**NSF Proposals: How Not to Get Funded**

NSF Division of Astronomical Sciences

Every year, the Division of Astronomical Sciences receives over 800 proposals. Of these, about 1 in 4 will be awarded. So, how do you write something that will review well? Just about anyone can give you advice on that... Here, we’ll give you some tips on how to do poorly.

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**How Not to Get Funded: The Fast Path**

The following Grant Proposal Guideline (GPG) violations are fatal. If you would like your proposal to be quickly returned unread with a note from your program officer telling you how sorry they are but that their hands are tied, do one of these:

**Have more than a one page Project Summary**

You are allowed one page at the beginning of the proposal to summarize the intellectual merits and broader impacts of your proposal. Anything longer than one page will get you turned down very fast.

**Have more than 15 pages of Project Description**

You are allowed 15 pages to talk about your project and the good things that will come of it. Anything longer than 15 pages and you’ll be eligible to be on the very panel that would have been fast.

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**Soon to be Fast Paths to Non-Funding**

For reasons we do not understand, the next two items are left out of some proposals. While their absence is not fatal this year, that may change in the near future.

**Don’t include Results of Prior Support in the Project Description**

Nobody wants to know if you or your co-PIs have received any NSF Support in the past five years. After all, your past record with NSF funding doesn’t matter, and impressing the reviewers with the results from that work isn’t going to improve your chances of being highly ranked. Really. We promise.

**Leave out any discussion of Postdoc Mentoring**

If you’re including a postdoc, don’t write about mentoring them in career planning, preparation of grant proposals, publications and presentations, ways to improve teaching, how to effectively collaborate with researchers, and training in responsible professional practices. This requirement was new in 2009, so no one will blame you for leaving it out. We’ll just return the proposal.

**No discussion of Broader Impacts in Your Project Summary (a.k.a. the #1 cause of returns)**

You’re submitting to the National Science Foundation, not the National Broader Impacts Foundation, right? It turns out these are taken very seriously, and if you don’t include them in your summary, your proposal will be returned.

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**How Not to Get Funded: The Slow Path**

If you’d like your proposal to go to review before not getting funded, try some of these!

**Cram as much in the Project Description as possible**

This is also known as “my project is so interesting, no one will mind…” or “Oh, rarely had the words poured from my penny pencil with such feverish fluidity…” There’s nothing reviewers like more than cramming prose that isn’t concise and to the point, so the more words you can use, the better. Along these lines, below are some tips for making room for all your prose.

**Use the smallest possible font size**

Most reviewers read proposals on their computers instead of printing them out. And the Acrobat Viewer has a zoom feature, so tiny type doesn't matter. Besides, picking up a proposal—out of a stack of 30 that need to be read before the meeting—and seeing all that tiny type makes a great first impression.

**Use slightly smaller margins**

If you need extra room, cheat the margins. Nobody will notice because they’ll be distracted by all the words you’re using. Really. Reviewers like this approach so much, it may soon join the Fast Track to Non-Funding.

**Make the figures really small**

A picture may be worth a thousand words, but why not use both? Legible axes and distinguishable markers for different data points are over rated. And again, Acrobat does have a zoom feature!

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**Leave out any discussion of Broader Impacts from the Project Description**

Why give up precious space to talk about Broader Impacts, especially after you’ve devoted an entire paragraph to them in your Project Summary? After all, there are two review criteria (intellectual merit and broader impacts) - do you really need to worry about both of them? It turns out the answer is “yes, yes you do.” Not only will the reviewers probably downgrade the proposal if Broader Impacts are missing, we may just send it back unread in the future.

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And no matter what you do, don’t talk to your Program Officer. They might offer advice, tips, or ideas for funding. It’s also not a good idea to try to sit on some panels to get a feel for what successful proposals look like. Instead, listen what the person down the hall who got one 15 years ago has to say. Nothing has changed. Really.