Writing Grant Proposals for Anthropological Research[1]

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Anthropologists seeking funding for research can do much to improve their chances of success if they understand the grant-making process and the skills needed to negotiate it. Funding agencies that allocate research support on the basis of peer review and professional criteria are to some extent an artifact of North American academic culture, but their scope is increasingly international, as are the norms they apply. The purpose of these comments is to encourage this internationalization and to assist all potential applicants by making the norms explicit.

Grants are not awarded simply because an applicant needs funds, has a worthwhile purpose, and/or is recommended by an advocate. There is a process through which the goals of a researcher and the goals of a funder whose mission it is to support research are brought together. The key element in this process is the grant proposal, which is a particular kind of document different from a research report or other professional writing. There are thus particular skills involved in constructing "fundable" proposals that, like other cultural practices, can be learned.

For the anthropologist in search of research funds, the first step is to locate funders appropriate to the need. It is unfortunately not the case that there are funds available for any need if one knows where to find them, and every funder sets limits on the eligibility of applicants and projects. Nevertheless, it is worth taking the trouble to investigate all possibilities. Because the circumstances of different countries, research fields, and funding needs are so variable, the process of identifying potential funders cannot be generalized. Whatever information sources are available (professors and colleagues, professional associations and newsletters, institutional grants offices, etc.) should be used initially. Once a possible funder is identified, it should be contacted directly for information on its current programs and policies.

Despite the diversity of funders, certain common principles underlie grant proposals of all kinds. The observations following are intended to apply, in a general sense, to proposals written for funders of anthropological research. With modification, they can be extended to proposals for funders with other mandates—including those supporting research not specifically defined as anthropology or activities other than research. However, these remarks should be taken only as general guides that need to be adapted to the specific requirements of particular funders and programs.

HOW THE FUNDING PROCESS WORKS

Every funder operates within a set of goals, guidelines, and procedures established by its governing body. Each one can offer its grants only to applicants whose requests fall within its scope of activities and only on the basis of the material submitted in support of those requests. Systematic review procedures are followed in making choices among competing requests.

Every funder has a *mission*, an overall purpose for which its funds are intended. Since the mission is usually stated in general terms, the funder may at any given time have more specific *directions* or *priorities* within its scope. *Programs* are the mechanisms for achieving the funder's current objectives; these define the specific purposes for which funds will be awarded, who is eligible to apply, and what procedures are to be followed. Missions, current directions, and program guidelines are spelled out in the funder's informational material. Because programs, priorities, and even missions change, the information consulted should be the most recent available.

The funder's mission and mode of operation depend ultimately upon its source of funding and its policy-making structure. There are basic differences between *public* and *private* funders. Agencies established by governmental bodies are intended to meet national or other public needs, whether these are defined as the solution of specific societal problems or as more general goals such as the building of national research capabilities. Such public agencies often have citizenship criteria for eligibility and other requirements imposed by the political bodies that finance them. Private funders vary widely in (among other things) the sources of their funds, the conditions established by donors, and the nature of their governance. Those that depend upon continual fund raising may work under different constraints than those supported by an endowment (a reserve that generates funds through investment). While private funders may function more independently of the political arena than public agencies, they are usually governed not only by their own bylaws but also by the laws covering nonprofit organizations in the countries in which they are based. (For example, private foundations in the United States must conform to spending and accountability regulations of the U.S. Internal Revenue Service.)

The mission of a funder may emphasize *basic* or *applied* research. The distinction is not absolute, as research-oriented missions may include an interest in the potential application of the results, while funders with problem-oriented missions will use many of the same criteria for evaluating good research as the basic-research funders. However, the fundamental goal in making awards in the first instance is the contribution the project will make to building knowledge in the discipline or area of the research, while in the second it is

the project's contribution to solving the problems identified by the mission.

There also are distinctions among the kinds of funding provided, such as grants, fellowships, and contracts. Although these terms are not always used consistently, *grants* are generally awards to support a research project or to further specific research goals. The qualifications of the researcher will obviously be relevant, but the main criterion in evaluation is the merit of the project. *Fellowships* are investments in individuals, providing for training, professional development, and/or time. The application usually requires a project statement, but this serves mainly to demonstrate the merit of the individual, which is the primary criterion. Both grants and fellowships are awarded on the basis of proposals whose objectives are defined by the applicant. *Contracts* are awards for projects that implement specific purposes set out by the funder (often solicited through a "request for proposals").

