

A Guide to Writing Successful Field-Initiated Research Grant Proposals

SPENCER FOUNDATION

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In preparing a proposal for one of Spencer's grant programs, you may find it helpful to learn more about what makes an application successful. To that end, we are providing this writing guide with tips and suggestions based on our review of past applications and our own sense of what makes for a strong and competitive submission. In reading this guide, we hope you come away with a general sense of how we look at proposals and make funding decisions as well as specific information that you can use in your own proposal writing.

Overview

Spencer's Research Grants in Education Program supports education research projects that will contribute to our understanding of education and its improvement. Under this program, we are looking for proposals that are focused on topics or issues related to learning or education, broadly conceived, and that are critical to the field.

Broadly speaking, we are looking for a proposal where the research project is well-described, well-reasoned, compelling, and rigorous. Along with this, we aim to support research that contributes new understandings using innovative approaches, theory, and/or methods. Proposals are evaluated based on a number of criteria including the significance of the project relative to the field of education; the ways in which relevant research literature and theory are used effectively in the proposal to justify the proposed work; and the overall quality, sophistication, and appropriateness of the research design and analysis plan as well as their alignment with the research question(s) and/or conceptual framing. Additional consideration is also given to the proposed budget and time; the potential of the team to complete the study as described and share results or other findings; and the ways in which projects support the professional and scholarly growth of their team members.

Field-Initiated

The Foundation is intended, by Spencer's direction, to investigate ways in which education, broadly conceived, can be improved around the world. As such, our Research Grants in Education Program is open and field-initiated, with the understanding that rigorous, intellectually ambitious, and technically sound research that connects to foundational knowledge is necessary to gain new knowledge related to pressing questions in education.

Topics and Methods

We strive to fund the best proposal on educational topics, regardless of specific topic, discipline or methodological approach.

Scholars from all disciplines can submit proposals across a range of educational research topics. We recognize that learning occurs across the life course as well as across settings—from the classroom to the workplace, to family and community contexts, and even onto the playing field—any of which may, in the right circumstance, provide the basis for a rewarding study that makes significant contributions to the field. We anticipate that proposals will span a wide range of topics and disciplines that innovatively investigate questions central to education, including for example education, anthropology, philosophy, psychology, sociology, economics, history, law, or neuroscience, amongst others. Moreover, we expect and welcome methodological diversity in answering pressing questions, thus we are open to projects that utilize a wide array of research methods including quantitative, qualitative, mixed-methods, ethnographies, design-based research, participatory methods, archival research, to name a few.

We are open to projects that might incorporate data from multiple and varied sources, span an appropriate length of time as to achieve a depth of understanding, or work closely with practitioners or community members over the life of the project. Moreover, we welcome proposals submitted by multidisciplinary and

multigenerational teams who are positioned to both contribute to the project as well as contribute to the teaching and learning of fellow team members. Finally, we encourage projects that thoughtfully consider the trajectories of their projects findings, implications and potential impacts, including how the knowledge may be shared and utilized across the field, in practice, in policy making, or with the broader public.

Considerations

The specific proposal elements, eligibility requirements, and review process vary depending on the funding level. We encourage you to read more about what is required for each funding level.

With that said, there are some things that we do not fund.

We do not fund projects that do not have research components intended to contribute to the broad field of education. These include:

- Scholarships
- Curriculum development
- Program development and implementation
- Program or curriculum evaluation
- Professional development programs

We would potentially fund research on professional development programs or evaluations at scale that go beyond questions of whether or not a program or intervention works, and is designed to contribute to generalizable or transferable knowledge.

Background

Since it was established in 1971, the Spencer Foundation has sought to support high-quality, innovative research with the potential to improve education. In pursuing that goal, we have always had broad ideas about the questions such research might ask, the methods it might use, and the ways in which we might support it. A broad approach to supporting education research reflects our awareness that the educational enterprise itself is complex; it depends on students' cognitive development, cultural values, and social backgrounds, teachers' practices, knowledge, and attitudes, institutional structures, educational politics, markets for educated workers, and more.

Proposing Field-Initiated Research

The idea of proposing field-initiated research can be both exhilarating and daunting. In drafting a proposal, you are tasked with both making a strong case for your line of inquiry and outlining a rigorous, high-quality approach for advancing knowledge along that line. At the same time, your arguments must be clear, precise, and accessible.

In this section, we explain our approach to reading and reviewing research proposals and offer insights we have gained that may inform your approach to writing, by explaining the following key components of a research proposal:

- The significance of your project
- Your project's connection to existing research and theory; and
- Your project's research design.

We find it helpful to think of these things not as sections of your proposal, but as related components that overlap and connect with one another. At the same time, we are intentional in not prescribing specific sections. We understand that proposal structures may vary based on disciplinary traditions and approaches to research.

The biggest challenges most people have is finding a way to strike an appropriate balance between these components and making sure they are aligned. If either one of these components are missing, underdeveloped, or disconnected from each other it is likely that the proposal will not be funded.

