



Preparing a Strong Grant Application

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My background

- Prof of Behavioural Sciences and Health; prev Gender and Health
- Interdisciplinary background; Mixed methods research
- Institute for Social Marketing, University of Stirling; MRC Social and Public Health Sciences Unit, University of Glasgow (-2018)
- Experience on funding boards
 - Cancer Research UK
 - MRC Population and Systems Medicines Board
 - MRC PHIND
 - NIHR Public Health Research funding board
- Grants (as PI/co-I) from: MRC PSMB & PHIND, ESRC, NIHR PHD and SDO, CSO, EU, Australian/NZ/Canadian funders

What experience do you have of writing grant applications and receiving funding?



Where do I start?



Key first steps – get the basics sorted

- Have I identified a potential funder or a particular funding call?
- Am I eligible to apply?
- What is the process – e.g. outline stage then full application?
- What am I interested in? Have I sorted out my main aims, objectives and research questions?
- Have I got the right team in place? (NB this may evolve)
- Have I identified who can help me within the University?
- Am I familiar with deadlines and sign off processes within my institution?

START TO PLAN!

Tasks
Timeframes



**What do you think
funding boards are
looking for?**



Funding bodies could be looking for

**Safe pair
of hands**

**Progress towards
their goals**

Innovation

IMPACT

**Methodological
advances**

Solutions

**Reputation
+++**

**Evidence to justify
(change in)
policy/practice**

**Awareness of
context**

**Theoretical
advances**

VfM

Rigour

What do you think frustrates funding boards and reviewers



A few sources of aggravation



- No clear research aims, objectives, research questions
- Lack of consistency of language and terminology in different parts of the document; spelling mistakes; unfinished/repeated sentences (except where required)
- Lack of a clear structure and ‘narrative’ to the application
- Lack of clarity on the scale of the work, the research design, and no clear sense of who is doing what, when etc
- Too much repetition or irrelevant detail in some parts, and lack of detail in the essential parts of the application
- No sense that research is ‘doable’ in the real world – eg discussing access to ‘hard to reach’ populations with no evidence of engagement with target ppn or relevant stakeholders and/or gatekeepers

KEEP READER ON YOUR SIDE –job is to make it as easy as possible for external reader to understand what you want to do, why and how, and why it matters – and to present this to others on the board (in competition with other good bids)

STEP 1: Find out about your potential funder(s)