Generally, grants, fellowships, and contracts cover only the expenses of the particular project and/or individuals involved. Although this might include administrative fees ("overhead") or other compensation to the institution where the research is done, such awards are not usually designed to meet institutional needs. *Institutional* awards, made to aid the development or support the programs of institutions, are generally a separate category of support.

There may well be a number of funders and programs under whose rubrics a given project might fit or that might be appropriate for different aspects of the project or different funding needs. The researcher might therefore submit multiple applications to different funders, beginning with a master proposal that lays out the whole project and adapting it to the requirements of each application. If multiple applications are submitted, it is important that each one be internally coherent and self-contained and that it follow the guidelines of the particular program and be phrased so as to respond directly to the funder's mission.

How can applicants get relevant information about the specific funders they plan to approach? The best source is the funder's own published material, which will be provided upon request. Usually the application form or accompanying instructions will give clear indications of what is expected in an application and clues to how it will be evaluated. Whether or not the specific criteria used in evaluation are stated explicitly, they can to a large extent be gleaned from the kinds of information requested.

While applicants tend to focus upon their own needs, it is vital in preparing an application to bear in mind the purposes of the funder. For a request to be successful, it is not enough that it fall technically within the limits of the funder's mission, and it is irrelevant that the applicant may think the mission ought to be redefined or stretched so as to include his/her needs. The applications that seem most likely to further the funder's goals will be the ones funded.

Of basic importance too is understanding who will be evaluating the proposal. Although specialists in the particular topic of the project are likely to be among the reviewers, it is almost certain that some of those involved in the evaluation will not be specialists (and some may not be anthropologists). The proposal must therefore make a case that is persuasive to those readers: the language must be understandable, the rationale clear, and the significance of the research spelled out. The application should neither "talk down" to the nonspecialist nor compromise the intentions of the research, but an effort should be made to anticipate the questions and concerns that such readers might reasonably have.

GENERAL POINTS

A number of principles should be kept in mind in constructing a proposal:

1. The proposal is the only thing that stands between the applicant ("you") and the decision makers ("they"). It must therefore make clear everything they need to know to make the decision you want and everything you would like them to take into account. The proposal consists not only of the explicit information included; it also represents the way the applicant works and the quality of research that can be expected if a grant is made. A proposal that is careless in presentation, that does not conform to guidelines, or that is overly casual tells the reader that this is how the work will be carried out. Similarly, a stingy response to the application's questions (one that grudgingly provides the minimum information required) is a missed opportunity to make the most persuasive case possible. The way to make the case is *not* by exceeding the length limits, furnishing extraneous material, or offering personal testimonials but by taking the trouble to prepare a high-quality document.

2. The proposal will be read by informed reviewers, who will evaluate it on the basis of its own merits. The applicant does not need to be known to the reader, and the status or personal connections of the applicant are usually irrelevant to the outcome. (In fact, personal recommendations full of praise may be counterproductive if belied by the evidence of the proposal itself.)

3. The proposal will always be evaluated competitively with others. To be adequate or even "good" is insufficient; for an application to be successful it must be better than others with which it will be compared. The applicant who asks, "Why was I turned down?", misses the point. There may be nothing specifically "wrong," but the proposal has not persuaded the readers that *this* project should be funded rather than others.

4. The proposal will be evaluated according to the same basic criteria, regardless of the funder: Is the project within the scope of the funder's mission? Is it potentially of value in that it will accomplish something of interest to others? Is there a realistic prospect that it will be carried out successfully? Does the applicant show himself/herself to be qualified—knowledgeable in the topic of the project, familiar with the relevant work

done by others, and capable of seeing the project through? In general, does the proposal build from a good idea, does it have a plan for implementing the idea, and does it communicate both idea and plan effectively to the reader?

