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Applying for a language documentation research grant

Peter K. Austin

1. Introduction[1]

Researchers who are interested in applying the principles and practices of language documentation that are discussed in the chapters of this volume are likely at some point to need funding to support their work. This chapter is an introduction to how to apply for research grant funding and the steps and processes involved in putting together such an application.

There are a number of general books on grant application writing (also called a 'grant proposal writing') including Browning (2001), Thompson (2007) and Tremore & Burke Smith (2009), to name several popular ones, as well as a wide range of useful websites, such as the United Nations Grant writing tips, the Grant Guide for Non-profit Organisations, and the Grant Proposal Tips of the Corporation for Public Broadcasting (see Web links, below). It is increasingly common for universities to have research grant offices that provide helpful information about grant application writing as well (see, for example, the University of Adelaide website at http://www.adelaide.edu.au/rb/apply/writing.html).

This chapter concentrates on applying for a language documentation grant and so includes more specific information than these general sources. The material included here comes from two main sources:

1. documents prepared by Ofelia Zepeda and Susan Penfield for grant writing workshops at AILDI in the USA and kindly made available for use here;

[1] Some sections of this chapter are inspired by Zepeda & Penfield (2008); I am grateful to Susan Penfield for making this document available to me. For comments and feedback on a previous draft I am grateful Jean McGarry, David Nathan and Susan Penfield. I alone am responsible for any errors.

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2. MA course notes on grant writing prepared at SOAS by Friederike Luepke and myself.

It is also based on my own experience of having read and reviewed hundreds of grant applications for projects on documenting endangered languages for the Australian Research Council, the Arts and Humanities Research Council, the National Science Foundation (NSF), the Volkswagen Foundation and the Endangered Languages Documentation Programme (ELDP) at SOAS. I cannot claim to be an expert in this area but I hope the suggestions in this chapter will assist applicants in putting their grant applications together, especially taking into account the perspective of a grant application review panel member.

2. Finding a Grant

Successful grant application writing involves lots of advance planning and preparation. It takes time to coordinate your planning and background research, and to organise, prepare and package your application, to submit it to the appropriate funding agencies, and to follow up on your application. Note that some agencies require applications to be submitted on line (eg. the NSF Fastlane system) and there may be a process of pre-registration and/or document download (as for ELDP) that is required before you can even start work on your application.

The first step is to identify potential funding agencies well in advance (and carefully note any application restrictions and deadlines). For language documentation research, the following are some possibilities (see Web links below for URLs):

1. funders specialising in endangered languages research

- Hans Rausing Endangered Languages Documentation Programme (ELDP, SOAS)
- Volkswagen Foundation project *Documentation Bedrohter Sprachen* (DoBeS)
- Foundation for Endangered Languages (FEL) (small grants only)
- Endangered Languages Fund (ELF) (small grants only)
- Gesellschaft für Bedrohte Sprachen (GBS) (small grants only)

2. National researcher funders supported by governments, eg. AHRC in UK, NSF or NEH in US, ARC in Australia, DFG in Germany, SSHRC in Canada etc.

3. National or international charities, e.g. Leverhulme Trust in UK, Firebird Foundation or Wenner Gren Foundation or Fulbright Foundation in US, Alexander von Humboldt Foundation or Max Planck Society in Germany

4. grants available from local organisations interested in documentation or language maintenance, e.g. Australian Institute for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Studies. A number of tribal councils in the US fund language research from casino earnings, and some language centres in Australia sponsor research grants

5. grants available via academic institutions, e.g. seed-fund research grants for academic staff at SOAS

Each funder may have different topics or research areas that they are willing to fund, and may have special eligibility requirements (e.g. whether you have to be a citizen of the country which offers the grant, or a tribal member). Some funders will only accept applications at certain times of the year, while others have no deadlines. You may be able to apply to several different funders for the same or similar projects, however some funders do not allow this. Also, those which do may ask whether the application has been or will be submitted elsewhere. If you do submit an application to several funders make sure that it is tailored to the goals and guidelines of each funder. You may also be able to resubmit an application to a funder that has already rejected an earlier version of it; again funders may wish to know if the application is a resubmission, and some may ask you to show clearly how the application has been changed from the rejected version. It is important to read the funder's goals and eligibility rules carefully, and to pay attention to deadlines, before starting work on an application.

