How to write a successful research proposal: ten golden rules

1. Sell your proposal

- Surprisingly enough, your fascinating research topic isn’t self-evidently interesting. Above all, you will need to justify why anyone else should care about it.
- Explain the topic. Why is it interesting? Why is it novel? Why does it matter? Imagine you are addressing a reader who’s constantly asking, ‘So what?’
- A useful strategy is to present it as a case study, or a way into examining a much bigger issue, so that your project becomes about much more than just itself.

2. Focus on research

- For funding bodies research means activity that will lead to the creation of new knowledge. Assembling primary data, editing books, and organising conferences may all be valuable stages in the research process but should not be presented as ends in themselves.
- Formulate the project around a particular question or problem that you want the answer to, not around a body of material you want to work on.
- Limit yourself to a single project! We all have side-projects on the go, but don’t give the impression that you are spreading yourself too thin to fulfill your core commitments.

3. Explain yourself

- Choose a clear and engaging title that says what the project is going to accomplish.
- Jargon and technical terminology are part of the rhetoric of persuasion and authority – but so is the ability to explain that jargon succinctly and unpatronisingly.
- Write for an intelligent but non-expert readership, and try out drafts on non-expert friends. Rewrite until they get what you’re on about!

4. Sound convincing

- A research proposal is not a legally binding document; it doesn’t matter if you change your mind between now and the end of the research project. In other words it doesn’t have to be true but it does have to be plausible.
- What approach(es) will you take to the subject and why is it/are they appropriate? Do you have the requisite skills (e.g. languages, statistics) already; and if not how will you acquire them?
- Be as concrete as you can. Examples are good; quantification is good; relevant pictures are good.

5. Situate your work

- Who has worked on the topic before? Are there any good articles or books you can draw on – or bad ones you can kick against? Are there useful approaches, theories, methodologies from other subjects or disciplines that you can apply to it?
- What sources and resources will you need, and where are they located? If appropriate, do you have permission to work on them and are there any extra costs involved?
- Why work in the place you have chosen? Facilities, infrastructure, research groups, individual colleagues?
6. Plan appropriate output(s)

- The funding body will expect something to show for your research. Who will want to know about it? Explain who your audiences will be, both academic and non-academic.
- How will you communicate your results most effectively to them: through conferences, articles, a monograph, online publication, websites, and/or other media?
- Address the current hot issues of impact and outreach proportionately.

7. Justify your time and costs

- Can you show that this is an appropriately sized topic and not just an undergraduate supervision essay—or an entire lifetime’s work?
- You may have to budget for equipment, support staff and/or travel. Be reasonable but realistic – don’t skimp on time allocation in particular! Work takes longer than we like to think.
- Consider applying to other funders for conference grants, etc., and make a virtue of it if you do.

8. Follow the guidelines

- Read, reread and highlight the guidelines and follow them to the letter. Make sure you use the recommended headings in the project description, for instance, in the right order.
- If you are not explicitly asked to follow a particular structure, the British Academy’s old instructions to applicants for their Postdoctoral Fellowship scheme are sensible ones to follow: “the proposal should clearly specify the context and research objectives of the study, describe the methodology to be used, and set out a realistic research programme for the duration of the fellowship.”
- Respect the rules about what is an eligible expense and what is not.

9. Look professional

- Write to the word limit. You want plausible detail, but no-one expects you to have done exhaustive research at this stage. Nor should you bore your readers with unnecessary waffle.
- Show that you have given serious consideration to ethical issues (e.g. interview consent) and data preservation (if appropriate) and are working within recognised disciplinary standards.
- Pay attention to the appearance of the proposal on the page or screen. Proofread repeatedly and ask others to proofread too: few writers catch all of their own typos.

10. Ask for help

- Don’t just ask your supervisor, referees and/or immediate colleagues to read through the proposal but try it out on friends and family too.
- Use your departmental/school grants administrator effectively: book her time in advance, and plan ahead for internal committee and submission deadlines.
- Ask the funding body’s support staff for advice on eligibility, handling online applications, etc. This cannot disadvantage you!

Professor Eleanor Robson. March 2010.