

20 Reasons Why Proposals Aren't Funded

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These comments have been gathered from proposal reviews over the last 15 years. They highlight the most common errors proposal writers make in developing and writing their proposals and illustrate by negative example what reviewers look for in "winning" proposals. All of these errors are avoidable.

1. Deadline for proposal submission was not met.
2. Guidelines for proposal content, outline and length were not followed exactly. As one government reviewer stated: "Overall, the most striking reason for low-marked proposals was the consistent failure of universities to be fully responsive to what was asked for in the RFP."
3. Proposals are not organized so that their distinct sections can be easily matched against the RFP evaluation criteria.
4. The study or project, although meritorious, was not a priority topic to the sponsoring agency.
5. Proposed research question, research design and/or research methods were completely traditional. The proposed project offered nothing unusual, intriguing, or clever or it seemed to lack significance.
6. Proposal was not clear in describing one or more elements. Or the proposal was not complete. For example, the proposal did not describe how the project would be managed, how activities would be monitored and results evaluated and reported.
7. In the literature review or background section, the proposal writer showed he or she did not know the area of his or her subject matter. For example, sources cited were out of date, or the proposal writer overlooked important reference materials or previous studies and projects.
8. Proposed project appeared beyond the capacity of the individual or institution to carry out.
9. Method for conducting the research or carrying out the project was not explained or seemed unsuited to the project.
10. Budget was too high. Budget was too low.
11. Costs appeared greater than the benefits, or it was unclear who would benefit.
12. Rationale for choosing a particular approach as the best solution to a research question or problem was missing or not very well thought out.
13. Constraints most likely to be encountered in carrying out the research were not considered and there were no tactics for overcoming them presented.
14. Lessons learned from previous projects are not shown or are not made relevant to the proposed project.
15. The proposed beneficiaries of the project had no role in identifying problems and solutions, in designing the project or in carrying out the activities. Therefore, it seems unlikely that benefits will be sustained.
16. Work plans are too vague. They lack specifics on what activities are to be done, why, how, when, in what sequence and by whom.
17. Weak evidence is presented of ability to meet schedules. Detailed monthly or quarterly schedules are missing, and timetables for accomplishing work are too optimistic.
18. Management responsibility and capability are not clearly demonstrated in terms of planning activities, budgeting funds, providing commodities, keeping records and writing reports.
19. The quality of the writing is poor. The proposal is hard to read, uses sweeping generalizations and jargon, is excessively repetitive and too long.
20. The proposal contains an unreasonable number of mechanical errors (for example, typos, pages upside down or out of place) showing an inattention to detail and quality of work.