3. Request for Proposals

A 'request for proposals' (RFP) is an advertisement funding agencies put out in print or on an electronic mailing list to announce they are willing to fund research, and specifying what information is needed to apply. The RFP is also sometimes called a 'Solicitation' in the United States. It can vary in size from one page to many pages, and contains crucial information including: the name and address of the contact person(s), the due date (deadline), the maximum length of the application (number of words or pages allowed), the required format, the total amount funded, what activities will be supported, and what are the expected outcomes. If the funder has a website, it is important to check it thoroughly once the RFP has been announced as it may contain additional useful information.

4. Next steps

If the funder has a website and lists projects they have funded in the past, carefully look at these to get an idea of what sorts of research work they like to support. Sometimes the website will have a summary of the successful applications and an amount showing how much funding was awarded. It can be useful to look at descriptions of successful grants to see the areas of research, the geographical locations, who was involved and how much money they received, as this can provide information for crafting your own application.

Once you have thoroughly read the RFP and explored the funder's website send an email to the contact person and express your interest in applying. You may wish to provide a short summary of who you are and what your project would involve (keep it to less than one page) and ask whether the funder would consider an application on that topic. Remember that funders **want** to fund good projects, but they can only support applications that meet their guidelines. Some funders ask for a 'Letter of Intent' from potential applicants, but even if they do not it can be useful to contact the relevant person to check if you would be wasting your time going ahead and putting in an application on your chosen topic or not.

Timing is crucial. It is never too early to start working on the application, and often too late! Applications for large grants (e.g. NSF DEL, Volkswagen DoBeS, or ELDP IPF and MDP applications) need months of preparation; generally small grants less time to prepare, however it is important to start work early on any application. Check if you need to submit your application electronically and if so prepare for that. It is advisable to get help from friends or colleagues who have applied for a grant before; do **not** be afraid to ask for assistance. If you are at a university there may be a Research Office set up to help with preparing applications, especially with the often complex task of preparing the budget (see below).

5. The application

Applications generally have to be submitted on a special form (sometimes called the 'proposal form'), although some funders do not have a particular format that they require. There may also be separate guidance information that explains how to fill in the form. Sometimes the form will have instructions about the minimum font size that can be used (e.g. 12-point or 10-point font). **Never** use a smaller font size than the minimum specified in an attempt to 'squeeze more information in' – remember that the application has to be read by human reviewers and tiny type will not please them. The form will typically have a series of sections with questions that applicants have to answer. Note carefully any word limits that apply to the answers, and do not exceed them. Applications can be rejected for purely technical reasons if the form is filled in incorrectly.

Application forms generally have the following sections[2]:

1. **Title** – this should be a one sentence description of the project, e.g. 'Documentation of speech levels in Sasak, eastern Indonesia'. Note that some funders, such as DEL and ELDP require you to give the ISO-639 code for the language to be studied in the title (this is also called the Ethnologue code since it originated in the SIL Ethnologue catalogue – see XXXX). ELDP additionally requests geographical co-ordinates to specify the location of the language and the project.

2. **Applicant Details** – the name and contact address of the applicant (also called the 'primary applicant' or the 'principal investigator' (PI)) together with details of any co-applicants (co-PIs). There may be separate questions for the name of the organisation (sometimes called the 'host institution') which will handle the money if the application is successful and the grant is awarded. The host institution is legally responsible for making sure the grant is properly spent and accounted for. In some cases, e.g. for applicants who are US post-graduate students, the host institution will only allow academic staff members to be the main applicant and the student has to be named as a co-PI.

3. **Project Summary** – this is generally a short description (around 100 words) giving an overview of the project goals and anticipated outcomes. Funders may publish successful grant project summaries on their websites.

