A comprehensive species-level molecular phylogeny of the New World blackbirds (Icteridae)


I study morphological and behavioral evolution in birds.

- I’ve applied for and received grants from private foundations, individuals, corporate foundations, scientific societies, NSF, institutions.....
- I’ve reviewed grant proposals for this same range of funders.
- I teach undergraduate and graduate proposal writing courses that have been very successful.

Outline

- Why write grant proposals?
- Why proposals aren’t funded.
- Writing strategies and tips
- What to do if you are funded?
Why write grant proposals?

- Money
- Critical skill to have on your CV/Resume
- Great way to force yourself to focus your ideas.
- Great way to develop your skills in communicating your ideas to others.

THE KEY TO WRITING SUCCESSFUL PROPOSALS

- KNOW WHAT YOU WANT TO ACCOMPLISH (GETTING MONEY IS NOT A GOAL. YOUR GOAL IS TO GET MONEY IN ORDER TO ACCOMPLISH SOMETHING).
- KNOW THE GOALS OF THE FUNDER
- KNOW YOUR AUDIENCE (THE REVIEWERS)
- WRITE A PROPOSAL THAT WILL ALLOW YOU TO ACCOMPLISH AS MUCH OF YOUR GOALS AS POSSIBLE WHILE MEETING THE NEEDS OF THE FUNDER AND THE EXPECTATIONS OF THE REVIEWERS

THEREFORE, THE MOST IMPORTANT THING YOU CAN DO TO IMPROVE YOUR PROPOSAL’S CHANCES IS TO KNOW THE AUDIENCE TO WHOM YOU ARE WRITING – THE REVIEWERS

WHAT IS THEIR EXPERTISE?

WHAT IS THEIR MOTIVATION?
WHAT IS YOUR RELATIONSHIP TO REVIEWERS?

- They are friends and colleagues who want to be able to recommend your proposal for funding.
- Your job is to make it as easy for them to do so as possible.
- If your proposal isn’t funded, do not blame the reviewers. It is your fault. You must own that and not think of yourself as a victim.

WHY ARE SOME PROPOSALS RANKED LOW OR EVEN UNFUNDABLE?

- Project idea isn’t innovative
- Proposal fails to convey the innovative aspects
- Written assuming reviewers have more or less expertise than they do
- Proposal emphasizes details rather than the big picture
- Inconsistent logic
- Lack of elements expected in discipline (e.g., hypotheses)
- Inappropriate methods

RESEARCH PROJECT INNOVATIVENESS AND/OR QUALITY

PROBLEM

- Give colleagues a brief outline and ask for comments
- Give colleagues a draft and ask them to rate on innovation
- Give draft to people with similar range of background to reviewers and ask for comments
- Give draft to colleagues and ask them to evaluate whether it is sufficiently “big picture”
- These last three are best evaluated by experts in the discipline
## Writing Quality

**Problem**
- Doesn’t follow proposal guidelines
- Proposal is poorly organized
- Proposal is poorly written
  - Grammar
  - Spelling
- Doesn’t use appropriate language
  - Too much or too little use of discipline-specific language
- Inappropriate use of discipline-specific language

**Solution**
- Read current guidelines very carefully
- Using draft, make an outline of the main points of each paragraph
- Use spell check and grammar check features, ask people to read your drafts many times and not at the last minute
- This is best evaluated by experts in your discipline

## Budget

**Problem**
- Budget magnitude is inappropriate
- Budget is not well justified
  - Values appear to be guesses
  - Items not necessary for the project
- Budget doesn’t follow proposal guidelines

**Solution**
- Be sure that you understand the budgetary guidelines of the program
- Get real estimates for every budget item
- Including only items that are increments of $50 or $100 indicates that they are guesses
- Be conservative about including budget items. Being greedy only makes reviewers unhappy
- Be sure you understand and have followed exactly the program guidelines.

## Principal Investigator Ability and/or Potential

**Problem**
- Failure to convey relevant experiences
- Failure to meet disciplinary expectations:
  - Publications
  - Degrees
  - Previous grant experience
- Failure to convince reviewer that the ideas are yours

**Solution**
- Make a list of things that demonstrate your ability/potential and check them off as you read your draft
- Talk with people familiar with this funder to learn what expectations are
- Make explicit statements about these being your ideas and ask letter writers (if any) to reiterate this point

## Research Project Feasibility

**Problem**
- Proposal is unlikely to be successful
  - Budget is too small
  - Insufficient time
  - The necessary equipment is not available
  - The necessary permits haven’t been obtained

**Solution**
- Be realistic about the budgetary, temporal, equipment, and permit needs of the project and be explicit that your proposal meets those needs.
- Have your colleagues comment on whether your proposal does this successfully
PROJECT FIT TO FUNDER

PROBLEM
• PROPOSAL FAILS TO CONVINCE REVIEWER THAT THE PROJECT MEETS THE FUNDER’S GOALS

SOLUTION
• BE SURE THAT YOU UNDERSTAND THE FUNDER’S GOALS AND THAT YOU’VE ADDRESSED THOSE EXPLICITLY IN THE PROPOSAL
• ASK YOUR COLLEAGUES TO CONFIRM THAT YOU’VE ADDRESSED THE GOALS CLEARLY

General writing strategies and tips:
Don’t make these mistakes!

• Your and your colleagues should read your proposal drafts with these specific possible mistakes in mind.

Specific writing strategies and tips:
What does success look like?
Ask others for copies of successful proposals

Specific writing strategies and tips:
Know your audience!

• Understand the reviewer and their motivations
• Write specifically for that audience. Use language that:
  • is sufficiently technical to convince the most expert of your reviewers that you understand your discipline, and
  • is sufficiently general to communicate effectively with the least expert of your reviewers.
• Find people from this same audience to read your drafts
• NEVER submit the same exact proposal to multiple places. Always rewrite for each specific audience.
Specific writing strategies and tips: Meet the funder’s needs and expectations

- Be sure to look at CURRENT program guidelines
- Contact the program officer if you have questions
- Be sure to structure the proposal as required
- Be sure you understand the level of detail and justification required for the budget
- Be sure that any required information is obvious.

Specific writing strategies and tips: The Hourglass Structure

Regardless of proposal length, the ideal proposal should:

- Start by appealing to the interests of a broad audience and paint the biggest picture possible
- The body of the proposal should provide sufficient detail to convince the reader that:
  - The project is feasible
  - the methods are appropriate, and
  - that you are capable of doing the research
- Conclude by reminding the readers of the broad interest and implication of your research

Specific writing strategies and tips: Importance of Multiple Drafts

- Get feedback early and throughout all stages of writing
- Get feedback from multiple people including a few with expertise comparable to your likely reviewers
- Reserve one or more people to read only your last draft

Specific writing strategies and tips: Importance of Multiple Starts

- Write three or more very different introductory paragraphs before editing any of them.
- Test those introductions with your colleagues to get their reactions.
Specific writing strategies and tips:
Importance of Including Hypotheses

- For some disciplines, hypotheses are absolutely required
- If required, make sure you've stated them properly

What to do if you are funded

- Who receives the money?
- What if you want to change your project or some aspect of the budget?
- What if they don’t give you all the funds you requested?
- What do you owe the funder?