Writing your first proposal

(...a plead from a reviewer!)
1st Rule: It is not about money!

A proposal is just about … what you want to do!

…and then write it in a persuasive document
1st Rule: It is not about money!

... meet Albert (no, not that one!)

A proposal is just about ... what you want to do!

...and then write it in a persuasive document
Three (major) step process

- Pre-writing
- Drafting
- Editing and Revising

... a couple of tips
Redefining Pareto

- Pre-writing
- Drafting
- Editing and Revising

Planning project and drafting proposal: 80% of your time

Actual writing of proposal: 20% of your time
Example: Tip #1

- Pre-writing
- Drafting
- Editing and Revising

**The rule of three**: known about since the time of Aristotle.

People tend to easily remember three things.

1. Reviewers are likely to remember only three things from your proposal – **plan in advance** what these will be.
2. **Tell your story three times**: Abstract - Introduction - Conclusion
3. Use lists of three wherever you can in your proposal (ex. 3WP)
1. Pre-writing Step

- Identify the source of funding
- Investigate suitable program
- Prepare a template
1. Pre-writing Step

- Identify the source of funding
- Investigate suitable program
- Prepare a template
1. Pre-writing Step

- Identify the source of funding
- Investigate suitable program
- Prepare a template
1. What projects are already funded?

2. What is the typical range of funding offered by the program?

3. What are the stated program goals of the funding agency?
1. What projects are already funded?  
There can’t be too much overlap of your proposed work with an existing program.

2. What is the typical range of funding offered by the program?  
You should have some idea of the typical funding range offered by the program, because your proposal can be dismissed outright if your budget requests are too extravagant.

3. What are the stated program goals of the funding agency?  
Make sure that your research goals can be, and are, written so as to coincide as closely as possible with the stated goals of the funding agency and the specific program!
Tip: after WHAT? it´s WHOM!

...imagine you’re tired, grumpy and hungry. It is Saturday evening! You’ve got still 50 applications to get through...

Information for reviewers

- Electronic Proposal Processing and Research Information Systems
- Further Information
- Contact Persons
• Identify suitable funding and program

“Experimental determination of the relative motion of Earth and Ether”
1. Pre-writing Step

- Identify suitable funding and program

- Investigate program

- Prepare a template
Tell a three-acts story

- Novelty and/or importance of the study (why it should be done)
- Explanation of proposed research (what will be done)
- Methods and techniques to be employed (how it will be done)
A *bulletproof* template

- Novelty and/or importance of the study (why it should be done)
- Explanation of proposed research (what will be done)
- Methods and techniques to be employed (how it will be done)

- Abstract (Executive Summary)
- Results from Prior Support - if needed -
- Introduction (Big Research Question)
- Review of Previous Research (State of the Arts)
- Proposed Research (incl. methodology)
- Summary
- Budget and justification
A (almost) *bulletproof* template

*Triple-check with the guidelines of the program you have chosen!!*

- Abstract (Executive Summary)
- Results from Prior Support - if needed -
- Introduction
- Review of Previous Research
- Proposed Research (incl. methodology)
- Summary
- Budget and justification
2. Drafting Step

- Produce a structure layout
  - **why** it should be done
  - **what** will be done
  - **how** it will be done

- Draft (i.e. merge structure with template)

- Identify *Visual* aids (plots, tables ...)

#MakeHumansSmartAgain
2. Drafting Step

It is about getting the structure right

→ Produce a structure layout

• Develop a mind map of your entire project by including all the key broad components (ex: https://www.mindmapping.com/)

Novelty and/or importance of the study (why it should be done)

Explanation of proposed research (what will be done)

Methods and techniques to be employed (how it will be done)

#MakeHumansStartAgain
It is about getting the structure right

→ Produce a structure layout

- Develop a **mind map** of your entire project by including all the key broad components (ex: [https://www.mindmapping.com/](https://www.mindmapping.com/))

- For each component of the template develop a new mind map focusing on all relevant items and ideas to be included and revise until all important information is added.
It is about getting the structure right

→ Produce a structure layout

• Develop a mind map of your entire project by including all the key broad components (ex: https://www.mindmapping.com/)

• For each component of the template develop a new mind map focusing on all relevant items and ideas to be included and revise until all important information is added.

• Revise your mind map to give it some structure

• Turn your mind map into a structured layout (merge with the given template) and plan how many pages each section should be.
It is about getting the structure right

→ Produce a structure layout  THEN proceed with the drafting

• Develop a mind map of your entire project by including all the key broad components (ex: https://www.mindmapping.com/)

• For each component of the template develop a new mind map focusing on all relevant items and ideas to be included and revise until all important information is added.

• Revise your mind map to give it some structure

• Turn your mind map into a structured layout (merge with the give template) and plan how many pages each section should be

Start drafting one section at a time. Write as quickly as possible to fix ideas on paper. You can revise and edit your drafts later on.
(Luckily!) grant applications do have submission DEADLINES!