4. **Project Narrative** or **Project Description** – this is the main part of the application which sets out the goals, methods and expected results. It may include some or all of the following:

   a. **Overview** (or **Background**) – this will generally be a description of the language and people involved in the project, including such things as the degree of endangerment of the language and the special focus to be adopted

   b. **Purpose statement** – sets out the general goals of the project and what the research hopes to achieve

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[2] Some of the material included here draws heavily upon Zepeda & Penfield (2008).

c. **Literature Review** – a list of any previous published or unpublished work on the language or the research topic showing what has been accomplished and what further work remains to be done

d. **Goals and Objectives** – detailed specification of the aims of the project and what areas it does and does not plan to cover

e. **Significance** – a clear statement of why the project is important and how it will contribute to the overall goals of the research. The significance statement should pay attention to the funder's goals, as well as the wider impact of the project

f. **Work Plan** – a detailed description, generally organised month-by-month, of how the project will be carried out, who will do what, which stages will precede which other stages, and how much time is allocated to each activity that the project will involve (for further discussion, see below)

g. **Archiving Plan** – most language documentation funders expect that the data and analysis collected will be archived for use now and in the future, i.e. for preservation. This section should include information about which archive has agreed to take the documentary materials and what arrangements have been entered into[3]

h. **Methodology** (or **Activities**) – this should be a clear statement of how the project will be carried out and the methods that will be used at each stage (for data collection methods see Lüpke, this volume, and for audio recording methods see Nathan, this volume). The equipment, computer software or any special techniques to be developed or applied should be me made clear here

i. **Ethics Statement** – a clear statement of the ethical principles to be adopted in the research, and whether these comply with the host institution's requirements (in the US most applications have to be submitted to the Institutional Review Board (IRB) before they can be approved and sent to the funder)

j. **Personnel** – who will be involved in the project and what their roles will be. How will individuals be selected for their role (e.g. of language consultant) and what skills do they have to carry it out?

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[3] See http://www.delaman.org for a list of archives that deal with documentary materials, especially materials from endangered languages. It is advisable to contact the archive **before** lodging the application to clarify your archiving plans and expectations about what materials will be archived and in what format, together with understanding how access and usage rights will be assigned.

Any training needs should be identified here, along with description of how the training will be provided

k. **Products** / **Deliverables** / **Outcomes** – this is a description of the expected results of the project, such as the form and nature of the corpus to be recorded, annotated and translated, specific activities carried out (e.g. orthography workshops in the language community) or the materials to be created. Note that non-concrete outcomes, such as training outcomes, can be included here

l. **Budget** and **Budget Explanation** – a detailed listing, together with supporting argumentation, of how much money is needed in each permitted budget category and why it is needed. Pay attention to any budget limits in the application instructions (e.g. ELDP small grants have a limit of £10,000, also ELDP applications can only ask for a maximum of £2,000 for publication costs) and do **not** ask for more than the limits. There is further discussion of budget issues below.

m. **Approvals** – the host institution will be expected to sign and stamp the application to indicate that it supports the application and will accept the grant if it is awarded. Successful grants may involve a legal contract being issued and so the appropriate person needs to approve the application. Be careful to allow sufficient time to obtain this approval before the deadline as the relevant person may be away, or there may be a time limit on when the approval can be given (e.g. university Research Offices often ask for applications to be submitted to them for checking and approval two or three weeks before the actual deadline)

5. **Supporting Documents**: this can include letters of reference supporting the application (e.g. from a student's supervisor or Referee, i.e. an expert who knows the applicant but is not directly involved in the project), a curriculum vita (resumé) for each applicant or co-applicant, evidence of permission to carry out the research (or statements about how the research permission will be obtained if the application is successful), and letters of support from the language community or local authorities. Some funders place limits on how much supporting documentation can be provided. Do not include supporting documents that are vague or unspecific in their content (e.g. a letter from a language community that says something like 'we support the researcher who is excellent and will do a wonderful job with this project').

