DO's and DON'Ts of proposal writing

DO

Be aware of the funding landscape and the open calls and deadlines, including strategic priorities: You can use Research Professional to help with this and set your personal alerts. You can also get your favourite Research Council (or Horizon 2020) to send you alerts about calls. Read green and white papers from funders including BIS/InnovateUK. Further information on funding opportunities can be obtained from the Imperial College Research Office web pages including http://www.imperial.ac.uk/research-and-innovation/research-office/funder-information/ and FoNS web pages: https://www.imperial.ac.uk/natural-sciences/research/funding/. Twitter and other social media are also used to disseminate information about calls, etc. Try to think outside usual funders and consider, e.g. medical and other charities, Human Frontier Science Program (HFSP), Global Challenge Research Collective Fund, Leverhulme Trust, etc.

For specific enquiries, you can contact your Faculty Research Strategy Manager: Sophie Armstrong-Brown, and your Vice Dean (Research), Paul French. You can also contact FoNS Corporate Partnerships team (Rebecca Wilson and Kay Penicud) for help with InnovateUK funding and industry partners. Your Department's Research Director can also provide advice and take any suggestions/concerns forward.

Develop and use personal relationships: Talk to staff at your funding organisations (e.g. Research Councils) and ask them how they could support your proposed projects. Whenever, possible, send them an outline proposal so that they can advise you how and where to direct your proposals. Talk to College staff who serve on funder panels (e.g. e.g. EPSRC SATs). Engage with your funders by reviewing diligently, by serving on panels and by responding to requests for information or other help. Join research networks including KTN, attend sandpits and town meetings. Be an advocate for your funders and take opportunities to provide them with positive publicity (e.g. media activities).

Carefully consider your funding mechanism: Besides Responsive mode grants from RCUK, think about larger scale grants, co-funded awards (InnovateUK, BRIC), specific targeted calls (e.g. recent EPSRC calls in Structured Products, Future Manufacturing, ..), early career awards (such as First Grant schemes and fellowships), and calls for major centres. Many of these larger scale calls are managed such that the College is only allowed to put forward a few bids and therefore must make an internal selection before submission to funder. The Research Office will normally manage this process. You can also take advantage of various seed funding schemes including internal funding from Departments, the Faculty Strategic Research Fund, sandpit events (which often provide funding with higher than usual success rates). There are also specific funds for impact-related activities including follow-on funds from Research Councils and internal Impact Acceleration Account funds.

Be ready when the call comes: If you have a great idea, start thinking about what you need and with whom who you need to work immediately - start shaping the proposal ASAP so you are ready to go if and when a call with a short lead time is announced. This is particularly important for calls for capital equipment and for EU calls.

WHEN WRITING A SPECIFIC PROPOSAL, DO

Be clear about what you want to do, why you want to do it, what you need and why the funder should support you to do it: Be specific and concise throughout the proposal – do not assume the reviewers will take anything as read. Provide evidence to support your assertions, particularly about impact. Ensure that you explain what is innovative and what would be the specific impact if the project were successful. If you have a hypothesis, make sure that you state it. Explain how your project builds on previous work and show that you are aware of previous relevant work - noting that your reviewer could be a close competitor. Explain why your proposal fits the remit and any strategic priorities.

Make sure you get across everything you need in the abstract and/or introduction/vision/summaries of Je-S form: Try to write these as if a busy non-expert reviewer will base their decision only on this text (reviewers may not work in the specific field of proposal and may not carefully read/understand it). Remember that these summaries may be made public so do not include anything that could compromise IP.

Pay attention to Impact: Ensure "Impact summary" and "Academic Beneficiaries" sections in JeS are concise and as specific as possible. Explain benefit to UK industry, society, taxpayer and any other beneficiaries (e.g. ODA countries for GCRF). Write a credible "Pathways to Impact" document - be specific and give time scales for impact to be realised. Request resources required to implement any specific steps you propose. Explain IP position and plans for exploitation.

Make full use of the limited page allowance of your proposal: Use figures sparingly - diagrams and presentations of data can be very effective but should not take more space than necessary. Do not waste space, e.g. with unnecessary background material or technical discussions in too great depth.

