



Writing Competitive, Outstanding Proposals

Scott H. Irwin



5 Easy Steps to Great Proposals!

1. Develop a Good Idea
2. Do Your Homework
3. Develop a Strategy
4. Prepare the Proposal
5. Understand the Probabilities

#1 Develop a Good Idea

- **Must have an exhaustive knowledge of the relevant academic literature**
 - In my view, most overlooked aspect of proposal development
 - Ridiculously easy to locate relevant literature with today's electronic resources
- **Deliberately cultivate a creative mindset**
 - Read trade journals, farm magazines, popular articles
 - Attend extension or industry meetings
 - Visit farms, companies and organizations to talk to people
 - Place yourself in a "hypothesis rich" working environment



Invaluable References on Creativity and Research

- Ladd, G. W. "Artistic Research Tools for Scientific Minds." *American Journal of Agricultural Economics* 61(1979): 1-11.
- Ladd, G.W. "Thoughts on Building an Academic Career." *Western Journal of Agricultural Economics* 16(1991):1-10

***Noticing, recognizing, and experiencing
surprise aid scientific discovery***

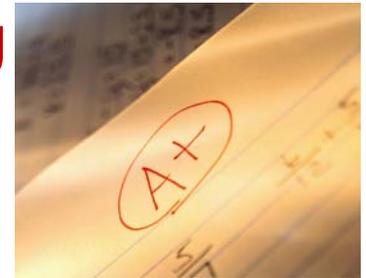
(Ladd, 1991)

#2 Do Your Homework

- **First understand the nature of the competition**
 - Subject matter focus
 - Basic or applied research orientation (NRI vs. RMA tools)
- **Visit grant decision-makers in advance**
 - USDA officials in DC; commodity organization state board or director
 - Obtain intelligence on key points of emphasis or subject matter areas
 - Signals seriousness to granting agency
- **If at all possible, find out the makeup of the review panel**
 - Background
 - Views
 - Reversing the jury selection process!

Do Your Homework

- Obtain and thoroughly examine winning proposals in the most recent rounds of competition if at all possible
 - Models are often very useful
- Attend grant workshops
 - Many campuses offer NIH, NSF workshops
 - CSREES/USDA is offering 2 grant writing workshops in 2005-06
 - <http://www.csrees.usda.gov/business/training/cpworkshops.html>



#3 Develop a Strategy

- **Have a list of ideas to draw upon**
 - How can my ideas fit the research call in the RFP?
 - What new ideas do I need to think about given the research call in the RFP?
- **Understand your personal comparative advantage and focus on RFPs that are the best match**
 - I have never received an NRI grant
 - Almost all of my grants are more applied and outreach oriented
- **Carefully develop partnerships**
 - Within your own department
 - Other departments
- **THINK BIG!**
 - Maybe except for assistant professors



#4 Prepare the Proposal

- Follow the format in the RFP as closely as possible
 - Organization
 - Length
 - Formatting
- Make the job of the reviewer as easy as possible
- Get the details right for all parts of the proposal
 - All forms filled out correctly
 - Submit forms in the correct order
 - Little things may have a disproportionate influence at the margin
 - Just as in journal article publishing, a quality signaling problem

Writing the Proposal

- Well-written and carefully edited proposals are a must
 - Often not the case due to time pressures, so start writing early
 - Have colleagues review if possible
- Reference I find helpful on writing:
 - Brorsen, B. W. "Observations on the Journal Publication Process." *North Central Journal of Agricultural Economics* 9(1987):315-321.

#5 Understand the Probabilities

- Behavioral psychologists have clearly shown that we are all over-confident
 - If acceptance rate is 20%, expect to submit 5 proposals before 1 is accepted
- A “Matthew Effect” likely operates that makes it difficult for young or unknown researchers to obtain funding
 - Teaming up with better known colleagues to start out may be helpful
- **BE PERSISTENT**
 - AgMAS project: More than 10 proposals rejected before first large grant