PREPARING THE PROPOSAL

Three questions are basic to most research proposals: What is it you want to do? How are you going to do it? and Why is it worth doing? You need to have the answers to these questions clear in your mind before you can articulate them in a grant proposal. Indeed, if you are not sure what you want to do or why you think it important, you should not be looking for funds at all; and if you do not have a clear idea of how to go about doing it, nothing that you write on an application about "methods" will make sense.

A fundable grant proposal, in other words, is based on a well-conceived research plan. As noted above, it is helpful to have a master proposal for your own use before starting to write a proposal for any specific funder. This document should make explicit your answers to the three basic questions, as well as an ideal timetable and the financial requirements (minimum and ideal) of each phase. The master proposal will guide you in identifying potential funders as they may relate to different phases or financial needs of the project and help you to prepare specific proposals for specific funders. Its main purpose, however, is to clarify in your *own* mind what you want to do. Is the effort worth your time and energy? Why do you think it is worth doing, and why might others find it so? Is it realistically possible to do even if you get funding for it? Being clear on these basic issues is the necessary starting point for writing a proposal that will persuade others.

As you move from the master proposal to specific applications, the first thing to do is to read carefully all the materials provided by the funder. Review the whole application and plan how you can make your case most effectively within its particular guidelines and format. Assume (unless you *know* otherwise) that what is published in these materials is what is meant—that there is no secret agenda. Follow the instructions as precisely as possible. If you have special questions or problems, contact the funder in writing (oral communications risk misunderstanding on both sides). However, if you find that your project is not eligible for the program, applying is a waste of time.

It is essential to allow sufficient time to prepare any proposal. Plan to write several drafts; allow time to rethink, revise, and edit. Remember that the mechanics of the final version will be time consuming. Hasty preparation generally reveals itself.

The body of the proposal may take the form of a narrative or of answers to specific questions. In either case, the application instructions and format should guide the organization of material. Writing technique is an individual matter, but the following approach may be suggested:

Taking into account the specific format of the application, begin by outlining the information to be presented. Outline the whole proposal, then review to see that everything required is there, that there is minimal redundancy, and that the organization is as effective as possible. Next, write the full first draft. The language should be clear and direct, avoiding unnecessary jargon or metaphor. The overall style should communicate confidence and enthusiasm about the project but not overblown claims for it.

After writing the draft, check it against the length limits and, if necessary, cut judiciously. Space limits should always be observed, but the allotted space should be used constructively. Finally, edit for clarity, precision, and grammar. (Applicants writing in a language that they do not fully control should seek help when editing if possible.) When the first draft is completed, set it aside, return to it with a fresh eye, and revise for a second draft. Continue until you are satisfied with the document. (If you're not sure whether you are satisfied, try reading it as if you were a skeptical reviewer considering someone else's request for funding. Would *you* give it high priority in a competition for scarce funds?)

Once the document is complete, type or mechanically print it, if possible, using a dark ribbon. If you must write it out by hand, print legibly. Copies should be as legible as the original; watch for faint, messy, or smudged print. Follow instructions about materials to be included and excluded, collation, and other details. Finally, proofread everything thoroughly; nothing reflects more directly on the applicant's standards and habits of work than a spate of editorial or typographical errors.

ADDRESSING THE MAIN QUESTIONS

What you want to do. A good proposal has as its objective something that is worth doing: something that addresses an important question or issue and that has not already been done by someone else. If it has been done but not quite in this way or in this place, then it is necessary to show why doing it in this way or in this place will add significantly to what we already know.

The "important question" is crucial. The fact that something has not been done before is insufficient reason for doing it; why *should* it be done? The fact that it fills a "gap in the literature" is not persuasive; why *should* the gap be filled, and why fill this particular gap rather than others? Once it is clear that the question is indeed important, you need to show that what you want to do is the most strategic next step to take in addressing it.

If the project is descriptive rather than problem-oriented, it still needs to be made clear how the description will bear, immediately or ultimately, upon some question or issue. The collection of descriptive data may be valuable in its own right, but a case must be made for the selection of this particular people, place, site, or species.

