

A close-up photograph of a person's hands typing on a silver laptop keyboard. The person is wearing a grey t-shirt. The background is blurred, showing a desk with a smartphone and other items. The lighting is soft and natural.

A brief guide to writing a strong research proposal

FACULTY OF SOCIAL SCIENCES | LUND UNIVERSITY





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In 2014, the Faculty of Social Sciences published a guide with advice on writing a research application ("Råd till dig som skriver en forskningsansökan"). During 2025, the faculty's research council has updated the guide and this is the result!

The quotes in the text are from reviewers who participated in the making of the 2014 guide.

A brief guide to writing a strong research proposal

In the current research landscape, writing and submitting research proposals is every researcher's bread and butter. Often, researchers approach application writing with mixed feelings – it can be demanding, yet it is also the moment when research visions start to take shape. Beyond securing funding, the process invites researchers to engage in sustained critical reflection on research design, to refine and focus their questions, and to articulate the theoretical and methodological contributions their work seeks to make.

It is not uncommon for researchers who have been successful in securing grants to remind early-career scholars that learning to handle rejection is a skill developed over time. Most would probably also agree that it takes many submitted applications to receive a successful decision.

Regardless of whether your application is successful, the intellectual effort invested in it is never wasted. The ideas can be further developed in future proposals or reworked into a publication.

Given the high level of competition for research funding, with success rates in the Social Sciences of between 8 and 12 per cent, a major part of all proposals submitted will not be approved for funding. You can increase your chances of success by recognising the many and varied funding councils and calls for research funding that exist in the contemporary research funding landscape.

The Research Council at the Faculty of Social Science, Lund University, has developed this brief guide to support researchers in the craft of developing a strong research proposal. The guide aims to encourage and motivate researchers writing applications, as well as providing support in the process, by highlighting the types of support available and giving an overview of how to approach the different parts of writing an application. The guide is directed both to beginners and to researchers who are more experienced in the area. It has been developed with the ambition to provide researchers at the faculty with insight into a set of key points in relation to developing a strong research proposal.

The research funding landscape: Funders, calls and evaluation

There are several funders available for research in the social sciences and humanities, both nationally and internationally. Consider making it a habit to reserve one to two hours once or twice per year to browse different funders, in order to find the funder and the calls that best suit your research idea, career stage and goal.

AVAILABLE CALLS

Often funders launch different types of calls for funding – such as calls for research environment, excellence grants, career grants, etc. Your chances to have a proposal accepted can increase if you select a call which is the best match for your research idea. But you could also start by looking at the funding calls available and develop your idea based on the available calls. It is important that you read the instructions carefully and follow them meticulously when developing the research design, compose the research team and write the proposal.

An overview of recurring funding calls is available at the internal website of the Faculty of Social Sciences: www.sam.lu.se/en/internal/overview-recurring-calls



Research Services at Lund University also publishes a newsletter with research funding news six times per year. Subscribe to the newsletter or read it via Research Services' blog: fs.blogg.lu.se/17-2/research-funding-news/

EVALUATION CRITERIA

In most cases, the evaluation of research applications is based on an assessment of four criteria:

- Quality of the research
- Originality and novelty
- Feasibility of the research project
- Merits of the applicant(s)

Make it a habit to familiarise yourself with how the funder(s) you are interested in work with the evaluation of proposals. This is also the case if it is a funder that you are previously acquainted with; funders may change their evaluation procedures or update the information given. You can gain important insight by keeping yourself updated. Usually this information is available on the website of the funder.

Two examples:

How the assessment is made at the Swedish Research Council's website: www.vr.se/english/applying-for-funding/how-applications-are-assessed/how-the-assessment-is-made.html

Starting Grant at the European Research Council's website: erc.europa.eu/apply-grant/starting-grant

REVIEW PANELS

Often the review panel that makes the assessment is openly announced on the website of the funder. Although each proposal generally is assessed by at least one or two researchers who are experts in the applicant's research field, review panels are often composed of an interdisciplinary group of researchers. It is therefore a good idea to check the profiles of the review panel members while you are working on the description of the proposal. This will make it easier for you to adjust the proposal to the interdisciplinary group of readers, without losing specificity and depth. Ideally, opt for a description of your research that both communicates your research idea to readers who are not experts in your specific field and displays your in-depth skills, expertise and high ambition in the field.



Writing a research proposal and designing a project

“The applicant must quickly capture my interest: Summarize all the most important points in the first paragraph – purpose, question, method, and added value.”

You do not get a second chance to make a first impression. Therefore the title, goal, purpose and the first half page of the application need to be crystal clear. Consider the following elements carefully when striving for clarity:

PROJECT TITLE

- Needs to be short – max 100 characters
- Should be immediately understandable
- May be somewhat provocative
- Should capture the “spirit” of the project.

