How to Make Successful (AHRC) Research Grant Bids

Stephen AR Scrivener
Introduction

- Writing a good proposal
- Writing for a funding context
- Writing a good practice-based proposal
- Relevant to an proposal, illustrated through AHRC
Writing from our own perspective

- This idea is really good
- I really know my stuff
- What matters to me matters to them – the funders
Multiple perspectives

- The proposer’s, of course
- The funder’s
- The disciplines (peer reviewers)
- The panels
- These perspectives are constrained by the evaluation process
- Understanding this context will help you to write a better proposal, i.e., one that does more justice to your idea
so now the funders
AHRC’s Mission

- Support and promote high-quality and innovative research in the arts and humanities.
- Support, through programmes in the arts and humanities, the development of skilled people for academic, professional and other employment.
- Promote awareness of the importance of arts and humanities research and its role in understanding ourselves, our society, our past and our future, and the world in which we live.
- Ensure that the knowledge and understanding generated by arts and humanities research is widely disseminated for the economic, social and cultural benefit of the UK and beyond.
- Contribute to the shaping of national policy in relation to the arts and humanities.
Mission drives programmes

- Responsive mode research schemes
  - Fellowships in the Creative and Performing Arts
  - Research Grants
  - Research Leave
  - Small Grants in the Creative and Performing Arts
  - Research Networks and Workshops

Strategic Initiatives
- Museums and Galleries Research Programme
- Landscape and Environment Programme
- Diasporas, Migration and Identities Programme
- ICT in the Arts and Humanities Research Programme
- Designing for the 21st Century Initiative
- Cultures of Consumption Programme
and to the process
Evaluation: Panels comprise diverse experts

- Panel 2 - Visual Arts and Media: practice, history, theory
  - Art and design
  - Arts management
  - History of art, architecture and design
  - Museology, curatorship and conversation (in art and design)
  - Cultural geography (where relevant to Panel 2 can be shown)
  - Communication, cultural and media studies
- Panel 3 – English Language and Literature
  - Includes creative writing
- Panel 7 - Music and the Performing Arts
  - Music (and ethnomusicology)
  - Drama, dance and the performing arts
  - Arts management
Evaluation: many people with varied expertise

- Two assessors selected from the AHRC peer review college
- 1 also nominated by applicant(s)
- Proposals in a round are usually assessed by panel members including convenor
- Panellists rate each proposal A+, A, RS, N, U
- Marksheets consolidated into single spreadsheet
- Committee meets to produce agreed rating
- A+ and A (typically) are rank ordered
Evaluation: from a lot to a little expertise

- Remarkable consistency in rating regardless of expertise
Evaluation: time is of the essence

- Panellists receive a lot of material
  - application material
  - assessors’ reports (I typically spend up to 4 hours)
  - AHDS report (where appropriate)
  - notes from officers

- Contextualising assessment
  - typically between 80 and 100 proposals to consider
  - typically eighteen working days between receiving report and returning marksheets
  - 18 days @ 7 hours = 126 / 90 = 1hr 24m per proposal
  - I used to set a side a week, working up to 10 hours per day
and now to applying understanding of the context
Choose the right programme for your purposes
Consider the odds

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Scheme</th>
<th>Appln</th>
<th>□</th>
<th>%</th>
<th>£k</th>
<th>£Payk</th>
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</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Research leave</td>
<td>628</td>
<td>311</td>
<td>50</td>
<td>3,797</td>
<td>4,385</td>
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<tr>
<td>Small grants</td>
<td>164</td>
<td>108</td>
<td>66</td>
<td>462</td>
<td>471</td>
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<tr>
<td>Research grants</td>
<td>385</td>
<td>78</td>
<td>20</td>
<td>12,560</td>
<td>10,449</td>
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<tr>
<td>Research Xchnge</td>
<td>22</td>
<td>15</td>
<td>68</td>
<td>232</td>
<td>165</td>
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<tr>
<td>Fellowships</td>
<td>57</td>
<td>20</td>
<td>35</td>
<td>1,80</td>
<td>696</td>
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<tr>
<td>Resource enh.</td>
<td>153</td>
<td>27</td>
<td>18</td>
<td>4,785</td>
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<tr>
<td>Research centres</td>
<td>245</td>
<td>17</td>
<td>7</td>
<td>14,235</td>
<td>2,197</td>
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<tr>
<td>Innovation awards</td>
<td>158</td>
<td>32</td>
<td>20</td>
<td>1,277</td>
<td>123</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Total</strong></td>
<td>1812</td>
<td>608</td>
<td>34</td>
<td>38,430</td>
<td>20,668</td>
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Make sure that you meet the aims or criteria

- e.g., Fellowships in creative and performing arts
- **Aims**
  - to support practice- and performance-based researchers of the highest quality
  - to enable such researchers to develop their careers by obtaining experience in the higher education environment
  - to encourage and nurture active research environments
  - to maximise the value of the outcomes of such research activity
Make sure you are eligible