6. Writing the application

The main point to remember when writing the application is that it is going to be read by a **Selection Panel** (also called a **Review Panel**) who will judge it according to a set of criteria, such as how well it accords with the funder's goals, whether it demonstrates research quality, if the applicant(s) are qualified and prepared to carry out the project, whether it is realistic and feasible (able to be completed in the time available for the money requested) and what the likely outcomes will be. The application may also be sent to **Independent Referees** (also called **External Reviewers**) who are typically specialists in the language or project methods and goals and whose identity is unknown to the applicant. These Referees will provide advice to the Selection Panel based on the same criteria in order to help with the decision-making process. Because of this, it is important to remember that your application will be read and judged by highly competent specialists who are well informed about documentation research, and who are also busy people who do not want to waste time reading unnecessary or irrelevant material.

The main rules of thumb when writing the application are:

1. **be persuasive**: use logic (with specific facts and statistics) rather than too many emotional statements with little support, and be credible (your project must be achievable and believable)

2. **be clear**: present a clear, linear argument supported by evidence. Do not add extra words to sound fancier; remember the Selection Panel committee will be reading **lots** of applications and they need to quickly find out what you want and can do. Make sure the budget is reasonable in relation to the work plan and the budget justification is believable

3. **be coherent**: plan your arguments and structure the application well. Zepeda & Penfield (2008:11) suggest using a method called PIE (Point, Illustrate, Explain), as shown in the following paragraph:

> (**POINT →**) For this community, there are no examples of recorded and archived conversation or even short dialogues between speakers. (**ILLUSTRATE →**) We need to document conversations of everyday occurrences like short exchanges about going to the market, what to eat, how to talk to an elder, how to bake bread, or make stew. (**EXPLAIN →**) We know that these things have rarely been recorded for Indigenous languages and by gathering this information we will not only be contributing to the documentation of important scientific insights that they might provide but we will also be gathering information which will help the community further its efforts at revitalization.

4. **be cohesive:** help the reader by linking old and new information in a cohesive way. Zepeda & Penfield (2008:12) give the following example

> We propose to extend the existing documentation of this language to include everyday conversation. We will collect audio and video recordings from the remaining speakers engaged in simple **conversation** which can later be incorporated into revitalization materials. To collect recordings of **conversations** appropriately we proposed **to train tribal members** in language documentation.
>
> The **training of tribal members** will be accomplished by (1) hiring a consultant for technical assistance and (2) establishing a small pool of younger semi-speakers to do the recording

5. **be credible**: your application must be believable. This involves:

- keeping your audience in mind – what do the **Reviewers** and **Selection Panel** want to hear?
- thinking about yourself – what are **your** strengths? Do you need to put together a team and demonstrate that it is coherent and can work together?
- providing evidence of cooperation and collaboration with relevant stakeholders

6. **be relevant**: be clear about the goals of the funding agency and write your application according to them. Make sure that you tailor your application to the particular funder; do not assume that you can submit the same application to several different funders, that is, do not assume a one-size-fits-all approach.

7. **pay attention**: to ethics, possible conflicts of interest, intellectual property rights, research methodology, budget, equipment choice, archiving, outputs promised, and workflow (it may help to look at good practice recommendations, e.g. the E-MELD 'School of Best Practice')

7. Work plan pointers

A work plan should explain how you plan to carry out the project in terms of timing, personnel, the materials to be collected, analysed and archived, the outcomes expected at each stage, and any training that might be included. As Zependa & Penfield (2008: 20) explain:

> The most important thing is that the work plan **makes sense.** That is, it must be **reasonable** and **doable**. If it is overly ambitious – that is, if too much work is proposed given the time and money specified – it is not likely to be funded. Likewise, if it is not ambitious enough it is not likely to be funded. You must find a good balance so that the work plan matches what is requested in terms of funding.

It is not a good idea to try to do everything that could be done in a single grant application – you might need to apply for several grants (sometimes with different funders) over a period of years in order to stage your work. It is often a good plan to apply for a small project first, prove you can do it and deliver what you promise, and then later apply for a larger grant. Funders are often pleased that you have 'leveraged' funds and results from various sources.