Significance of Your Project

Successful proposals have a clear focus of inquiry and/or specific research questions.

First and foremost, it is important that your proposed research project is focused on topics or issues related to learning or education, that these topics and issues are critical to the field, and that you have articulated a clear and compelling set of research questions or line of inquiry related to these topics and issues.

This is often the most exciting and interesting part of a scholar's proposal – where we, as readers, see their passions. We have found that scholars choose to focus on topics or issues for a variety of reasons and oftentimes focus their attention of filling significant gaps in research, but we have also found that many competitive proposals focus on critical and emerging trends in the field or take aim at unexpected, puzzling, or contradictory relationships, or counterintuitive findings that warrant additional attention.

Be sure to cue readers to the centrality of education in your proposal by writing about how your topic or issue is represented in established educational research spaces or how knowing more about your topic or issue may inform educational practice or policy or connect to existing paradigms. Please remember that within the context of your proposal, the importance of your topic or issue is also connected to the extent to which your research question or line of inquiry advances knowledge on that topic or issue. For example, suppose your research project examined the underrepresentation of women of color in graduate-level computer science courses. This is an issue that is clearly within the realm of education. Moreover, we can agree that this an issue that warrants attention. However, what makes the issue significant, in the context of your proposal, is that your research questions or line of inquiry offers a path forward for better understanding underrepresentation of women of color in graduate-level computer science courses.

It is important to make sure that your research questions or line of inquiry target the development of new knowledge. Try to avoid questions or lines of inquiry that appear to have obvious answers or foregone conclusions – they seldom push the field in an appreciable way.

Also, try not make hyperbolic claims about the significance of your research. Sometimes, the importance of a project can be found in sound reasoning and attention to detail.

Questions to Consider:

- What are you studying?
- Why are you studying it?
- What will we learn from the study?

Tips and Insights:

- Identify a specific topic or issue related to education or learning and explain why it is important to know more about it.
- Explain how your project will improve theory, policy, or practice in education, contributing to generalizable or transferable knowledge for the field.
- Make explicit the connections between your topic or issue and broader themes or ideas in the field of education.
- If your project focuses on a specific program, policy, or practice, make sure to describe it in detail and explain how studying this program, policy, or practice can yield generalizable or transferable knowledge.

Common Mistakes

- Projects are not expressly research projects (e.g., request for funding book writing, curriculum or technology development, technology purchases, philanthropic support for nonprofits or other service providers, program evaluations).
- Projects are not clearly connected to education.

Connection to Research and Theory

Successful proposals make a compelling rationale for the study that is based on the relevant literature.

In making the case for the significance of your project, you should reflect on how other researchers have treated the same topic. Using research and theory, you can delve deeper into explaining why you are studying your topic or issue and why you are asking your research questions or taking up your line of inquiry.

Provide a succinct review of literature where you discuss current and seminal research related to your topic and highlight important gaps in that knowledge that warrant scrutiny. We recognize that you are an expert in your field and are thus likely to be well immersed in the research literature. At the same time, we hope that you can use this expertise to determine what research is and is not relevant to share in your proposal, writing in a way that outlines broad issues in the literature, but ultimately converges on your specific topic or issue and supports the case for your research questions or line of inquiry.

You should also provide a theoretical or conceptual framework that explains any key relationships in your project and/or informs the way that you are examining your topic or issue. We understand that different fields and approaches use theory differently, but, at the same time, believe it important to situate studies within major theories within your given discipline.

This is particularly important when your study is exploring a foundational question by looking at a specific intervention. You should provide the theoretical and empirical rationale for why the intervention is likely to be effective.

Questions to Consider:

- What is it that we know? What is it that we don't know? And how is this problematic?
- What are the major theories or frameworks that help us make sense of this topic or issue or change our current understanding of this topic or issue?

Tips and Insights:

- Describe, cite, and comment on the current state of knowledge around your topic or issue and how your research questions or line of inquiry are related to that current state of knowledge.
- Reflect on how your findings may influence our existing knowledge base, capacity to improve education, and/or key assumptions in the field.
- Define key terms and avoid jargon (when possible).
- If your project focuses on a specific program, policy, or practice, explain your theoretical and empirical rationale for why the program, policy, or practice is likely to produce your anticipated outcome.

Common Mistakes

- Overly broad and long review of literature.
- Little or no discussion of research literature.
- Little or no discussion of relevant theory.

Research Design

Successful proposals describe and provide a convincing rationale for the design of their study. At the same time, problems with research designs are common in the proposals we review.

A sound research design is the best way to make sure that your project will yield findings that are of value. However, different scholars may approach their study with different, equally valid designs. Therefore, it is important to be clear about your research design, making your choices explicit, and explaining how your research design is purposeful and well-suited to your research questions or lines of inquiry. You should also make explicit the data you plan on using in your project, how you will analyze it, and when appropriate, your data collection plan.