- e.g., Fellowships in creative and performing arts
- The applicant
  - must be an artist who has not had the opportunity to carry out a significant programme of research in an HEI
  - should not hold a full-time post in HE
  - be of postdoctoral standing
  - have established track record of research and show outstanding potential in terms of practice-based research in the creative and performing arts
Make sure it is research in AHRC’s terms

- To fit the Council’s definition of research a proposal
  - must define a series of **research questions** or **problems** that will be addressed in the course of the research. It must also define its objectives in terms of seeking to enhance knowledge and understanding relating to the questions or problems to be addressed
  - must specify a **research context** for the questions or problems to be addressed. It must specify **why** it is important that these particular questions or problems should be addressed; **what other** research is being or has been conducted in this area; and what particular contribution this particular project will make to the advancement of creativity, insights, knowledge and understanding in this areas
  - must specify **research methods** for addressing questions or problems. It must state **how**,…, you will seek to answer the questions… It should explain the **rationale** for the chosen research methods and why these are thought to provide the most appropriate means to answer the questions
Read the scheme guidance, e.g., research grants

- AHRC provides elaborate guide to applicants for each scheme
- Know the relevant guide well, don’t rely on the application form
- e.g., guide explains how your proposal will be assessed
  - the significance and importance of the project
  - the appropriateness, etc., of research methods and timescale
  - ability of applicant(s) to complete project (track record)
  - value for money
  - appropriateness of dissemination
  - for certain programmes, the extent to which proposal meets the Council’s strategic priorities
Read the scheme guidance, continued

- e.g., it explains what should be in the case for support
  - what are the aims and objectives of your research?...
  - what are the research question(s) or problem(s)?...
  - what is the research context for your project?...
  - what research methods will you be adopting?...
Look at how the proposal will be assessed

- The assessors form is evaluation of criteria are operationalised
- AHRC evaluators form is public domain
  - the quality and importance of the project
  - people
  - management
  - outputs and dissemination
  - value for money
  - strengths and weaknesses
- The guidance to assessors explains these things in detail
So now you're ready to write the proposal

- The field of inquiry
- The research methods employed in the field
- The field’s practical understanding of research practice
- The proposal is an argument in shorthand
- Therefore, communication, communication, communication, communication
What does the shorthand need to convey

- That you understand the field of inquiry
- That you have made a case for there being a lack of understanding
- That you have explained the significance of this lack
- That you have shown how the research questions/problems follow from and if answered/solved will fill this lack
- That you have a plan for answering the identified questions/problems
- That you know what methods you will use and why they are appropriate
- That you are realistic about what is achievable within the timescale
Be kind to panellists and reviewers

- The proposal needs to stand out - it needs to be a strong idea
- The proposed research is the primary consideration
- As early as possible state the idea, explain why it needs to be tackled and estimate its impact - be bold
- Remind the reader of the above at appropriate points
- At key points remind the reader what you have told them and tell them what you are going to tell them, in particular explain significance
- Don’t assume that the reader can put two and two together, tell the reader what you want them to understand (explain why)
- Use simple language and language construction
And let your kindness continue

- Write so the reader can get it in one pass - every time the reader has to go back on something is another nail in the coffin. Don’t assume the reader knows anything about the subject.
- Don’t have too many aims or objectives, the reader won’t have time to stitch loads of objectives together with methodology, outcomes etc.
- Make sure that the research methods and stages of work will yield these aims and objectives, explain the connection.

? → Objective → Task → Method
↑
Method
And continue

- Structure the proposal logically so that the reader doesn’t have to wait to see the significance of something said earlier, e.g., don’t explain how you are going to do something before saying why you want to do it.

- Think of all the reasons for attacking your proposal and rebuff them.
and now, hesitantly, to the practice based proposal
Problems in writing practice-based proposals

- Research questions and problems
- Context
- Methods
Has the applicant

- Described the issues, concerns and interests stimulating the work?
- Shown that the issues, concerns and interests reflect cultural preoccupations?
- Shown that the response to these stimulants is likely to be culturally original?
- Made clear the relationship between the artefact(s) to be realised and those issues, concerns, and interests?
- Explained their likely originality
- Indicated any knowledge, learning or insight likely to result from the programme of work?
- *Provided an account of method that suggests a self-conscious, systematic and reflective practitioner?*
Summary advice

- Understand the overall funding context
- Choose the right programme for your research
- Make sure that you meet the aims or criteria
- Understand what is expected and this will be assessed
- Recognise that your proposal must be transparent
- Understand how the proposal will be read, both in terms of time and shorthand
- Recognise that success is all about communicating efficiently
Further details on practice-based research papers by Professor Stephen Scrivener:


