



Pitfalls for AHRC grant applicants to avoid

Top Tips from members of the AHRC Peer Review College

1. Tips in general

The Scheme

- Consult the AHRC guidelines for the specifics of the funding call and ask yourself whether your proposal really fits the scheme.
- Make sure that you address the scheme's criteria clearly and in detail. As far as possible, couch your application in the language that the scheme employs.
- Don't add unnecessary elements to your grant application simply to meet what you see as the scheme's requirements.

The Research

- Make innovative research the core of the application.
- Avoid 'agenda chasing' - focus on academic value first.
- Make sure to situate your project against relevant research and/or practice and highlight where it differs. Also, think about other disciplines and if there may be an overlap of research interest.
- Make sure that you have a good knowledge of past and current scholarship in the subject about which you are researching.

Research Methods

- Avoid aspiring to methodology that sounds good but which doesn't actually link with your project or outcomes: you need to be careful to think through your project and how your aims/objectives can realistically be achieved through your chosen methodology which will then lead to the outcomes detailed.
- Avoid brief or muddled Research Methods.

Assessment

- Consider carefully the assessment criteria outlined in the guidelines - this is what reviewers are guided towards and needs to be addressed in the application.
- Avoid extended qualitative assessment of previous work from third parties - it's actually more useful to assessors to understand your own evaluation.



Je-S

- Use the Help function on the Je-S site for each heading to ensure that you provide the information required for each section – this is especially useful for the Summary and Impact Summary sections.

Language

- Avoid repetition and using complex technical language – especially in the Summary section.
- If you use abbreviations and acronyms, ensure that they are spelled out in full the first time that they are used and also the first time that they are repeated (if they are) in the Case for Support.

The reviewers

- Avoid assuming the understanding of the reviewer.
- Spend time revising your proposal and make sure that when the bid is submitted, you have a defensible answer to any possible issues that might be raised. From the beginning, look at the documentation from the reviewer's point of view.

Keep it simple

- Try to explain complex elements of your proposal in a simple way.
- Avoid providing unnecessary detail in the Research Context section.

2. Sections in the grant application form

Objectives:

- Separate aims and objectives.
- Avoid over-complicating the aims and objectives.
- Avoid using this as a section for preamble and contextualisation.
- Try to state the objectives economically and as a cascade with one following the other if possible.

Summary:

- Remember this is for non-specialists and should be in plain English.
- Avoid cutting and pasting from the Case for Support or elsewhere.
- Try to say clearly what you are going to do, why it is important and what the consequences are.
- Avoid qualitative assessment of previous work from third parties.
- Describe the project generically as well as specifically.

Outputs:

- Avoid being over-ambitious in your outcomes - be realistic for the size of grant.



- Make sure that the timetable you've set is appropriate and that it manages two things: to give the reviewer the sense that the project is achievable within the timescale; and to leave you enough freedom and flexibility to deal with any issues and opportunities that arise during the research.
- Avoid making the timetable too broad and unspecific, but also make sure the work is not mapped out in too much detail.
- Make sure your outputs are consistent with the work that you propose.
- Think about impact when you define outputs and the target audiences.

Ethical Information:

- It is vital that any work engaging with claims to 'impact' on individuals or communities fully considers the ethical implications of this research and ensures that these are met appropriately.
- Avoid taking the issue of ethics lightly: think through the project and its implications fully.

Academic Beneficiaries:

- Make sure to think about short, medium and long term benefits.

Impact Summary:

- Be realistic in impact statements and, wherever you can, detail examples of particular organisations that will benefit.
- Avoid the obvious, generalities and truisms - try to direct attention to specific impact the research might have even if this seems quite small but is clearly 'real'.

Summary of Resources:

- Make sure that all the resources that you request are essential to meet the objectives.
- If consultants are used be clear why their input is essential.
- Make sure that the costings are appropriate. High quality proposals that are expensive will be recommended for funding, if the panel can see clear justification for the resources requested.
- Be prepared to make a specific case for the resources you request; and be prepared to readdress it, if the reviewers' reports raise cost as an issue.
- Avoid costing resources that might be reasonably expected to be available in a sophisticated research organisation capable of supporting world class research.
- Ensure that there is a clear justification of resources. As such, avoid conferences/travel/networking that are not specific to the research.



Staff:

- Be prepared to shuffle the project team to make best use of the strengths of the personnel in the bid team: the person who originated the project might not be the best person to act as PI. Think about how the team will look to an informed external reviewer.
- Where possible, consider the skills required to undertake particular functions and the costs of the person employed to perform these.
- Ensure that the project management structure can deal with unforeseen disruptions to the programme of research, unexpected results and staff changes.
- Ensure that support mechanisms are in place for early career researchers, or people who are making their first bid. This is something that the reviewers will comment on; and they'll be concerned if the evidence for support isn't strong.
- In proposals which include applications for PhD studentships or post-doc researchers, try to fully articulate how they will be properly supported and how they will benefit from the project themselves, rather than primarily benefitting the project with their labour and input.

Technical Plan:

- Ensure that technical requirements have been thoroughly investigated. Technical requirements have to be factored into the bid from the beginning as an integral part of the planning process.

1. The Case for Support

- Consult the Research Funding Guide for what is required for the Case for Support as regards the particular application and, if possible, answer all the questions in the sequence suggested as well as using the headings and sub headings provided.
- Aside from the clear statement of the research question and its significance, avoid repetition and do not feel that it needs to be the maximum length in order to be credible.
- Avoid third party evaluations and excessive description of previous successes.
- In advocating the significance of the research, avoid anticipating the research outcomes or suggesting that the research findings are already known.
- Provide the specific context for the research question, its method and the significance of the expected and unexpected results.



2. PI Response to Peer Reviews

- Use the review process wisely. Be prepared to deal candidly with any issues that the reviewers raise; don't be overly defensive, but don't simply accept criticisms that you feel are unjustified.
- When you respond to the reviewers, use your response as an opportunity to assess your proposal objectively; and address the points that the reviewers raise clearly and in as much detail as the space allows.
- Avoid taking it personally and avoid inflammatory responses (even if you feel that they are justified; the panel is quite accustomed to evaluating the limits of a peer review).
- When given the right to reply, you should use this constructively to deal with or contradict (with evidence) any problems highlighted by peer-reviewers. You should not launch a complete rejection (without evidence/substantiation) of what the peer reviewers have noted, or use it as a plea to the panel for funding nor produce a weak apology.
- Respond to points constructively, professionally and, if contradicting the reviewer, use the material in your original application to counteract any misunderstandings.
- If there are questions, try to answer them succinctly and avoid skirting round the difficult questions.
- When you address a point or comment raised by a reviewer, it's helpful if you mention the peer review identity so the panel is aware which point or comment you are responding to.
- Try to identify the major difficulties that the reviewers have identified. Try to address the difficulty raised directly and, if there is an error of fact, respond to it.

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