Different approaches may require attention to different things. For example, if you are doing ethnographic field research, it is important to communicate information about such things as the specific data collection methods you plan on using key participants, spaces or interactions you will observe, and documents or other artifacts you might collect. Alternatively, if you are doing a statistical analysis of a large dataset, it is important to talk about such things as the construction of the dataset, sample size, and key variables. Regardless of approach, you should describe all key concepts under investigation and how they are operationalized in your study or observed in your data collection. This may mean explaining all your data collection tools and protocols (and providing copies in your appendix).

Similarly, you should explain your analytic methods clearly and make evident how the data will be used to answer your proposed research questions or support your inquiry. Take care to show how your analysis techniques will result in usable findings. We recognize that some approaches to research require analytic plans to be developed in-situ (e.g., design-based research, research-practice partnerships, participatory action research). Should your approach fall in this category, please pay additional attention to describing your approach and explaining its value.

Questions to Consider:

- What is your approach to research and how does this approach align with your research questions or line of inquiry?
- What data are you looking at, why are you looking at it, and how are you collecting or accessing it?
- How is your research design informed by your theoretical or conceptual framework?

Tips and Insights:

- Remember that different methodological approaches may require attention to different things.
- Consult research in your field to see what information is typically shared for your methodological approach.
- Describe how your analytic methods and explain how your data will be used to answer the proposed research questions and/or support the direction of inquiry.

Common Mistakes

- Little or no explanation for why specific methodological choices have been made.
- Not including sample size, or descriptions of research sites, participants, or recruitment criteria.
- No power analysis.
- Not describing protocols or survey items, variables included in models
- Limited or no information about any intervention in the study.
- Limited or no analysis plan.

Bringing it All Together

While each individual component of your proposal is important, it is equally important that they connect to one another. Throughout your proposal you should work to demonstrate an alignment and connection among the above component.

Figures and Tables

Visual representations are often helpful tools for explaining complex ideas and organizing your thoughts. We encourage you to include them in your proposal when appropriate. However, they should not take the place of text. Each chart, graph, table, or other visual representation, whether they be in your narrative or included as an appendix, should be clearly labeled and explained in the narrative text of your proposal.

Additional Sections

In addition to the components discussed above, your project team, budget, and timeline also communicate key information about your project.

Project Team

It's not enough to have a promising idea and good research design – you also need to have the right people to help complete the project and share results or other findings. Therefore, it is important to communicate that you (or alternatively, you and your research team) have substantive knowledge about the topics or issues in your project as well as experience with your proposed research methods. This is communicated through your description of your team and your curriculum vitae.

Budget

When developing your budget, please think of everything you need to do your project. This may include a range of things from software to research assistants to travel for data collection or conferences. While it is important that your budget is reasonable, economical or undersized budgets are not any more attractive to us than budgets requesting the full amount of awardable funds. If the program funds projects up to \$50,000, your project is not more competitive if your budget is only \$10,000. In the end, we want to fund high-quality research and we want investigators to have the necessary funds to do that.

With that said, unreasonable expenses or unspecified expenses may jeopardize a proposal's chance of receiving funding.

Timeline

You should give yourself enough time to complete your project. Your project timeline should also include key project activities discussed in your proposal narrative.

Tips for Writing

In closing, we offer the following general tips for writing proposal.

- **Remember who your readers are.** Your proposal will be read by people who are knowledgeable about your field of study and methodology as well as generalists in educational research. Therefore, your writing should be clear and direct. While you may use technical language in your proposal, please avoid jargon and hyperbole.
- **Plan your writing with your deadline in mind.** It is tempting to aim for the next available proposal deadline, but that can lead to rushed and incomplete proposals. We offer multiple deadlines for small and large grant programs to give you several opportunities to seek funding. Successful proposals may require months of planning and writing.
- **Learn from your colleagues.** Think about partnering with your colleagues on projects. Working with someone more senior may help you develop a track record for getting grants and will help you learn more about the grant writing process. Similarly, working with people from other disciplines or fields, or people with other methodological approaches may expand your thinking about a topic or issue and make for a more compelling project. If you are working on a multidisciplinary team or in with people whose methodological expertise are different from yours, you should read each other's work.
- **Get feedback from your colleagues.** Sometimes as scholars we get stuck in our own patterns of thinking or discourse. It's a great idea to have someone outside your field read your work. We, the program staff, may not be experts in your field. There may be vocabulary terms that are obvious to you, but not to us. We always suggest: Think about the colleagues in offices down the hall from you. They may be experts in education, but not in your specific area? Would they understand your proposal? You might even ask one to review it for you.
- **Learn from any feedback you get and try again.** We receive about 2,000 grants proposal each year across our various programs, but we are only able to fund between 5-10% of the proposals we receive. However, we do strive to give as much written feedback as possible. Our reviewers and program staff believe feedback is important to building capacity for conducting high-quality research. We see review processes as an important professional and ethical service to you and the field of education research at large. Our review processes are intended to provide feedback to you that help to improve your work – regardless of funding decision.

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