Getting your first grant: a junior faculty perspective

Phillip Newmark

Department of Cell and Developmental Biology
University of Illinois at Urbana-Champaign

pnewmark@life.uiuc.edu
• The funding climate
• Approaches to writing
• Strategies
• Resources
Research project applications received
(NIH Center for Scientific Review)

Figure 7: Research Project Applications Received at CSR, FY 2001-2004, New vs. Experienced Investigators

- 2004: 18,047
  - Experienced: 13,643
  - New Investigators: 4,404 (4.5% total applications; 17.7% new awards)
- 2003: 13,643
  - Experienced: 10,196
  - New Investigators: 3,447 (3.7% total applications; 16.9% new awards)
- 2002: 9,595
  - Experienced: 7,294
  - New Investigators: 2,301
- 2001: 1,640
  - Experienced: 1,200
  - New Investigators: 440

Legend:
- Green: Experienced
- Blue: New Investigators
The current funding climate

- Number of applications rising
- Funding $ leveling off
- ~75% already committed to continuing projects
- ~4% of NIH awards go to new investigators
Some thoughts on writing

“What is written without effort is in general read without pleasure.” - Samuel Johnson

“Writing is easy. All you do is stare at a blank sheet of paper until drops of blood form on your forehead.” - Gene Fowler

Then there is Isaac Asimov...

For most of us, writing is hard work
Protect your writing time

• Get release time from teaching and committee assignments when you start (should be in your contract)

• Take advantage of this time; just say “NO”

• Choose the members of your research group carefully
Establish a routine

• If possible, define your most productive writing time

• Set aside a block of time for writing every day

• Close your office door, if necessary

“There is no great writing, only great rewriting.”
Your deadline ≠ funding agency’s deadline

- Senior colleagues need time to critique your proposal
- You need time to revise (and re-revise) accordingly
- Office of Contracts and Grants needs time to approve budget and ensure that your proposal meets agency guidelines (don’t rely too heavily on this)
- Your administrative support staff does not need to race around at the last minute because of your deadline

So, start writing several months in advance of the official deadline
Strategies:
Do your homework

• Understand missions of different funding agencies

• Search for Program Announcements (PAs) and Requests for Applications (RFAs) relevant to your work

• Research funding levels at different Institutes; some have specific policies to aid new PIs
Strategies (continued)

• Get senior faculty with study section experience to review your proposal

• Talk to Program Officers/Directors; they are extremely helpful

• For NIH, write a cover letter requesting study section, as well as primary and secondary institutes for funding
Resources

• NIH Center for Scientific Review Video: “Inside the NIH Grant Review Process”
• NIH, NSF web sites
• Science Next Wave Career Development Center
• Strunk and White, “The Elements of Style,” 3rd Edition (used book stores)
Take advantage of this time to think deeply about your work and to put it into a broader context

“I hate writing; I love having written”
-Dorothy Parker