SUMMARIZE OVERALL PURPOSE

- Describe what you ultimately want to achieve with the project.
- One single sentence!
- Comes first in your research programme.
- Start with: "The ultimate goal of this project is..."
- Follow up with a sentence that describes the overall strategy for achieving the goal.

DEFINE THE PROBLEM

Provide a brief but engaging background that can be understood by everyone. Play on the reviewer's emotions.

IDENTIFY A GAP IN KNOWLEDGE

Follow up by identifying a gap in our knowledge that is preventing us from moving forward, but which your project will remedy.

HYPOTHESIS OR NEED FOR AN INTERVENTION

- Formulate the ideas that are the basis of the project.
- Should be in the form of a statement.
- Use clear, unambiguous wording.
- Avoid "might," "could," "possibly," and similar words which give the reader the impression that you yourself do not believe in what you are saying.
- Good standard wording: "The research in this project is driven by the following hypothesis" or "The research in this project recognizes the need to..."

SPECIFIC AIMS OR RESEARCH QUESTIONS

- The backbone of the application; describes concretely how the hypothesis should be tested.
- Good standard wording: "I will test my hypothesis by pursuing the following specific aims" OR "The following research questions guide this project:"
- Provide max 3 overarching but specific aims/research questions that return in the shape of subheadings in the work plan.

WHY NOW?

- Preliminary results (your own or others) have given rise to the hypothesis or new questions.

- You (or someone else) have developed methodology that allows the hypothesis to be tested.
- Recruitment of key competencies allows the formation of a research group that can tackle the problem broadly.
- The problem has negative effects for the individual and/or for society and a solution is urgent.

WHY YOU?

- Refer to why you are particularly well suited to carry out the proposed project, e.g. because you...
 - have unique knowledge and preliminary results
 - have developed a new method of analysis or model
 - have access to unique material
 - are part of a collaborative team with unique or complementary skills.

TO CONCLUDE:

- Title
- Summarize overall purpose
- Define the problem
- Identify a gap in the knowledge
- Hypothesis/intervention
- Specific aims/research questions
- Why now?
- Why you?
- Aim to cover this in half an A4-page

Research design

“Ensure that the method and theory are consistent with the planned data collection. The data collection must be well thought out.”

Given the high level of competition, to be successful, a research proposal needs to stand out from the crowd. Such quality can be achieved by working carefully on the research design of the project, considering how the separate parts weave together

to form a coherence – from aims and goals, methods and material, to the research team, international collaborations and long-term ambition or vision. Showcase clearly the novelty and impact of the project, its aims and goals, research questions and that you have the right skills and competence for leading the project. Do it early – preferably already on the first half of the first page.

For all funding calls and schemes, it is of significant importance that the proposal contains a clear motivation for the selection of material, methods employed, theoretical frame, research team, yourself as PI, aims and scope of the proposal. Align all parts of the application with the aims and goals of your project idea and carefully use the limited space in the proposal to argue for, elaborate and clarify your project idea, including in the justification of the budget, the ethical reflection, the abstract and the popular scientific description.

“Use the space in the application wisely, avoiding letting background and theory overshadow methodology and planning.”

For an application to be successful, it is important that the proposal clearly showcases the novelty aspect of the project idea, by highlighting the ways in which the proposed idea goes beyond the state of the art.

The feasibility aspect is similarly crucial. When explaining how your project will be carried out, strive to be as specific and clear as possible. You could, for example, provide a detailed working plan for operationalizing the project in a table, illustrating the scientific programme on a month-to-month basis or, for larger projects, on a half-yearly or yearly basis. If it is a collaborative project, the feasibility aspect can also be strengthened by a description of what competencies all team members bring to the project.

For larger proposals, with a research team involved, such as an ERC Starting Grant or a research environment grant from the Swedish Research Council, the funder is interested in ambitious and bold research ideas. Provide a mitigation plan if the project is a high risk/high gain project. Explain your vision for how the planned research will impact the research field in an international context.

The researcher, the research team and international collaboration

“Clearly describe the division of responsibilities within the research group so that evaluators have a clear understanding of who is to do what and when.”

In the evaluations of research proposals, the review panel considers whether the applicant has the skills and competence needed for carrying out the project, but you do not need to be an expert on all parts of the proposal yourself. Put together your research team so that the team has the competence needed for carrying out the research.

Explain clearly what each specific team member brings to the team as well as to the project, and why you are the most suitable person as the PI for the project. This will also contribute to strengthen the feasibility aspect of the proposal. Some funders or calls have specific requirements for the composition of the research team, or for being principal investigator/research leader.

When you develop your idea, also consider how your project connects to international collaborators. If you plan to co-author publications or invite an advisory board, remember to explain what the international collaborators contribute to the project, in addition to the expertise and skills of the research team.