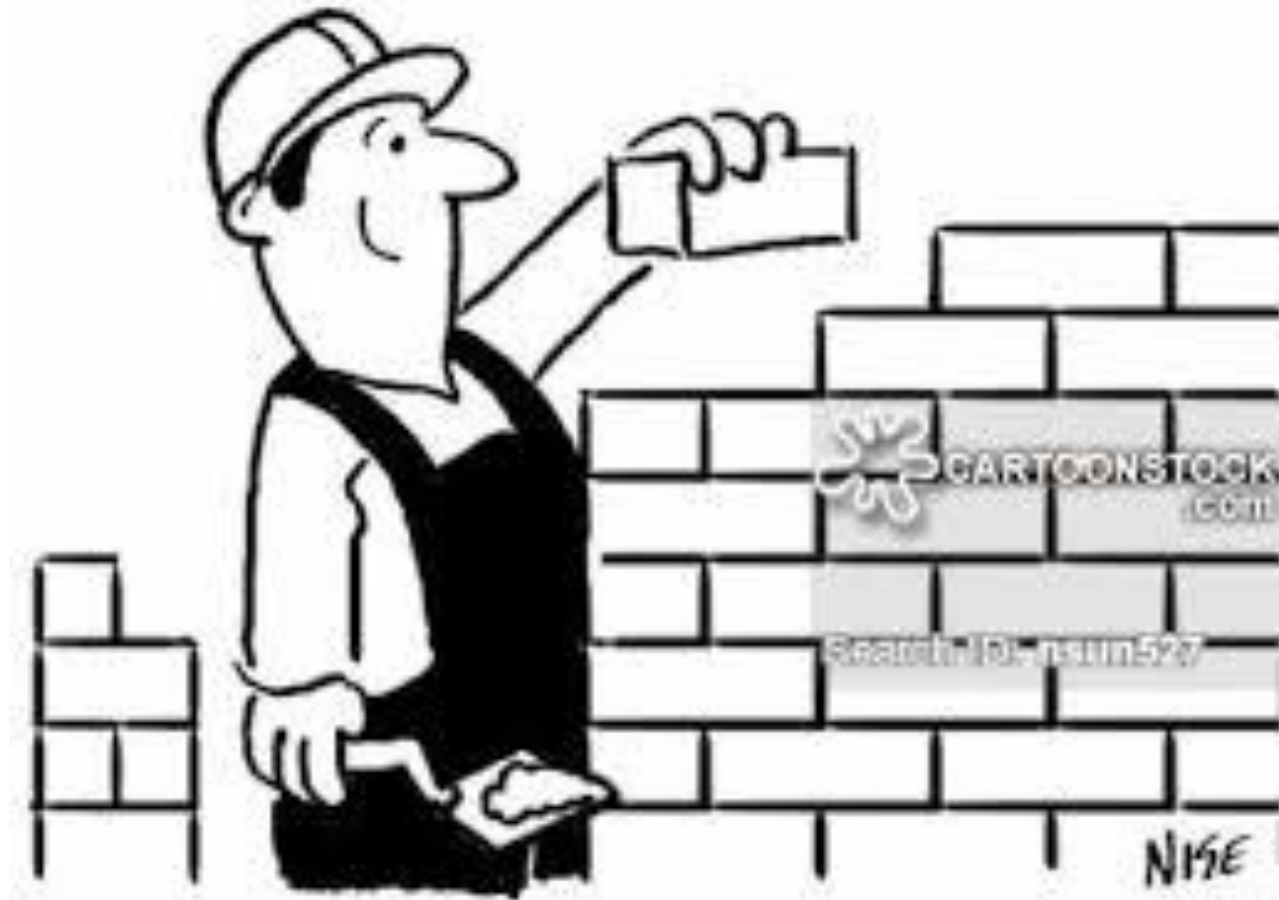
Understanding the Funder's perspective

- Responding to a specific call vs 'researcher-led'
- What are their **priorities** (in general, and for this call)?
 - Start with background research on them
 - Is what you propose to do a good 'fit' with their priorities?
- What are their **criteria**?
 - Do they fund the type of research you want to undertake (focus, scale, methods)?
 - What guidelines do they publish on applying to them for grants
 - Make use of resources: webinars, details of specified calls, advertised contacts etc

Why should the funder be interested?

- What does the existing evidence show?
- What is the 'gap'?
- Why might you be the best person/team to address the gap?
- Who stands to benefit from the research?
- Can you answer the 'so what?' question?

STEP 2: Build the case for your proposal



Common elements – funding bodies often have clearly structured forms

- Abstract and other summaries (Plain English/Lay Summary; Technical Summary)
- Overview of the literature - **Defining the gap**
- **Aims, Objectives, Research Questions – maybe divided into distinct workpackages**

CHECK OUT WHAT GUIDANCE THE FUNDERS GIVE



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STEP 3: Your research design



Common elements

- Abstract and other summaries (Plain English/Lay Summary; Technical Summary)
- Overview of the literature -Defining the gap
- **Aims, Objectives, Research Questions – maybe divided into distinct workpackages**
- **Research design - Methods – preferably clearly linked to each of the RQs or aims/objectives/WPs – and proposed analysis**
- Impact; Who will benefit?
- Finances and Justification for ask
- Team (CVs/expertise)
- Partners and Letters of Support