- Set aside time to write and protect it from other distractions (including people!)
- Yes, distraction include Facebook, Twitter, email and notifications of all sorts!
- Use time framing to decide how much time you wish to devote to a specific task. Start with short amounts of time (15-20 minutes) at first and increase them gradually.
- Use regularly the Weekly Check-Up form to assess how well you are doing and keep momentum.
Academic Writing Weekly Check-Up

1. What have I accomplished this week?
   Make sure you include everything you have accomplished no matter how big or small.

2. Is there anything I wanted to accomplish but did not?
   Be specific and include projects/items that have dropped out of the list of things you wanted to accomplish.

3. What useful insight about my writing have I learned or experienced this week?
   Pay attention to important clues about your writing routine. For example, note how long it takes to complete a task compared to how long you thought it would take. Find out which aspect of writing comes more easily and which one does not. Can you include something in your routine that makes your writing more enjoyable?

4. What challenges am I experiencing?
   If some specific challenge comes up over and over again, it may be because the task is either too big (if so, you need to break it down into smaller, more manageable parts) or not really important (if so, you should consider scrapping it altogether from your list).

5. If I were to give myself advice, what would I tell myself about these challenges?
   We are often far better at giving advice to others rather than to ourselves. Pretend a good friend comes up to you with the same challenges you are facing. What piece of advice would you give him or her?

6. What are my top priorities for this coming week?
   Planning the work ahead and being clear about your priorities is an effective way to keeping on track. Be realistic though with what you can achieve in one week. Only list three to four items and focus your attention on those.

7. If I could get nothing else done this week but ONE THING, which one would I choose to do? Which one thing would make me happy and proud?
   Well, this one is self-explanatory, really. Pick up that one thing and stick to it until completion. A sense of achievement is the best propeller forward.

This worksheet is based on the trainings of Christine Kane. Christine Kane is known as the Mentor to People Who are Changing the World. She is the president and founder of Uplevel You™, a multi-million-dollar company committed to the growth and empowerment of entrepreneurs and creatives around the globe through teaching not only high-level cutting-edge authentic marketing and business strategies, but also transformational techniques to shift mindsets and wealth.

www.ChristineKane.com

2. Drafting Step

• Produce a structure layout

  why it should be done
  what will be done
  how it will be done

• Draft (i.e. merge structure with template)
  - Abstract (Executive Summary)
  - Results from Prior Support - if needed -
  - Introduction
  - Review of Previous Research
  - Proposed Research (incl. methodology)
  - Summary
  - Budget and justification

• Identify *Visual* aids (plots, tables …)
Abstract (Executive Summary)

- It should be written last and should capture the most important and exciting elements of your proposal (it should tell the entire story!)

- In some funding scheme (ex. ERC) it drives whether your proposal is passing to the next round

- Include an executive summary even if it is not required by the funding agency as it is often the last (and sometimes first!) thing read by a referee

How to (Tip: twitter friendly summary)

1) Write down in one sentence your goal
2) Write down the two to three (maximum) key ideas you wish to convey
3) Twitter friendly (140 characters) summary
It provides a broader context for your research (the *Big Picture*)

It emphasises not only the compelling features of the proposal, but also why the research is important to do and why you are the person ideally suited to performing the work! *(Be aware: you don’t have to prove you are smart!)*

It includes substantial background information regarding the current experimental and theoretical issues confronting your field, (i) so the referees can understand the import of your proposal, and (ii) so the referees get the impression that you are an expert in the field.

- Use the CV for that (adapt it to the criteria of the grant program)
- Place <<strategic>> sentences on the methodology part (ex: "as we already proved ...", "I during my PhD...", etc)
It provides a broader context for your research (the *Big Picture*)

It emphasises not only the compelling features of the proposal, but also why the research is important to do and why you are the person ideally suited to performing the work! (Be aware: you don’t have to prove you are smart!)

It includes substantial background information regarding the current experimental and theoretical issues confronting your field, (i) so the referees can understand the import of your proposal, and (ii) so the referees get the impression that you are an expert in the field.

Do not assume that your reviewers will make the connections you want them to make. If you want them to know something, tell them explicitly what you want them to know.
Remember? Tell your story three times: Abstract - Introduction - Conclusion

Be aware of details!

Broadest perspective

..gets progressively

more specific ...

OBJECTIVES

state-of-art

Prop. research

#MakeHumansSmartAgain
It describes your specific research plans.

> For each proposed project, explain **what** you are going to do, **why** you are going to do it, **how** you are going to do it, **what will be learned** if you are successful (Objective - Methodology - Results)
 Proposed research: Albert's proof

- It describes your specific research plans
- For each proposed project, explain **what** you are going to do, **why** you are going to do it, **how** you are going to do it, **what will be learned** if you are successful (**Objective** - **Methodology** - **Results**)
Proposed research: get is structured

I) Statement of objective

- Most critical part – tells the reader the core of the proposal. Keep it short and specific!!
- Try a two-step approach: “The overall goal of this study is to… Specifically, we will test the following three hypotheses…”
- Make quantitative predictions rather than “would be different” or “would show a pattern”. Be precise!!

