The Art and Science of Grants Crafting

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Introduction

As you all know, many people are involved in helping to put a good grant proposal together. There’s the applicant, who plays (of course) the major role. There’s that person’s friends and colleagues, who assist through conversations, reading drafts ... and being there. There’s the Office of Research Services, there are the grants facilitators associated with that office, and sometimes with the offices of deans, and then there’s the grants crafters. The grants facilitator at ORS facilitates – takes care of the technical rules and regulations: an invaluable role, checking everything from eligibility through budgets to font and margin size, as well as institutional fit and acceptability. The grants crafting role is different – basically a very specialised kind of editor. You assist with language, including grammar and spelling, but you go way beyond that to advise on style, presentation, organization and approach as well as making sure all intellectual, scholarly and required elements are adequately and strategically addressed and especially that all evaluation criteria have been met – and can be seen to have been met.

I first started doing this after sitting on a SSHRC adjudication committee back in the 1980s, and realising that it wasn’t enough to have a good idea and a good cv. I puzzled over what made some proposals I had read so much more convincing, polished and assured -- and thus what made them feel like a ‘good safe bet’ to fund with scarce tax-payer resources. I concluded that a competent, clear and thoroughly thought-through proposal that was well presented, readable, looked good on the page, and engaged my imagination was what was fundamental to success. I went back to my home department and drafted a list of ideas, and then offered to speak to the faculty about them.

They weren’t interested at the time, but things now have changed. The idea of grants crafting has caught on as competition has become ever more intense, and most institutions now have people like you and me, or (in some cases) support the use of professional writers to produce grant proposals. It should now be possible for individual institutions to identify and train their own grants crafters, and the challenge that I want to address with in collaboration with you is how to explain and transfer our own grants crafting skills to others.

In other words, how do we formalise and pass on the lessons I we have learned in many years of doing grants crafting? What follows is what I have learned; I hope you will be able to add to that, so that UVic will have an ongoing feed of good grants crafters into the foreseeable future.
Requisite skills

Good research fascinates me – and all grants crafters need to be the kind of scholar who is interested in good ideas, regardless of discipline. That’s not everyone – but it has to exist in a grants crafter. I think that there are four broad categories that are fundamental in grants crafting:

1. the ability to work positively and non-threateningly with vulnerable people who are trusting you with their intellectual ideas – an academic’s soul;
2. the ability to write well, engagingly and with clarity;
3. knowledge of exactly what is required by the evaluators of the grant;
4. the ability to ‘market’ those ideas – sell them, intellectually speaking, to a committee whose constitution is unknown – fire their imagination, make them want to fund the proposal.

There are also four basic rules:

1. always be respectful
2. always respect confidentiality
3. always remember people are trusting you with their intellectual property
4. always remember grants crafting is a privilege.

With these 4 basic rules in mind, I will expand on the 4 basic categories, using examples that are akin to things I have seen, but are not drawn from any one individual proposal – thus taking care of confidentiality, respect, and trust.

1. Working positively. It is really important to establish a rapport with a candidate. I usually start by asking people to tell me (not using their notes or proposal) what their research is about and why it interests them. Then I ask what the main questions are, if they haven’t told me that. Then I ask more questions – about literature, methodology, originality and significance. Finally I ask what they think the outcome of their work will be in terms of contribution to knowledge, publications and perhaps also policy.

Weak ideas, or muddy thinking will show up at this beginning stage of crafting a proposal. Before even looking at the page, I can get a sense of the work ahead. I always thank people, tell them how interesting their work is, and (if it is muddy and confused) express recognition of the complexities involved and say something like: “Well, let’s roll up our sleeves and see if we can get this tidied up so that its real value shines through”.

Sometimes people are demoralised. If so, I talk about SSHRC processes and what can happen. I explain that you can get trapped in an opposing “expert school of thought” trap, and ask if that’s what’s happening. I try to move discussion to the issue of whether or not to try again: I will encourage that up to
3 times and then switch to what to do instead that also engages their passion – i.e. seek an alternative, even if that means waiting another year. This is ‘human relations’, and one has to go by the seat of one’s pants. Do what feels right – and if you get an adverse reaction, switch tack. The purpose is encouragement of THEM, not insistence on YOUR ideas!