Allow time for iterations

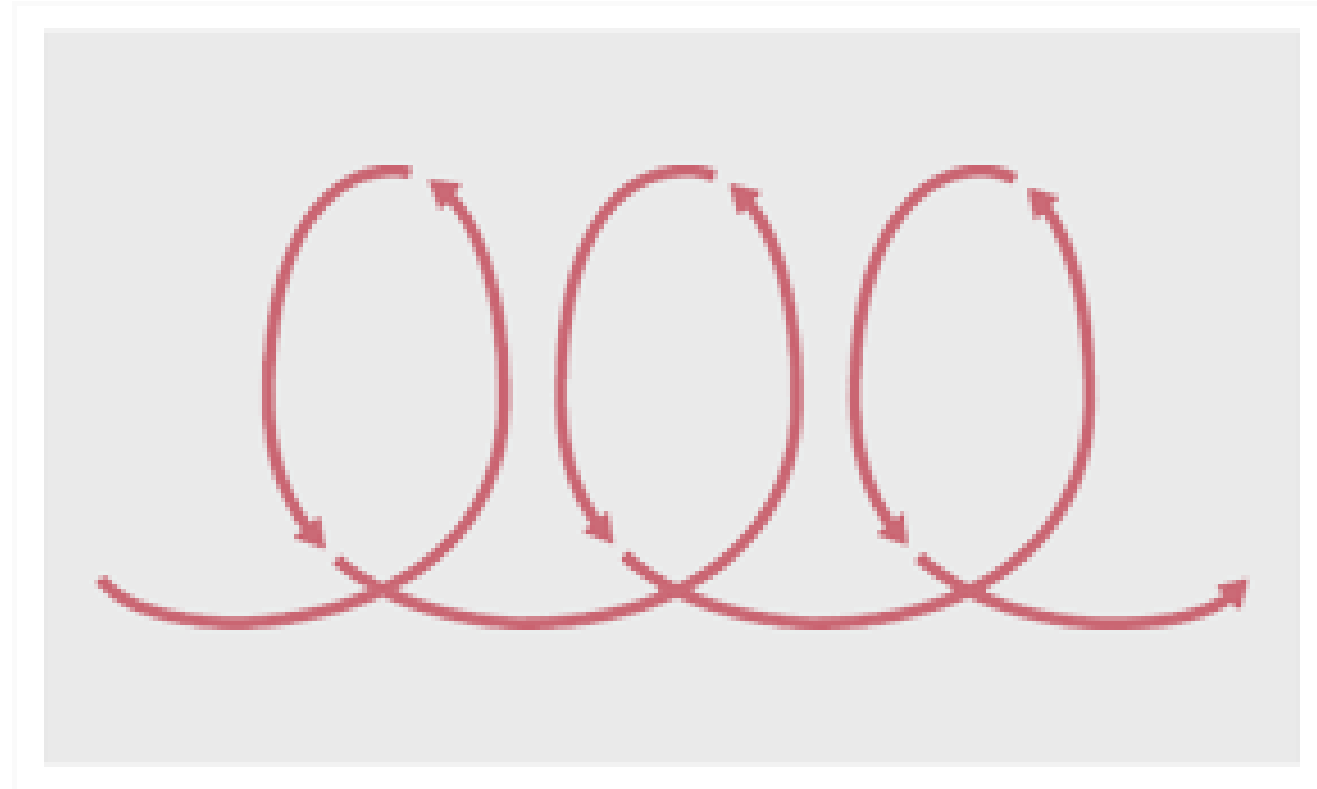
Try to get your best draft at each draft

Don't get bogged down or procrastinate – use place markers if needed

Divide the tasks, but keep strong oversight

Keep an eye on the practicalities, feasibility and resource implications as ideas develop. Work through in detail at crucial stages

Get critical feedback on your ideas and how you've articulated your plans– early enough to take on board



**What will the funder be
looking for in your team?**



Why you (and your team)?

- Track record
 - Relevant knowledge of the field
 - Relevant expertise in all aspects of the research design
 - Experience of securing grant funding
 - Evidence of delivering on outputs and impact
 - Mentorship/support, if appropriate
 - Evidence of relationships and support from key partners
 - Evidence of appropriate commitment of each partner – Goldilocks

