope to discover? At this point in your PhD, stating any hypotheses may seem premature, but don’t worry; funders recognise that research objectives change as a PhD progresses.

Mini Literature Review and USPs

Succinctly sum up/evaluate the research that has already been conducted in this area, mentioning names, to show that you have read widely around the subject. Do not be tempted to write a lengthy and detailed literature review – this should be more like a brief commentary on the context of your proposed research, mentioning only the most relevant publications (this might mean selecting the most recent / famous / academically sound work). Crucially, identify the original contribution that you can make. Ask yourself: what are the gaps in this area and how can I fill them? How can you build upon the existing research? Perhaps nobody has yet examined / translated these materials, or perhaps this subject has only been tackled from xyz perspective, or using only quantitative / qualitative research methods. It could be that related research already exists but is inadequate because of xyz reasons. Perhaps something about you – your professional experience, your access to particular resources / people, and your expertise in a particular area – makes you well placed to do the research in comparison with others who have attempted the same topic. This is your chance to explain why you are the best person to undertake this research, so it may be worth briefly stating your most significant achievements – such as prizes, relevant work experience, degrees obtained, successful projects, etc. Similar to a business proposal, you must stress your project’s unique selling points (USPs) in order to justify funding in a competitive market. Especially Arts & Humanities funding is particularly competitive.

Theoretical Framework

Explain the theories (and their proponents) that you anticipate will guide your hypothesis (of course, these may well change as your research progresses), and explain why they are suitable.

Methodology

Explain how you will conduct the research successfully and within the allocated time (normally three years). Even if the panel is impressed by and interested in your topic, they are unlikely to fund it unless they are certain that you are qualified – i.e. have the necessary skills (or access to the relevant training) and resources – to conduct the research. For example, archival / qualitative / quantitative research skills, techniques for collecting and analysing data, statistical skills, specific computer skills, languages, access to research sites. Be as specific as possible. In short, you should describe the source material that your project requires, and show that you will have the ability to access, understand and analyse this material (often within a 3-year time period). You should also give a rationale for adopting these methods. Finally, if there is space and it is appropriate in your case, you should anticipate any unforeseeable obstacles, such as ethical issues or problems obtaining visas, and explain how they will be negotiated.

Research Plan

Give a year-by-year research plan to reassure the funders that you can organise the various stages of your research – from literature review to data gathering to writing up – to meet the three or four-year deadline (even if, in practice, this plan changes). For example:
Year 1: literature review, plan research methods / fieldwork (including approaching gatekeepers, if necessary), gain necessary research training (be specific), secure ethical approval (if needed).

Year 2: data gathering – for example, conducting fieldwork at xyz sites, visiting archives, conducting interviews with xyz, translation of documents, analysis of primary sources, interview transcriptions.

Year 3: writing up – data analysis, drafting chapters and final submission.

Note: some funders may require more detailed research plans than others.

Research Institution and Supervisors

Explain why, as a student of the xyz department at xyz university under the expert supervision of Dr/Prof xyz, you are ideally placed to conduct this research. Perhaps the department has a thriving research culture, links with other relevant institutions and organises valuable forums / training opportunities for PhD students. Perhaps your project complements the existing strengths of the department in question. Perhaps your supervisor(s) is well known for his / her expertise in relevant areas, or has experience in seeing similar research projects using similar methods through to the end. The location of the institution could also be relevant.

Anything Specific to that Funder

If relevant, you may wish to specify information that relates to / express admiration for the work of the particular funder to whom you are applying. And, as previously mentioned, you should always include anything they specifically ask for, regardless of whether it is mentioned here. Some funders, for instance, require a detailed breakdown of anticipated expenses that you will incur during the course of your research, such as flights, visas, fees for visiting archives, etc.

At the end, list some of the key authors (your ‘references’) – that is, those whose publications are closest to your research topic or related to the theories and methods that will guide your study. Ensure you include any publications mentioned in the proposal itself (otherwise this can be considered as plagiarism). This normally doesn’t count towards your word count but be selective.

And Finally...

Draft, re-draft and re-draft again! As many times as it takes to purge your proposal of verbiage, jargon, clichés and spelling / grammar / punctuation mistakes. Do so regardless of the word limit. By writing in flawless – and plain – English, as well as concisely, precisely and unambiguously, you show you respect the panel’s time and also demonstrate skills that are essential to a good researcher. Also, for ease of reading and structure, write in short paragraphs rather than one solid block of text, and consider using a subheading or two.

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