With students I start by chatting, then I read the text all the way through out loud. I do this (I explain) so that they can hear their words spoken by a different voice than their own – it gives them some distance and often lets the see where problems may lie. I will stop reading to ask the kinds of questions that show my interest, seek clarity, and send messages that I appreciate and enjoy what they are trying to do. They are (and I often say it to them) “our scholarly future”, and very precious to all of us as a result.

2. **Writing style, grammar, punctuation and errors.** Not everyone writes well. Not every knows they don’t write well either. A grants crafter’s job is not to tell people what bad writers they are, but to suggest rephrasing and re-ordering and explain why, in the context of a grant proposal, this works better than what they have. In other words – I teach them that they need a particular approach these days to writing a grant. This may be stylistic in the traditional sense of (for example) identifying topic sentences and making sure they are either at the beginning of a paragraph or, in a discursive part of the proposal, at the end of a paragraph forming the ‘punch line’. “Therefore....” is useful. I have known people to say they don’t like such words as “therefore, however, moreover, thus ...” and I reply that I sympathise, but in this particular kind of space-limited tightly-argued document they serve a vital purpose – that is, the make the lines of argument and conclusion very clear to readers who are working under pressure and with multiple files to read.

Teach people to think about punctuation, understanding that this, too, is different than the style they might use in another kind of writing such as a journal article. Punctuation in a grant proposal exists to make sure that the committee can read at speed and not have to re-read a sentence to figure out what is being said. I say – “Overuse commas. Remember to use either ‘– xxxx –”or (xxxxx) as parentheses if inserting a connect thought, perhaps as illustration”. I prefer brackets because they make it easier for the eye to jump to the main parts of the sentence – to hold onto the subject and main verb while reading the parenthetical statement. The semicolon and the colon are often confused these days. Semi colons provide a break in a sentence that allows connection: “Not everyone writes well; good writing is an art form” looks better than to overly-short sentences. A colon is an extension of the preceding thought: “Many editors cut back on punctuation these days: see, for example, Elsevier.”
I look for incorrect use of prepositions and pronouns. In a long paragraph, is it clear who “they” are? What person “her ideas” belong to? Prepositions are not a matter of scattering an assortment over the page. “The approach to (not: for, with, in or by) standard English”; “the trouble with Mary” means something different from (not than) “the trouble of Mary”; “salt of the earth” is not the same thing as “salt from the earth”.

Other common mistakes I watch for include: the use of its and it’s. “It’s” = it is. “Its” is possessive – its task was done. Also watch the use of tenses – they must agree. This happens in literature reviews, for example, where discussions can start with “Homer said that....” and then suddenly shift to “the point is that Homer says that...”. And then, of course, there’s ‘led’ and ‘lead’, as well as ‘of course’ and ‘of coarse’.

These things are minor, I am sometimes told. I reply “perhaps, but they are irritating – and an applicant does not wish to irritate an evaluator. They also suggest sloppy writing and thinking – and therefore suggest that scarce research dollars might be more wisely invested in someone else.” So I recommend every applicant purchase a copy of William Strunk Jr. and E.B. White, The Elements of Style. Macmillan (New York). Mine is the 3rd edition, 1979, and cost $1.50 (!) but they keep reissuing it because it is extraordinarily useful, and is a quick guide for grant application writers, and it remains cheap.

Finally, I also talk about ‘spin’: setting the proposal up to be seen to be original, strategic, competent. An opening sentence that grabs attention is very useful. A closing ‘last words’ that points out how essential a contribution to knowledge/policy/understanding/international research, or whatever the topic area is, is always a nice way to finish. See also the ‘marketing’ section (below, point 4).