Universities – help and hurdles

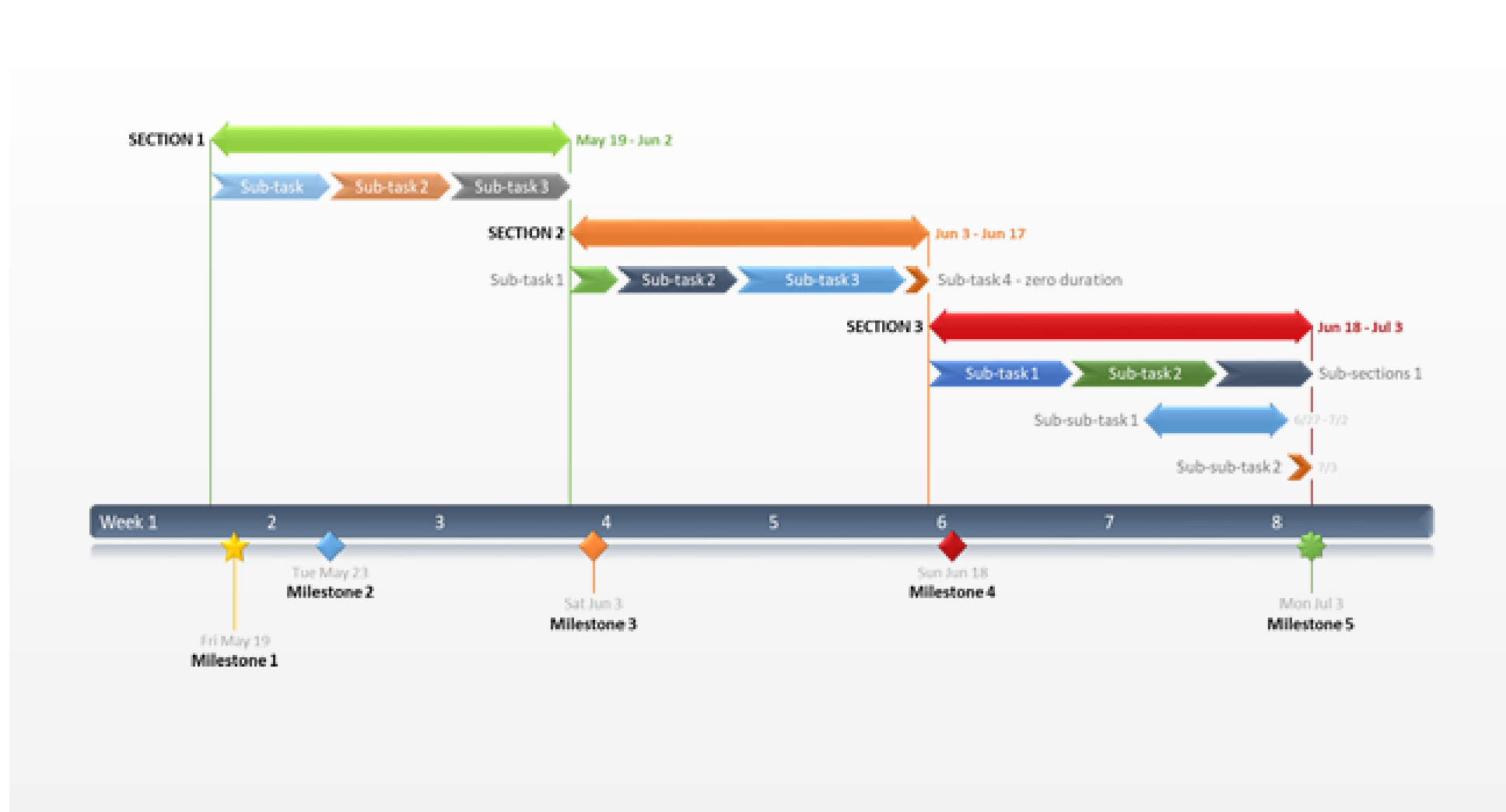


- **Plan** for the practicalities
 - Are there sign off processes (e.g. internal peer review, sign off by finance/research office on final bid)?
 - Who can help with the costings? What about costings for co-Is in other Universities?
 - Do any of my co-Is have similar help/hurdles?
 - Can I submit the grant myself or does it need to be submitted through (eg.) the research office?
 - **How much time do I need to allow for these in advance of submission?**