II) Proposed research method

- Describe the methods in rough detail that a reader could envision what will be done
- Provide all important details but omit irrelevant ones. What is relevant depends on the objectives
- Sub-headings can be a useful way to organise the section (for example WPs)
Proposed research: get is structured

III) Evaluation (incl. milestones, risk assessment, time plan)

• If the study is well-designed, there are a limited number of possible outcomes. It is important to explain to the reader how each outcome will be interpreted.
• If there are likely outcomes that cannot be interpreted, the proposal is weak.
• If the sampling is insufficient, interpretation is uncertain, and the proposal is weak.
• How will these results specifically be applied to address the problem or need identified in the beginning? Do not leave the reader hanging!
2. Drafting Step

- Produce a structure layout
  - **why** it should be done
  - **what** will be done
  - **how** it will be done

- Draft (i.e. merge structure with template)
  - Abstract (Executive Summary)
  - Results from Prior Support - if needed -
  - Introduction
  - Review of Previous Research
  - Proposed Research (incl. methodology)
  - Summary
  - Budget and justification

- Identify *Visual* aids (plots, tables …)
*Plausible* timeplan

...better nothing that this ...

- Indicate milestones
- Every major milestone has (at least) one associated (minor) risk (otherwise not risky/new enough!)
They should only serve to enhance your text, not to distract from it.

Plots MUST be clear and legible
(a.o colours combination, size, contained information)

This plot is completely useless and pretty annoying!
Plots, table, equations etc..

They should only serve to enhance your text, not to distract from it.

Plots MUST be clear and legible
(a.o colours combination, size, contained information)

Use equation only if absolutely necessary
(I am supposing you are all experimentalist)
3. Revising Step

- Budget
- Review
- Proofreading
3. Revising Step

• Budget
  i) Salaries (yourself, others)
  ii) Materials, Equipment (items > $$$$), Services
  iii) Travel
  iv) Overhead (it is normally calculated automatically)

It also forces you to think through the approach and methods in detail!

• Review

• Proofreading
3. Revising Step

• Budget
  i) Salaries (yourself, others)
  ii) Materials, Equipment (items > $$$), Services
  iii) Travel
  iv) Overhead (it is normally calculated automatically)

• Review
  “…imagine you’re tired, grumpy and hungry. It is Saturday evening! You’ve got still 50 applications to get through…”

• Proofreading
Be your tougher reviewer

First and foremost: the key questions

- Have you presented a compelling case?
- Have you made your hypothesis explicit?
- Does your project seem feasible? Is it overly ambitious? Does it have other weaknesses?
- Have you stated the means that can be uses to evaluate the success of your project after you have executed it?
Be your tougher reviewer

First and foremost: the key questions

► Have you presented a compelling case
► Have you made your hypothesis explicit?
► Does your project seem feasible? Is it overly ambitious? Does it have other weaknesses?
► Have you stated the means that can evaluate the success of your project have executed it?

!!ASK ADVICE!!
Ask advisors or senior colleagues to read and critique your proposal. This will minimise major flaws and make it more effective!
*Triage* Approach

..revise in order of SEVERITY


i.e. don’t loose time on details!
..revise in order of SEVERITY

- Faulty organisation
  IMPROVE STRUCTURE *(told you 80% is drafting!)*

- Lack of clarity
  1) Answer the following questions:
     What do you want to say
     Are you saying it?
     What do you want your reader to remember?
  2) Write down each answer in the clearest possible way, by focussing on one key idea at a time.
..revise in order of SEVERITY

• Inappropriate usage of language

  Avoid (a.o):
  • Colloquialism or excessive jargon;
  • The second personal pronoun you;
  • Redundancy and ambiguity;
  • Imperatives.

• Poor grammar

  Tip: A good course ahead of time might help!

*Triage* Approach

task successful applicants for their
documents to analyse it

#MakeHumansSmartAgain
## Proofreading Checklist

1. Text checked for typos using a spellchecker
2. Text checked for common grammar mistakes
3. Punctuation used correctly throughout
4. All references formatted consistently and according to requirements
5. Numbered references appear in the right sequence, starting from 1
6. All figures and tables are recalled in the main text
7. Captions and titles contain enough information for stand-alone figures and tables
8. All labels in figures are clearly defined and units given where needed
9. Different lines and symbols can be distinguished when printed in black and white
10. All proper names are spelled correctly (e.g., in the Acknowledgments)
11. Figure resolution is high enough for possible size reduction

M. Aliotta - Mastering Academic Writing in Science
The pre- and ultimate check

(especially for exec. summary)

• **Proofread from a printout**
  To be done after all electronic spell checking. Cover all the lines below those you are reading. This technique will help you avoid reading ahead and thus possibly skipping any mistake.

• **Read backwards**
  Read sentences backwards, you will focus on spelling rather than by meaning.
If you have more questions write me an email!

Good luck!

“...luck is what happens when preparation meets opportunity.”