3. Evaluation criteria. These, with the guidelines are essential. In the new SSHRC architecture, the evaluation criteria are carefully set out in the description of each program. Unfortunately, they are not always matched in the web-based instructions, something of which SSHRC is aware, and has a committee considering, they told me. I use my own template, and suggest applicants follow it, for this reason. Committees have to work at speed. They don’t have time to go searching all over an applicant’s document to find out if each criterion has been addressed. Make it simple for them. Read the evaluation criteria for each program, and craft a template to match it. Then see what is in the attachments and what is not. You’ll end up with something like this, with slight differences, program by program:
Evaluation Criteria and Scoring

The following criteria and scoring scheme are used by the adjudication committees to evaluate Partnership Grant applications:

1. **CHALLENGE** — *The aim and importance of the endeavour* (40%):
   - originality, significance and expected contribution to knowledge;
   - appropriateness of the literature review;
   - appropriateness of the theoretical approach or framework;
   - appropriateness of the methods/approach (including the co-creation of knowledge);
   - quality of training and mentoring to be provided to students, emerging scholars and other highly qualified personnel, and opportunities for them to contribute;
   - potential influence and impact within and/or beyond the social sciences and humanities research community; and
   - potential for long-term viability and identification of progress indicators.

2. **FEASIBILITY** — *The plan to achieve excellence* (30%):
   - probability of effective and timely attainment of the proposal’s objectives;
   - quality and genuineness of the formal partnership and associated management and governance arrangements and leadership, including involvement of partners and others in the design and conduct of the research and/or related activities;
   - appropriateness of the requested budget, and justification of proposed costs;
   - indications of other planned resources (time, human and financial), including leveraging of cash and in-kind support from the host institution and/or from partners;
   - quality of the knowledge mobilization plans, including effective dissemination and exchange, and plans to engage within and/or beyond the research community; and
   - strategies and timelines for the design and conduct of the activity/activities proposed.

3. **CAPABILITY** — *The expertise to succeed* (30%):
   - quality, quantity and significance of the contributions and commitment of the host institution and partners to the proposed endeavour and of the institutional role and experience in collaboration and formal partnership;
• quality, quantity and significance of past experience and published outputs of the project director and/or team members relative to their role in the partnership, and to the stage of their career;
• evidence of contributions such as commissioned reports, professional practice, public discourses, public policies, products and services, development of talent, experience in collaboration, etc.;
• experience in formal partnerships; and
• potential to make future contributions.

Note the different use of bold, italics, underlining. There are also CAPS, or CAPS, or CAPS or CAPS – and combinations of these, as well as bullets and number systems. These things are visual unspoken clues, and the eye registers them so it is important to be consistent. Use the toolkit (found in the Word toolbox), which can be used to help an applicant organise a grant, especially the largest chunk of writing – the detailed description, which can be from 5 to 20 pages in length depending on program. I teach people to decide on how they are going to organise their proposal, make sure they select an appropriate set of tools, and make sure they use them consistently, and don’t switch in mid-proposal. The best lay-out is one in which the hierarchical order of the proposal is obvious: what are main heading, sub-headings, lists, and so on.

4. Marketing ideas. This is also about ‘spin’, as addressed in the writing section. The object of the exercise, I tell everyone, is to market their ideas – I say, quite simply, that my job is to help them sell the ideas about which they are passionate to other people. So: what’s the right word to put the right ‘spin’ on an idea? Think about using ‘innovative’… but only if it really is (and be prepared to back that up, I say). NEVER use ‘unique’ unless you can guarantee that there is not another one like this anywhere – i.e it really is the only one of a kind. In more general terms, I advise people to avoid media-sell language and think scholarly and policy sell instead! So words like ‘useful’, ‘challenging’, and phrases like ‘thinking outside the box’ can be of service. I also warn them not to overdo it – a proposal is not an advertisement, and a committee should not feel they are being manipulated. So I also advise the use of words like ‘rigorous’, where appropriate, and suggest ‘meticulous’ organisation, ‘responsible’ governance mechanisms, ‘equitable’ arrangements for team members and students. I remind people to talk about ‘mentoring’ – and saying exactly how they will do that. One does not merely train; one also mentors: it is good stewardship of the intellectual contribution to scholarship. And that is also what grants crafting is all about!

It may well take several iterations to get a proposal into the best possible shape. I try to meet people face to face the first time I work with them. Thereafter, it can be done by email, using track changes. When I do that, I always send back 2
copies – one with the track changes showing and the second with all changes accepted – a ‘clean’ copy. I advise people to read the clean copy first, to see if they like it. If not, they can go back to the track changes version and accept and reject as they desire. It is their document, and that way they keep control of it. Finally, once the competition results are announced, I delete all proposals from my computer, thereby protecting my integrity and their intellectual property. This too is a matter of trust, respect and confidentiality.