Ask a colleague, friend, and your research environment for feedback

Receiving feedback on your proposal serves several purposes. It can strengthen the development of the project idea and design in the planning phase, helping you to sharpen certain parts of the application, such as the composition of the research team, the state-of-the-art section or the aim of the project. When you have an almost finished draft, feedback from colleagues can give you valuable insight into the key aspects: quality, novelty, an applicant's merits, or the feasibility of the project. For the popular science description, it is a good idea to ask someone outside of your area of expertise to provide feedback.

How is an application read?

“Avoid lengthy introductions with detailed literature presentations of the research situation where the relevance to your own problem formulation is not clear.”

Most reviewers state that they do a quick read-through to get an overall impression. But overall impressions are based on different things; the summary is very important to some, while the whole is more important to others. Even those who skim the text in its entirety want to understand the question on the first page. The rest of the text is read based on the research question that has been understood.

There is considerable agreement among reviewers about what is irritating. It can be summarized by saying that they like text that is comprehensible and rigorous. Reviewers are not impressed by “fluff” and “nonsense.”

What do approved applications have in common?

“First impressions are important. I often read quite a few applications at a time. I group them together fairly early on.”

It is important to write an application that is equally strong in all its parts, and according to the reviewers, there are common features among the applications that are approved:

- The applications have an interesting and/or important research question that they convincingly demonstrate can be answered. The applications are well thought out, clear and concise, and the different parts (research question, theory, method, and implementation) are coherent. It is often an advantage to be part of a larger research network.
- Approved applications are exciting but also feasible – reviewers want to see results! Such applications show how to build on previous (preferably your own) research and clearly demonstrate the gap you intend to fill. Show publication

merits relevant to the application and, preferably, a research environment that guarantees productivity.

- Good applications are clear and convincing in their description of what needs to be done, why it needs to be done, and how it should be done. Successful applications are written in a way that conveys the applicant's subject expertise not only to intra-disciplinary reviewers but also to reviewers in other social science research areas.
- Successful applications explain why the project is important and relevant right now. Why should it be carried out by this particular person or group? If previous work has been done in the same area, has the novelty of this project been demonstrated?

How is research relevance assessed?

The proposal must not only be *original* in relation to existing research, but the *relevance* requirements are also increasing, even among basic research funders:

- It is important to be able to offer a clear contribution with new important knowledge that is of interest to broad groups.
- For a reviewer, it is difficult to determine the relationship to other research outside one's own research area. They often must fall back on whether the applicant's own account is convincing. Other colleagues in the assessment group are also a great help.
- It is a sensitive balancing act between name-dropping and important positioning. But as an applicant, you should bear in mind that there is always someone in the assessment group who is well versed in the field, as applications are distributed according to the reviewer's expertise.

Things to consider regarding text and layout

- The text and layout are important and convey an image of the person behind the application.
- Always follow the layout instructions given by the funder and present the application in an easily accessible structure.

- If the format allows, you can develop an easy-to-read graphic design. Use headings, italics, bold type, and include an image or figure.
- Write a short and focused project title that arouses interest among broad groups of researchers/reviewers.
- Use words and terms that can be understood by reviewers who are not experts in your particular field.
- Write in such a way that someone who is not familiar with your subject - but who knows what a scientific study usually looks like - can understand.

How important are previous publications/ grants awarded for success?

- It is entirely possible for younger and less-established researchers to obtain funding from, for example, the Swedish Research Council. However, a strong track record (in relation to the age of the applicant) also plays a role in the reviewers' considerations.
- The more senior the applicant, the higher the expectations and requirements for the quality of previous publications.
- Credibility is important, and the funder is keen to see results. That is why there are sometimes targeted calls, where younger researchers do not always have to compete with their more experienced counterparts.

How should costs be considered? Should one be generous or not?

The relationship between work and costs must be realistic. It is therefore just as wrong to ask for too much as it is to ask for too little. The budget should make it possible to carry out the research.

When developing the budget for your project proposal, always contact your finance officer for assistance in calculating the costs. It is not uncommon that a budget needs to be modified to strike the best balance. Contact your finance officer already at an early planning stage to avoid last-minute stress and mistakes.

Make the most of your work

- Try to rewrite your applications into articles to get something out of the time spent on the application even if you were not awarded external funding.
- Apply often and “strategically” so that you always have applications in. Practice makes perfect!
- Apply, revise, and refine the application again.

Best of luck in designing and writing your research proposal!

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Further reading:

Lamont, Michèle (2010) *How Professors Think. Inside the Curious World of Academic Judgement*, Harvard University press

ABOUT THE BOOK:

“Excellence. Originality. Intelligence. Everyone in academia stresses quality. But what exactly is it, and how do professors identify it? [---] Judging quality isn’t robotically rational; it’s emotional, cognitive, and social, too. Yet most academics’ self-respect is rooted in their ability to analyze complexity and recognize quality, in order to come to the fairest decisions about that elusive god, ‘excellence’. In *How Professors Think*, Lamont aims to illuminate the confidential process of evaluation and to push the gatekeepers to both better understand and perform their role.”

Reference: www.hup.harvard.edu/books/9780674057333



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