8. The Budget

It is really important that your budget **matches the work plan** and is reasonable and credible (do not ask for gold plated taps if you don't really need them!). You might need advice on the right costings from your Research Office, or from friends and colleagues who have applied for a grant before, and people who know how much things cost in the country where you plan to work. You can apply for:

- Visa costs, research permits, and other necessary setup expenses
- Costs for vaccinations and medication, e.g. malaria medicines
- Transport: international and local transport to the field site. Do not underestimate distances and roads! If you plan to use public local transport, ask yourself how frequent is it? How safe is it? If you plan to use private transport: ask yourself if having your own transport will facilitate contacts, or turn you into a taxi driver. Is it worth/possible/affordable to buy/hire a car/motorbike/boat? Is it possibile to use or get a ride in a contact person's vehicle?
- Accommodation – costs here will depend on the local situation and may not be determinable exactly in advance. There are typically several options when doing fieldwork such as hotel, hostel, camping, renting a house, or renting a room, and for each of these there are several considerations that need to be weighted, such as the possibility of participant observation and exposure to the language (less in a hotel, more in a rented room), requirements of safety, privacy, and access to power/equipment (more in a hotel, less in a rented room), and strain on or danger for the host and the host

community (renting a room may give rise to expectations to feed the researcher as a guest which will place a strain on local resources)

- Equipment – the equipment to be purchased depends on the goals of the project, the duration and intensity of fieldwork, the intention and time/space to process data in the field, the safety of equipment (whether it will be subject to theft, accidental damage, dust and dirt, humidity, need to be transported, etc.), the availability of power, and spare parts, and other local factors. Equipment for documentation projects normally includes[4]:
    - one or more digital audio devices (+ sufficient media + backup, e.g. external hard drives)
    - other audio devices for simultaneous recording, backup and copies for distribution (could be analog cassette tapes)
    - microphones: depending on the project this could be a combination of good stereo microphones, shotgun microphones, lavalier microphones (see Nathan's chapter on audio, this volume)
    - digital video camera (+ tripod + connection cable(s) for microphone(s) + reflectors + lights) if justified
    - portable computer – a netbook or laptop for data processing
    - carrying cases (Peli or Pelican cases are recommended)
    - solar panels or generator – for electricity generation if required and appropriate
    - cables, connectors, multimeters, manuals, spare batteries, and basic tools
    - pens and paper
- Compensation (payment or gifts) for language speakers (consultants) and others involved in the project
- Archiving – there may be costs involved in preparing the collected materials for archiving and/or sending them by courier on a hard disk to the archive for deposit. These can be calculated and included in the application

[4] Remember to learn how to use the equipment and test everything before you leave for fieldwork. A single missing cable or connector can ruin a field trip.

It is important to check all costs, make sure they are reasonable and justified, and that the budget falls within the funder's guidelines.

9. Lodging the application

There are two ways that grant applications are typically submitted:

- **on line**: most granting agencies today require 'electronic submission'. For some, the whole application process is done entirely on line;
- **hard copy**: some funders also want stamped hard copies but you should print out a hard copy for yourself and other stakeholders anyway

Applications **must** be submitted by the funder's deadline, if they have one. Late applications are generally rejected outright and late submission of a few minutes or hours may mean having to wait for another year to lodge the application again. Start early and submit before the deadline.

10. Now what?

After the deadline has passed applications are normally sent to Independent Referees and the Selection Panel for assessment. The Panel may need to meet to discuss the applications and referees' reports face-to-face, all of which will take time to organise. Funders generally like to have decisions made within three to six months after the application deadline. Letters of rejection are sent to unsuccessful applicants, and successful applicants will receive a letter of offer. The amount awarded may be less than applied for (for a range of reasons, including reduction of the budget to exclude non-allowed expenses or substitution of less expensive but equally appropriate equipment, or because the funder decides to support more projects at a lower level), and there may be some room for negotiation about the budget and terms and conditions of the grant.