‘Tips’ for grants crafting proposals

With all this in mind, here are my ‘tips’ for grants crafting proposals. I tell applicants the following:

1. Read the SSHRC description of the program to which people are applying ...and then also read the web-based instructions: they are not the same thing. Do this every year: SSHRC learns, and so should a grants crafter.

2. An ‘implicit contract’ is involved between grants crafter and applicant. Spell it out:

• Not a guarantee that you will get the grant!

• Application material, ideas and discussion will remain confidential

• Positive criticism

• Technicalities not addressed

3. Assessors may have the kind of specialized knowledge you need, but a committee will not. Therefore:

• Provide a rapid introduction for intelligent non-specialists.

• Provide appropriate references.

4. Writing has to be logical, consistent and easy for an outside to follow. Therefore:

• Present research plans coherently, as a set of problems.

• In a logical and connected order.

• Point to where future research would go.

• **Always** state the central problem of your work and why it is important.

5. If you are critiquing existing models or approaches in the literature,

• do so lucidly, without partisanship, and
• demonstrate clearly why your approach is better.
• Be precise.

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7. If you are departing from your earlier work, make it clear that you have done your homework in your new area.
• Literature surveys are essential.

8. If you are changing field:
• Show practical applications of your work where appropriate
• spell out training opportunities for your students
• show how these will be provided, institutional and other support.
• Be precise about dissemination and communication
• give a sample of the names of likely journals, conferences, publishers
• indicate the probable publication sequence over the period of the grant and beyond.

9. In some cases, the existence of a team (interdisciplinary or otherwise) will be helpful.
• Show how you will put it together the contributions of each part
• how it will help in training students, or how it will help a new scholar (or one who is starting up again after a long while) to integrate into the research world.

10. Track record:
• Be clear about what's a book, a chapter, a report, a talk and also about the “other scholarly production” category — videos, for example.
• Do not fudge this — co-authored means specifying how much was your contribution; forthcoming means accepted for publication, etc.
• Quality counts more than quantity.
• Explain the restrictions on you if your publications are limited.

11. Special circumstances:

• Where and if appropriate, explain teaching loads, class sizes, administrative obligations, serious illness, and other relevant matters crisply and matter-of-factly.

• Don't apologize or editorialize — just make your case succinctly.

12. Budget:

• Do not inflate your budget, but do not underestimate it either.

• Explain why you have put particular amounts against lodgings, travel fares, RA salaries, materials costs, and the like. Use UVic and Expedia.ca

• Don't expect to get money for “fishing trips” — find out in advance (or be able to show that you did as much as you could) about the contents of archives, for example.

13. More on budget:

• Keep equipment budgets to an absolute minimum, and explain why you cannot get them from your institution.

• If you are asking for travel money for a student or RA, justify this very carefully.

• Get other financial support as well, if you can.

• Provide information about where else you are looking for support. If this is not possible, explain why that is the case.

14. Adjudication committees:

• Some of these committees are interdisciplinary; some are not; some have non-academics on them. They are your audience – so find out what you can.

• Committees get tired and impatient with complex obscure language, typos, poorly laid-out or explained budgets, and incomplete information.

• Committees are not only not infallible and tired, they are also starting with imperfect information about you and your institution.

• Give them the information you know is essential to your case, straightforwardly and without editorializing.
15. Finally, when it is written:

• Ask a friend who is not overly familiar with your research to read your proposal some day/evening when he/she is tired and see if it makes sense.

• Then ask your friend to tell you which bits are confusing, or that had to be read twice.

• Then sit down again and work on getting rid of the jargon, or the long sentences, or . . .

16. And the last thing to do is to remember:

• Grant competitions are still going to be, on occasion, unfair.

• After one rejection, do not despair, sulk, or get angry . . . or at least, not for long.

• There will be comments that come with the decision.

• Take the advice that makes sense to you; ponder the rest, and then accept or reject it.

Conclusion

Grants crafting is an art. It is also wonderfully rewarding. A grants crafter gets to talk about people’s ideas with them, share their enthusiasm, learn a huge amount about a wide range of disciplines. It is a fascinating and rewarding occupation, well worth the very considerable time and effort involved.