

Top tips for anyone writing their first big grant

On the 1-3rd March the BES hosted its first grant writing retreat for anyone applying for their first big grant. After three days of hard work we asked all participants to share their top tips.

With a huge thanks to Simon Blockley, Alistair Boxall, Zoe Davies, Emma Sayer for their generous support and help in facilitating, sharing their experiences and the vast amounts of advice. These top tips were the “Sticky Bits”

It goes without saying, have a brilliant idea and then make sure you have 3 reasons to fund your idea.

How long does it take to write a successful bid? As long as you’ve got...

Plan your time scales and deadlines over period of months before a deadline looms, sometimes you need to be selfish and find dedicated writing time. To do this you need to plan and prepare early to build it into a schedule. Attend retreats so you can get away from the everyday office noise.

Practice and seek advice from those who have written big grants before and know just how much time is needed.

Small grants support large grants

The pressure might be on to get a big grant but don’t forget small grants are very useful, especially if you’re using them to build towards a larger grant, they allow you to show evidence of capability, develop your skills sets, grow your profile and ability to deliver projects on time and on budget. But they’re also very useful for pump priming bigger projects and proof of concept, especially where you want to demonstrate that those risks are not really risks at all.

Read the guidelines

Know your schemes, we can’t say this often enough:- **read the guidelines, keep reading them.**

Go through grant agency documents and highlight their keywords and then use them in your application. The most common feedback from funders is that the criteria have not been met. Make sure you apply to the right funder for your research, meet their expectations and tailor your project to their criteria.

Funders have different approaches to risk

Research councils like NERC and BBSRC are fairly risk averse; others like ERC and Leverhulme prefer a little more risk. Successful grant winners use this to their advantage and swap

between funders depending on their funding requirements. Be aware that timing for some funders matters especially those targeted at different career stages.

Build networks early and maintain them

Building networks takes time so it's useful to have project partners in place before you develop the project. Collaborators can provide the skills sets you might not have, provide advice on the feasibility of the project and you can use them to test out your ideas.

Critical Friends

It's a good idea to find yourself a trusted critical friend, someone who's not in your discipline who asks the questions reviewers might ask when you get too technical. Your critical friend can nudge you to stick to the timescales you set out, they can proof read, review your ideas and help you communicate to the non-specialist.

Mentors within your discipline can advise on content and procedures and check you've considered all the criteria.

Presentation and communication are critical:

No matter how great the idea, you need to communicate it quickly and effectively to the review panels. You should start with a 10 line vision to hook your reviewer.

Make readers "warm" with an engaging, easy to read proposal, it should be clear even to the most extreme non specialist. The general appeal of your bid matters just as much as the technical details and contributes to "Making your story sticky", i.e. Reviewers remember it for all the best reasons.

Don't be afraid to be creative, use a mixture of pictures, colour and conceptual diagrams to show how your proposal works, how work packages are linked and show how these deliver the aims and objectives.

Be true to yourself

Play to your strengths, articulate them and be positive. A great CV won't compensate for a poor idea and the CV and outputs are less important than ideas themselves.

Finally, get writing, remember it is still a game of persistence and very best of luck!