Remember, that not every application will be funded and that funders usually have less money available than the total of all the good applications they receive (success rates can be as low as 15-20% of applications submitted). If your application is not successful (and most applications will not be on the first try) then:

- do not get too upset or take the rejection personally – it is normal for applications not to succeed
- do not give up – most grants are awarded after two or three tries

- ask for reviewers' and selection panel's reports on your application if they are not included with the rejection letter – most larger funders will provide copies of the reports which you can then use to help improve your next grant application. Some funders will invite you to reapply and ask you to specifically indicate how you have addressed the weak points raised in the reports. If you do not understand the reports and feedback start a discussion with the contact person
- reassess your project and plans and revise the application for submission to another funder or resubmission to the same funder

If the application is successful it may be necessary to review the budget (it could be 6-9 months since the time the original budget was drawn up and costs may have risen or fallen in the meantime) and put purchasing and staff appointment processes into action. It is also a good idea to publicise the grant and to let stakeholders in the project know the outcome. The work plan may need adjustment and the project begun.

Funders normally require regular reports on research project progress covering such issues as results to date, issues and problems, budget and spending, and any action required for the future. At the end of the project a final report must be provided to the funder showing the project outcomes, how the money was spent, its impact, and any lessons learnt from the project. Failure to provide reports can jeopardise future grant applications.

11. Conclusions

Writing a research grant application requires time, preparation, background research and hard work. There are several key ingredients that will generally make an application fundable:

- the topic and goals fall clearly within the areas of interest of the funder
- the applicant demonstrates appropriate knowledge and skills to be able to carry out the project and achieve the stated goals
- clear and explicit project outcomes, both tangible and intangible
- the project involves an interesting research question and does not simply propose 'to document language X'
- the relevant literature and research by others is properly covered and used as context for the application
- an appropriate research design, with a clearly specified data collection and analysis methodology (including appropriate equipment choice), and a sensible and achievable work plan

- a well-structured and well-justified budget that does not violate the funder's guidelines on possible expenditure categories or funding limits
- potential contributions beyond the research community, including the language speaker community and the wider society

If you write your application so that it has these characteristics then it stands a good chance of being funded, although you must keep in mind that success on the first try is very unusual. Writing a successful grant application is a mixture of careful planning, hard work, attention to detail, and to some extent, good luck.

References

Browning, Beverley. 2001. *Grant Writing for Dummies*. For Dummies; Updated edition (February 19, 2001)

Thompson, Waddy. 2007. *Complete Idiot's Guide to Grant Writing*. 2nd edition. Alpha.

Tremore, Judy & Nancy Burke Smith. 2009. *Grant writing: A complete resource for proposal writers*. Avon, MA: Adams Media.

Zepeda, Ofelia & Susan Penfield. 2008. Grant Writing for Indigenous Languages. University of Arizona.

Web links

United Nations Grant writing tips
http://www.un.org/Depts/dhl/sflib/libmgnt/grantproposals.htm

Grant Guide for Non-profit Organisations
http://www.npguides.org/guide/index.html

Corporation for Public Broadcasting
http://www.cpb.org/grants/grantwriting.html

Hans Rausing Endangered Languages Documentation Project (ELDP, SOAS)
http://www.hrelp.org

Volkswagen project *Documentation Bedrohter Sprachen* (DoBeS)
http://www.volkswagenstiftung.de/index.php?id=172&L=1

Documentation of Endangered Languages (DEL)
http://www.nsf.gov/pubs/2004/nsf04605/nsf04605.htm

Foundation for Endangered Languages (FEL) (small grants)
http://www.ogmios.org/home.htm

Endangered Language Fund (ELF) (small grants)
http://www.endangeredlanguagefund.org/

Gesellschaft für. bedrohte Sprachen (GBS) (small grants)
http://www.uni-koeln.de/gbs/e_index.html

Discussion questions

1. Go to grant section of the website of the Endangered Language Fund (ELF) (http://www.endangeredlanguagefund.org/request.html) and (1) find the contact person, (2) final the due date for grant applications (3) identify what activities are encouraged (4) identify who can receive money

2**.** Now do the same for the Foundation for Endangered Languages (http://www.ogmios.org/grant.htm)

3. download the ELDP small grant application pack (available on the website at http://www.hrelp.org/grants/apply/) and develop a project application, complete with budget costings and work plan. Ask a colleague or friend to review your application and give you feedback on it.