

What characterizes a good research proposal?

1. **GOOD FIT**—Your idea and goals are a good fit with the mission and vision of the funder’s program. No matter how great your idea is, and how well your proposal is crafted, if it’s not in line with the mission, goals, and vision of the funder and the particular program you are applying to, it won’t get funded. Hint: The solicitation is carefully written to reflect program goals; your job is to read it carefully and ensure your project aligns well.
2. **CLEAR**—Your goals, objectives, methodology, expectation of results, in short, your articulation of your ideas must be clear, easy to identify, and understandable to an educated reader. Your goals or research questions, in particular, must be clear and identifiable. Too often I see them buried as the last sentence of a section on page 2 or 3. While use of jargon is often unavoidable, your writing cannot be obscure. Your review panel will be composed of experts, of course, but perhaps they won’t have expertise in this particular area. After all, it should be YOU who is the expert for the research you propose. Programs fund diverse types of projects, and panels are assembled to address that diversity. Good communication of your ideas to these people is essential if you want to be funded.
3. **SIGNIFICANT**—Your project must pass the ‘so what?’ test. There is no substitute for a good idea. Your proposal may fail to meet all the expectations of a good proposal, but if your idea is exciting and significant, you may still be funded. If your idea is seen as incremental, already-been-done, or you are the only one who cares about it, it will not be funded. It is part of your job in the proposal to show why your project is important, why it is significant, and how it will change the field.
4. **IMPACTFUL**—Your project has significant impact on the field and on society. You have articulated the intellectual merit of a project—how it changes or expands the field—and outlined the impacts on future practice, on the people both working on the project and beneficiaries, and on society in general. Foundation grants often focus much more on a project’s impacts than on the scientific merit. Many funders do not specifically request your attention to these items, but may want to know all the same.
5. **COMPLETE**—You have left no unanswered questions. Potential risks are addressed; you can get the data or have the cooperation of others that you need (and can show that); you have the requisite experience or resources to carry out the project. And no proposal parts are missing.
6. **COMPLIANT**—Your proposal abides by the funder’s guidelines. All the required pieces are included. Only acceptable optional pieces are included. Margins, fonts, title elements, and proposal length reflect the funder’s requirements. All the sections of the narrative are addressed, are in order if they must be, and are clearly identifiable. Budget items match what is fundable. Items in the proposal follow requested formats.

7. **READABLE**—If you frustrate a reviewer because you've used 10 pt Arial, because there is no white space, because you've used every possible smidgeon of real estate in the allowable number of pages, because there are enough errors to seriously interrupt reading and comprehending, because there is one error that just happens to be their pet peeve, because every paragraph uses bold or italic somewhere, because you use acronyms generously, the likelihood of being funded drops. Good English and good writing matter, but information presentation also matters. Reviewers don't always read the whole thing the way an editor must. Sometimes they scan. Make it easy for them to scan and pick out the important bits.