How to Read a Funding Agency Solicitation

A funding agency solicitation is a document that describes the purpose of a funding opportunity and provides specific directions for submitting an application. There are many names for a solicitation, such as RFA (Request for Applications), RFP (Request for Proposals), FOA (Funding Opportunity Announcement), and PA (Program Announcement). Smaller foundations or private agencies may simply refer to a set of “guidelines.” Whatever the name, for those who are new to grant writing, a funding agency solicitation can be intimidating. Every funding agency arranges the document differently and the language used is often unclear. But you must read the solicitation thoroughly in order to prepare a competitive application. To repeat: you must read the solicitation thoroughly in order to prepare a competitive application. At minimum, you should read the entire solicitation three times: before you begin the application, in the middle of the process, and before you submit the application. The simplest piece of grant writing advice is also the most important: follow the directions!

When you are trying to decide whether or not to pursue a funding opportunity, the solicitation will help you understand the following considerations:

- **Eligibility**: Are you eligible to apply? Is your institution eligible to apply? Are you eligible to be the Principal Investigator (PI)?
  Eligibility criteria can change from year to year, so do not rely on the criteria of previous competitions. Eligibility criteria are usually clearly described in a solicitation, but if they are unclear and you have any questions, it is best to contact the funding agency directly.

- **Program fit**: What is the purpose of this funding opportunity? Is it a good fit for my project?
  The purpose of the funding opportunity is usually one of the first items described in a solicitation. The purpose may be more or less specific and well described; it may be necessary to seek guidance from a program officer to determine the agency’s current priorities. Grants are highly competitive; if a particular opportunity is not a good fit then you should spend your valuable time elsewhere.

- **Deadline(s)**: What is the deadline? What is required for an application?
  Some funding opportunities have several deadlines for required submissions in addition to the full application (e.g., letters of intent or pre-proposals). Make sure that you have time to do all that you need to do to apply. If a deadline has recently passed, then check to see if there will be recurring deadlines in future years.

- **Application process**: Can you apply individually? Do you need to be nominated by someone? Does the university apply on your behalf?
  The answers to these questions will influence both your application process and your deadline. Most grant proposal applications prepared by university faculty and staff must be officially submitted by a Research Service Center rather than an individual PI. However, there are some opportunities, such as summer fellowships, that must be submitted by the individual PI. If you are unclear about the application process, consult with your Research Service Center.
- **Review criteria:** Will you be able to address all the review criteria thoroughly and competitively?
  The review criteria are usually described near the end of a solicitation. Reading the review criteria will give you a clearer understanding of the program’s purpose.
- **Budget:** What are the minimum and maximum funding limits? What costs are allowable? How long does the funding last?
  Budget considerations will largely determine the feasibility of the project and your scope of work, so be sure that you have a clear understanding of what costs are allowable. Your Research Service Center can help you develop an appropriate budget for your project.

If you decide to apply for a grant, you should read the solicitation again in its entirety in order to develop a thorough understanding of the proposal requirements:

- **Proposal structure:** Exactly what information should be included in the proposal? How should it be presented?
  Usually the solicitation will provide a clear outline for your proposal. Follow it. Make sure the requested and required information is easy for reviewers to find.
- **Document format:** What are the formatting guidelines?
  The funding agency’s formatting guidelines are not optional. They are used to ensure that proposals are presented in a reader-friendly way for the reviewer, and that no proposer has an unfair advantage. Be sure to follow these guidelines precisely.
- **Supplementary documents:** What additional documents are required to complete the application package?
  Almost all grant proposals require the submission of supplementary documentation in addition to the proposal narrative and budget: biographical sketches, facilities descriptions, research compliance descriptions, letters of support, and data management plans, just to name a few. As you plan your proposal, prepare an outline of each required document and a plan for completing it; you do not want to have to scramble to assemble the application package at the last minute.