Present as much leverage as you can: demonstrate the importance of your project by presenting support in cash or in kind from industry and/or other potential stakeholders. This can include support from the Department (e.g. space, refurbishment, technical staff, studentships, contributions to equipment costs, buy-out of your time, administrative support, ..) that could be funded from a fraction of the overheads for large grants. It can also include support from industry and/or end users in the form of samples, evaluation of performance, advice, fabrication, access to data or to patient cohorts, etc. Try to provide a reasonable financial value of these contributions in the proposal. Note that, while letters of support (LoS) are often useful and frequently necessary (i.e. wherever a partner or third party is named in proposal), they are usually not sufficient – cash or in-kind contributions are much more convincing and some funders will not accept LoS without a real contribution. A weak LoS can be damaging.

Ensure that your proposal complies with all formal requirements: These range from page length and font size of proposal to remit of funding scheme and any funding constraints. No proposal should be rejected by funder on a technicality.

Complete and submit your costings for approval well (at least 5 days) before funder deadline: Too many staff leave costings and proposal submission to the last minute and this can risk being unable to submit or submitting a sub-optimal proposal. Make sure that you include PI and co-I time wherever possible and that you cost for any technical staff and College facilities needed. Be aware of rules on funding flexibility before you submit your proposal to ensure you can spend grant funds as you need.

Get some else to review and critique your proposal: Take advantage of Departmental mentors, Research Committees, Section leaders etc. Make sure that you get feedback on your proposal from a non-applicant in time to make changes.

AFTER PROPOSALS IS SUBMITTED, DO

Response to Referees: Be courteous, concise and specific. Try to address all points raised and to highlight where referees have recognised key strengths. Provide evidence for any assertions. Remember that reviewer may be on funding panel.

Undertake mock interview where appropriate: Any funding interview (e.g., for fellowship, programme grant, etc.) should always be preceded by a mock interview. Ask your Department to arrange this and ensure you practice with same personnel who will attend real interview. Try to have experts who can address potentially awkward issues. Decide in advance who will address which topics and make sure you have balance between different interviewees. The team leader needs to be credible and speak the most but not more than 50% of the time.

DON'T

Restrict yourself to a single funder. It is useful to apply to diverse potential sponsors, particularly noting that some Research Councils may not permit resubmissions of great proposals- even of great ideas. Sometimes it is easier to access different funders in partnership with colleagues, e.g. in multidisciplinary proposals.

Begin building new project consortium only after a call has been announced: Competition for funding is increasing and opportunistic proposals that lack depth or credibility in <u>any</u> aspect are unlikely to be successful.

Pad out research proposals or waffle: Make every work count, avoid unnecessary repetition, including between the form and the Case for Support. Do not provide irrelevant information, e.g. in the introduction, and do not make unsubstantiated claims. Do not waste space on generic statements or assertions that can be taken as read. Avoid giving a hostile reviewer ammunition. Avoid giving a lazy reviewer the wrong idea. Be specific and put forward the arguments, ideas and evidence on which you want your proposal to be judged. If there is a weakness, address it specifically and do not hope it will not be noticed.

Be arrogant/condescending: (some people seem to find this difficult). In case your reviewer does not agree with you, ensure you are making reasonable arguments supported by evidence. Do not neglect relevant prior work and do not unfairly criticise other work in the field.

Leave Je-S summaries to the last minute – they are read first by many reviewers and can set frame of mind for reading of whole proposal. They may also be used by funders to assign reviewers.

Write Pathways to Impact as an afterthought: (this seems to happen) The credibility of impact is increasingly important for research proposals – including those for fundamental research. You should explain why the funder should support your proposal given their aims and remit. For most proposals, there should be specific beneficiaries and specific steps to realise impact. For some proposals, beneficiaries may be other scientists and timescales may be long term. Do not pad out your Pathways to Impact – it does not have to be two pages.

Disclose anything in the proposal that could later compromise IP: Note that abstracts/summaries are often published. Although proposals may be considered confidential, ideas can leak out and your competitors may review you proposal.

Submit proposal at the last minute: Respect the internal deadlines and enable Research Services and Departmental Research Managers to check your proposal. Make sure that your proposal is reviewed before internal submission to give you a chance to address weaknesses while there is still time and to avoid any formatting or technical errors that could lead to an "office rejection".

Insult reviewers in Response to Referees: (even though they may deserve it). It will be counterproductive. Assume that anything you write will be a matter of record and remember that you cannot know/control who sees it.