UKRI BBSRC, EPSRC MRC & NERC:
Increasing your chance of response mode success.

Preparing a high-quality proposal takes considerable time and planning. The following tips have been collated from discussions with UKRI Programme Managers, UoA awardees and current and recent UKRI panel members.

BEFORE STARTING TO WRITE

UNDERSTAND THE FUNDER'S REMIT

BBSRC: supports research in areas including plants, microbes, animals (including humans), and tools and technology underpinning biological research. See BBSRC remit for more detail or send a 2-page outline to remit@bbsrc.ukri.org to verify fit.

EPSRC: supports research in areas including chemistry, engineering, information and communications technologies, materials, mathematical sciences, physics. See EPSRC remit for more detail or confirm remit via the EPSRC remit form.

MRC: supports research in areas including molecular and cellular medicine, infections and immunity, population and systems medicine, neurosciences and mental health, translational research, methodology development, global health research. See MRC remit for more detail or send a 2-page outline to the relevant programme manager to confirm fit.

NERC: supports research in areas including atmospheric physics and chemistry, climate and climate change, ecology, biodiversity and systematics, geosciences, marine environments, polar sciences, science-based archaeology, terrestrial and freshwater environments. See NERC remit for more detail or confirm remit via the NERC remit form.

Research crosses remit boundaries? The Research Councils have a Cross Research Council Remit Agreement, whereby they fully support research that spans disciplinary boundaries. Whilst one Council will lead on the assessment of a cross/inter-disciplinary proposal, all relevant Councils will feed into the review of such proposals to ensure they are fairly reviewed.

Speak to the funder early to confirm your ideas are in remit and what submission route (Board/Panel) to take – programme/portfolio managers are available within the Councils to advise and expect to be contacted. Making contact can also be an opportunity to gain more insight into how to design and present your proposal for the specific funder.

UNDERSTAND HOW YOUR PROPOSAL WILL BE ASSESSED

Understanding how your proposal will be reviewed and assessed will help you to pitch your application accordingly. Each Council publishes its process, assessment criteria, scoring matrix and Board Panel membership. Be mindful that each Council utilises a slightly different

approach to the review process, e.g. EPSRC and MRC utilises a sift/triage before proceeding to Board/Panel; EPSRC and BBSRC panels act as moderating panels and do not re-review proposals, whereas MRC Boards are empowered to bring their own expertise to the assessment to complement peer reviews. NERC applications are assessed by peer review but processes may vary to suit the needs of the scheme. Peer review may consist of two stages: expert review and moderating panel. Work is ongoing across UKRI to harmonise the review process across all Councils.

Be aware of strategic priorities: Whilst Council's will support all research within their remit, they also have strategic priorities which can be utilised to prioritise grants for funding provided they also reach quality thresholds. Review UKRI funders' strategic priorities set out in their delivery plans and the priorities/'opportunities' of each UKRI funding Panel/Board detailed on their webpages. Take these into account when preparing your bid and, only if relevant, highlight how you research aligns – do not try to make it fit if it doesn't, your research does not need to align to a priority area to be funded through response mode.

Find out why grants succeed or fail – speak to your Research Development Executive, programme/portfolio managers at the Councils, or colleagues that have served on funding Boards/Panels to gain insights into what can make or break a proposal. The Grants Academy holds a list of University researchers who sit on funding panels, contact your Research Development Executive for details.

TAKE TIME TO GET YOUR IDEAS RIGHT

The Research Councils operate with limited budgets which are never able to extend to funding all 'fundable' proposals. Therefore, to stand a chance, your application has to be of the highest quality and transformative to the field.

Engage with School support processes such as the Intention to Submit/Supporting Grant Application process and internal peer review. Inviting constructive criticism at multiple stages of development may help strengthen your proposal and ensure your research questions are framed appropriately, methods are robust and you're working with appropriate collaborators.

Does your pilot data justify your approach? If it doesn't then this will be spotted and is often cited as a reason for rejection. If necessary, delay your submission and focus on collection of further data.

Be ambitious and innovative but have and describe clear risk mitigation strategies within your proposal.

CRAFTING YOUR PROPOSAL

READ THE GUIDANCE

Read all the guidance documents carefully– including the funding guide and any supplementary documents. Make sure you understand what the call is seeking. Ensure you are using current documentation as guidance is updated regularly.

Where requested use headings provided by the funder.

Ensure all the requested elements of the application are carefully addressed – adhere to any formatting/presentation requirements.

MAKE THE MOST OF INTERNAL SUPPORT

There is a considerable support available to UoA staff preparing UKRI applications. Get the most from this by building this into your timescales.

Grants Academy: Experienced Research Development, Impact & KE and Research Finance professionals support Principal Investigators applying to UKRI calls and can facilitate input from other teams such as Digital Research and Research Governance if they are approached early enough.

"Take peer review seriously" (UoA MRC awardee) – follow UoA requirements for peer review and seek out reviewers who will be constructive and honest– this is how UKRI panel members and expert reviewers will approach reviewing your bid.

Allow time for R&I to read your final application – a fresh pair of eyes can spot things others have missed – you may need time to respond to any issues that are identified.

ENSURE YOUR APPLICATION IS EASY TO READ AND UNDERSTAND

Write for *everyone* who will read your proposal - Funding Panel Chairs, Introducing Members, other panel members and expert reviewers. Take into account that some will review your bid in more detail than others and have varying knowledge of your field. Take into consideration that panels typically only spend around 8 minutes discussing each bid and review a high number of proposals at each meeting.

Use headings and spaces between paragraphs - to help readers navigate to what they are looking for quickly – could be particularly helpful to an Introducing Member defending your application at a panel.

Convey the novelty of the research and your expertise and enthusiasm early in the application.

Give each section a structure and stick to it. E.g. Work Packages: use bullet points, introduce with lay language and end with a statement of expected impact.

Consider including a schematic summary (if the call permits this).

Ensure your Summary is lay and give it a start, a middle and an end. Do not use technical language but if you have to explain it! Set out why the research is required and consider asking a lay reviewer to read before submission.

Use plain English - if acronyms are needed explain the terms in full.

Consider ending with an experimental outlook outlining your plans for progressing the research beyond the current proposal.

If you're not ready to submit - DON'T! - waiting until the next deadline may well improve your chance of success. Flaws in your approach will be spotted – it is essential for UKRI proposals to be underpinned by scientific excellence. Be familiar with resubmission rules – different Councils have different rules.

AFTER SUBMISSION

Keep generating data – this may be useful in your rebuttal.

Be aware of when peer review comments are expected – you are often only permitted 10 working days to respond so ensure you have the time to do so.

Seek comments on your rebuttal – even though limited time is available, seek input from others, including your peer reviewers. Provide respectful responses even to reviews that you strongly disagree with. Use the UoA rebuttal guidance to help craft your response.

Hope for success however, many high-quality grants don't get funded - don't get disheartened UKRI success rates are around 20-25% (sometimes less) and most PIs will have had rejections. Don't give up, take on board any feedback and consider consulting with senior staff and R&I to plan how to take your research ideas forward.

Further resources:

12 top tips for writing a grant application – UKRI

Guidance for applicants – BBSRC – UKRI

Guidance for applicants – EPSRC – UKRI

Guidance for applicants – MRC – UKRI

Guidance for applicants – NERC -UKRI