STEP 4: Essential practicalities



Build a clear, realistic timeline and milestones

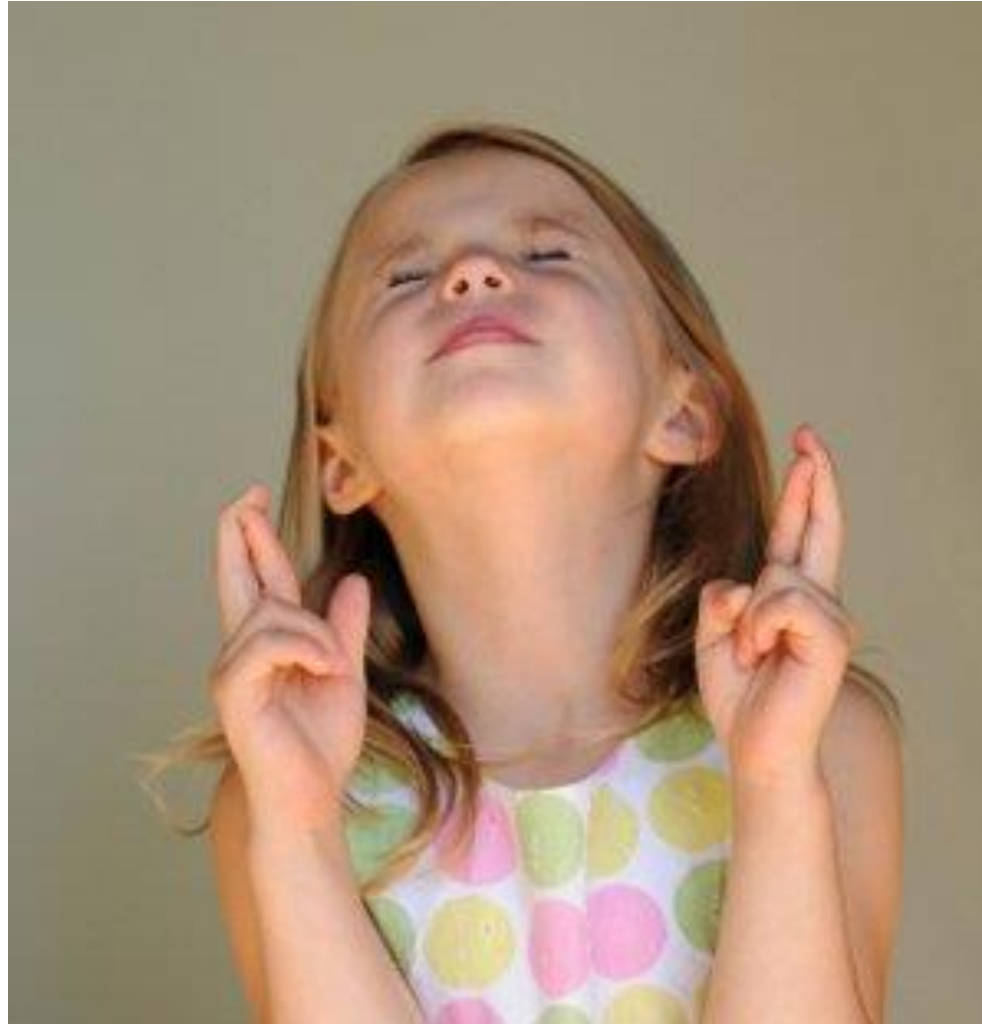


Resources and Value for Money

- Have you **identified all the resources** that you need?
 - Prepare detailed costing so you provide further justification if asked
 - Think through every aspect of your proposed research in relation to staffing and other direct and indirect cost
 - Are you within budgetary range?
- Can you **justify all the costs** that you are asking for? Is it easy for the grant funding body and referees to link JoR to the research proposed?
 - Try to use the same language in costings to rest of proposal; consistency of scale of fieldwork etc



STEP 5: Submit!



STEP 6: Response to referees



Response to referees

- If possible, address all comments
- If too many points within the space constraints, identify the key criticisms and develop a strong response
- Don't just ignore the ones you don't like and hope they won't notice!
- Be open to suggestions about you can improve the design
- Make it clear which comments you are referring back to
- You don't have to agree with everything they say, but avoid an arrogant/dismissive response
- Remember, that a referee may be interpreted as being out of line by the funders too...

Some top tips – engage your reader

- Develop a strong case
- Proof read carefully – typos, missing pages/paragraphs etc do not inspire confidence
- Use clear, straightforward language – this may be the nth proposal your reader is looking at. You want yours to be a pleasure to read so reviewer engages with the content and ideas
- Avoid as many acronyms as you can
- Step back – would it make sense to an intelligent non-specialist?

Some top tips – get the appropriate support

- Build your experience, seek support and mentoring if required
- Ask colleagues if you can read any successful applications
- Ask Cols to take on drafting sections related to their specific expertise
- If in doubt, ask!

Questions?

