FREE GUIDE

Research Grant Application Basics: Free Guide (PDF)

The basics of a first research grant application: how research funders differ, the usual parts, your sponsored programs office, a planning worksheet and a readiness checklist.

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> This guide covers the basics of a research grant application for people applying for the first time. It describes common practice and names a funder's rule only where it was read on that funder's official site. The funding opportunity and the funder's current application guide always come first.

Checked November 2026. Programs and rules change, so confirm on the official site.

How research funders differ from program funders

	Program funder	Research funder
What it pays for	Delivering a service or activity	Answering a question and producing new knowledge
What the proposal must show	A documented need and a workable plan	An important gap in knowledge and a sound method
Who reviews it	Staff, board or community reviewers	Usually researchers in or near your field
Who applies	The organization	The institution, on behalf of a named lead researcher
What success looks like	People served and outcomes achieved	Findings, shared results and next questions

Two things follow. Reviewers will judge the science and the team, not only the need. And the application belongs to your institution, so it must go through your institution's approval process before it is submitted.

The usual parts

Names and order differ by funder. Use the funder's headings, not these.

Part	What it answers	A first-timer's note
Aims	What exactly will you do, and what will you learn?	Write this first and share it early. Everything else follows from it
Significance	Why does the question matter, and what gap does it fill?	Cite the field fairly, and say plainly what is not yet known
Approach	How will you do the work, and what if it goes wrong?	Give methods, analysis, a timeline and a plan for likely problems
Investigators	Why is this team able to do it?	Show relevant training and results. Fill gaps with collaborators
Environment	Does the institution have what the work needs?	List only facilities and resources this project will use
Budget	What will it cost, and why?	Every cost should trace to an aim. Build it with your grants office

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What two federal funders say

The National Institutes of Health (NIH) says on grants.nih.gov:

- The Research Strategy has three main sections, with headers in this order: Significance, Innovation and Approach
- Specific Aims is limited to one page for activity codes that use that section, unless the funding opportunity or a related notice says otherwise
- Biographical sketches must be prepared using a tool called SciENcv
- The Facilities and Other Resources section should describe how the scientific environment contributes to the probability of success
- You should check the funding opportunity to confirm the type of budget required, and funding opportunity instructions always supersede the general instructions

The National Science Foundation (NSF) says on nsf.gov:

- Proposals must follow its Proposal and Award Policies and Procedures Guide, and a program solicitation may modify that guidance
- The project summary gives an overview and includes a statement on the intellectual merit and a statement on the broader impacts of the proposed activity
- A research proposal also includes a project description, references cited, documents for each senior or key person, a budget and justification, and a section on facilities, equipment and other resources

For page limits, formats, fonts, forms and anything not listed here, check the current application guide.

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Working with your sponsored programs office

Most universities and research institutions have an office that reviews and submits grant applications. It may be called sponsored programs, sponsored research, research administration or the grants office. Contact it as soon as you decide to apply.

Ask these questions and write down the answers.

Our contact in the office:

Internal deadline for the full application:

Internal deadline for the budget:

Internal forms or approvals we must complete:

Who submits, and in which system:

Accounts or registrations I need as lead researcher:

Our institution's indirect cost and fringe rates, and who confirms them:

Approvals the research may need (for example human subjects, animals, biosafety, data use):

Who helps with subawards and letters from collaborators:

Planning worksheet

Funder and program:

Funding opportunity title or number:

Deadline set by the funder:

Lead researcher:

The question, in one sentence:

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The gap in knowledge it fills:

Why now, and why this team:

Aim	What we will do	What we expect to learn	Evidence we can already show

Role	Person	What they add	Agreed (yes or no)

Facilities, equipment or data the work needs, and whether access is confirmed:

Main cost lines we expect:

People who will read a draft, and when:

Readiness checklist

- [ ] We read the whole funding opportunity and the funder's current application guide
- [ ] The institution and the lead researcher are eligible
- [ ] The question fits what this funder and program support
- [ ] The aims are drafted and a colleague outside the team has read them
- [ ] Each aim can still be completed if another aim does not go as hoped
- [ ] We have preliminary work, or a clear reason the program does not expect it
- [ ] Collaborators have agreed to their roles, and letters are requested
- [ ] The sponsored programs office knows we are applying and gave us internal deadlines

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- [ ] Required accounts and registrations are in place
- [ ] Required research approvals are identified
- [ ] The budget is being built with the grants office, and every cost traces to an aim
- [ ] There is time for at least one full outside read before the internal deadline
- [ ] No text, data or figure is copied without credit, and all results are reported honestly

> **Want help with this?** The Complete Grant Architect is a free 16-week grant writing course, and you can hire a grant writer for your next proposal. Both are at subthesis.com.

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