A particular project is likely to be only a small contribution to some large research goal, but it should make clear what that goal is and how the project will contribute to it. At the same time, the project's own goal should be achievable. Thus, it should be framed in terms of one or more *research questions,* that is, specific questions that can be answered by the research proposed. A research question must be *possible* to answer, but the answer should not be obvious; if it is, why bother to do the work?

What you want to do needs to be related to what has already been done: the status of the question or issue, other efforts to address it, and what is inadequate or incomplete about prior work that will be remedied or advanced by your project. Whether or not this should entail a review of the relevant scholarly literature will depend upon the particular format of the application, but it should be evident that the proposal builds upon prior work.

In sum, this part of the proposal should provide an explicit statement of what you aim to accomplish and your general plan for doing so. It should also make clear why you want to do it and what we will know as a result that we don't know now.

How you will go about doing it. For most funders of anthropology, "methodology" does not necessarily mean a tight research design with formal hypotheses to be tested and quantitative measures. However, it does mean a statement of the steps you will take in trying to achieve the aims of the project. It must tell what will be done to answer the research questions posed: what kinds of information are needed to answer them and how that information will be obtained. The discussion of method should make clear your rationale for choosing these particular ways of going about the work. It should show that you selected them (possibly over alternative strategies) because they are both feasible and likely to yield the information needed to answer the question(s) posed. Include as much detail on the specifics (site, population, sample or portion of the population to be examined, instruments or data-collecting techniques, timetable, etc.) as the application format invites and space allows. The object is to show that the plan for carrying out the research has a good chance of realizing the aims of the project.

Why it is important. The statement of aims will already have suggested the potential significance of the project. In some application formats that statement may be expected to include a literature review, while in others this may be covered in a separate item. However, it is essential that the proposal show how the project relates to work done by others and why it would be of interest to others—including but not only the specialists concerned with the particular time, place, and topic of the project. Who the "others" are will vary according to the mission of the particular funder, and the statement of significance should vary accordingly. The point is to indicate how the research, if carried out, will contribute to some larger enterprise—whether that be solving a societal problem, gaining knowledge about a world area, or addressing issues of significance to a scholarly discipline.

In relating the project to other work, it is not enough to say that it "bears upon" or "contributes to" certain interests, bodies of literature, or current developments in a discipline. How does it bear upon and in what way will it advance these interests? Why is this particular study, rather than some other, the *best* next step towards making such advance? The object is to leave the reader with a sense that the project is not only interesting but of compelling value and thus merits high priority for funding.

ADDITIONAL ITEMS

Abstract. Most applications will require an abstract of specified length. It should be written after the body of the proposal, as it should cogently summarize the proposal's main points and cover, in brief, the three essential questions. Prepare your abstract with great care. It may be the only part of the proposal read for some purposes in the process of evaluation, and it will be used by most readers to remind them of the contents.

Title. Like an abstract, a title serves to prepare readers for the contents of the proposal, to remind them later of what was in it, and to inform those who will not read the proposal itself. Choose a descriptive and straightforward title that accurately sums up what the project is about. Grandiose claims, metaphor, and clever phrasings are usually inappropriate and may mislead.

Budget. In preparing the budget portion of the proposal, it is essential to review and follow carefully the budget guidelines and instructions. These will state what budget items are allowed and within what limits. Each budget category included should be clearly related to the research plan as stated in the application; if the relation is not obvious, it should be spelled out. Itemize the budget in as much detail as is realistically possible (and as space permits) and show how the budget figures were arrived at if this is not self-evident. Check all arithmetic carefully; careless errors may suggest sloppy research to follow.

Although a strong proposal will not be turned down because of problems in the budget, the budget reflects on your preparation for undertaking the project. The items requested should be those necessary and adequate to achieving the aims of the project, and the estimate of costs should be realistic but economical. Most funders will have budget limits that may in effect require funding from other sources. If the funds requested in the application are intended to supplement funds from other sources, you should make this clear. It is also useful to explain how you would proceed if full funding were not obtained.

Bibliography. Generally, some kind of bibliography will be needed, either for citation of literature referred to in the narrative or as a broader listing of works relevant to the project. Needless to say, a bibliography should be accurate in all details, as it will be conspicuous evidence of your scholarly habits.

If a project bibliography is requested, it is intended to reveal your familiarity with the relevant literature and the specific ideas or approaches that have influenced the project. The reader may also look to it for evidence of awareness of essential literature in other languages or other disciplines or literature that disagrees with the your own approach. However, the bibliography should be selective, not simply an indiscriminate list of references taken from some other source. The stated guidelines should offer a clue as to how extensive it should be, but there should be a reason for including each item.

Curriculum vitae. The application instructions will indicate the biographical data to be submitted, but any statement should provide the full relevant information on your background and prior work without being inflated or overly detailed. It will be read to determine your qualifications to carry out the project proposed, your track record in producing results from earlier research (if appropriate), and evidence that the current project makes sense as a development from past work. If it is a new area of interest, there should be some indication that you have taken steps to acquire the necessary background.

FOLLOW-UP

Each funder will have its own policies with regard to the processing of applications and handling of decisions. There may be further communication with the applicant prior to a final decision: additional information may be requested; changes in the budget may be asked for or imposed; conditions may be attached to a tentative award. Eventually, you will be notified with the offer of an award or a declination. If an offer is made, acceptance of it will constitute a formal contract; make sure you understand fully what you are agreeing to before signing this (or any other) contract.

Some funders will provide copies (or summaries) of reviews of proposals, either routinely or on request. Others may pass on specific suggestions or reviewer comments in certain instances, or the policy may be to offer no feedback at all. Resubmission of unsuccessful applications is generally allowed, within limits. If resubmitting, it is of course advisable to evaluate the proposal and attempt to strengthen it. If you are convinced that the proposal was eminently meritorious but the reviewers did not understand or appreciate it, consider whether you have stated your case as clearly and as effectively as you might have.

There is always the chance that a good proposal will not succeed for reasons that have to do with the nature of the competition, the funder's judgment about priorities, or other circumstances beyond your control. In that case, try elsewhere. Research funding involves a certain amount of guesswork, and mistakes are inevitable; every grant maker expects that proposals it has declined will one day produce important work under the sponsorship of other funders. The suggestions offered here carry no guarantees of success, but it is hoped that they may contribute to more effective proposal writing.

Hieroglyphic Literacy in Ancient Mayaland: Inferences from Linguistic Data[1]

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A major achievement of Classic Maya civilization (ca. A.D. 250–900) was the development of a complex system of hieroglyphic writing with a true phonetic component, a system known to us primarily through inscriptions on carved stone monuments.[2] After the Classic collapse hieroglyphic writing continued to be used by speakers of Mayan languages until after the arrival of Spanish conquerors. From the end of the Classic period on, most glyphic writing was done on bark paper. Nearly all of this was destroyed by the Spanish during the early phases of the conquest (Tedlock 1985:27). For a number of reasons, the Spanish presence was detrimental to the preservation of knowledge, native or other, of Maya glyphic writing. In addition, it did not promote historical documentation concerning the nature and extent of hieroglyphic literacy. Probably for many of the same reasons that the meanings of Maya glyphs were lost to the world,[3] knowledge of which of the speakers of Mayan languages produced and understood them was lost as well.

The nature and extent of hieroglyphic literacy in ancient Mayaland can be inferred from other evidence. For example, that Classic inscriptions on stone monuments deal almost solely with events in the lives of Classic Maya rulers and their retainers (Schele 1982:1) suggests that reading and writing may have been the exclusive domain of the elite. At the same time, that inscribed Classic monuments were erected in highly public places suggests that large numbers of people could read, if not produce, them.

Durbin (1980) cites Kubler's (1973:162) suggestion that "the original purpose of the Maya scholars who composed them [inscriptions on stone] was perhaps to make the meaning clear to the farmer from the fields" and argues that this "would mean that historical information was presented by a sophisticated elite to a lay audience" (p. 111). He finds the few existing codices (inscriptions on bark paper) considerably more complex

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2. Classic Maya writing is an extensive elaboration of an earlier and much simpler writing system (Coe 1976).

3. Remarkable advances in deciphering Maya hieroglyphic writing have been made in the last 15 years or so. Linda Schele (personal communication) estimates that at least 85% of inscriptions can now be understood.