

## DOS AND DON'TS

## Grant-writing blunders

- Avoid being too ambitious — don't propose a study that would take decades. Grant officers can tell when an applicant is overextending.
- Don't use abbreviations, acronyms, jargon or highly technical language. Reviewers who aren't familiar with your field will get annoyed and may think that you are trying to cover up for a lack of knowledge or ability to carry out the experiment.
- Don't give short shrift to explaining why your proposal is important. Reviewers

don't already know. Explain the study's impact, advances and potential.

- Make the application easy to read — don't cram it with text, use too-small fonts or miniaturize any figures.
- Get lots of colleagues from within and outside your field to review your application closely and provide written responses.
- Make sure that you're asking for an appropriate sum. If you request too much or too little, reviewers will conclude that you don't know what you're doing. **K.K.**

Proposals must be easy to read, agree Stephen Russell and David Morrison, co-founders of Grant Writers' Seminars and Workshops, a consulting business in Los Olivos, California, that helps clients with applications. "Reviewers read grant applications for only one reason — because they have to," says Russell. To help them, he and Morrison recommend making margins wider than the minimum, using an easy-to-read typeface and font size such as 12-point Arial — or whatever is specified in the instructions — and adding spaces between paragraphs and sections.

Spelling errors and poor grammar may not immediately disqualify an application, but they could lower the score, or at the very least give a bad impression. "Bad English and typos are an annoyance factor that reviewers have to overcome," says Wallon. "If it's done sloppily, I wouldn't recommend it."

But scientists don't necessarily need to hire a consultant to make sure that their application is letter-perfect, say programme managers. "Using a commercial consultant gives your application a tone that panel members will detect. We're looking for a contribution from the individual," says Alex Martin Hobdey, head of the unit for starting grants at the European Research Council in Brussels. Consultant-assisted applications tend to sound too slick or smooth — it is more effective to get editing recommendations from colleagues.

Submissions that are incomplete or past deadline are certain to be disqualified. Hutterer says that out of the 850 applications to EMBO's fellowship programme each year, some 150 are unfinished and thus immediately ineligible. And Dennis Abbott, a spokesman for the Marie Curie Actions programme, decries late submissions. "No matter how good your application is, it's too late," he says. "Deadlines are set for a reason."

## SHADES OF EXCITEMENT

Applicants need to communicate the pay-offs of the research straight away. Russell says that a common mistake is to write a title that could be reused for future renewal applications. For example, he says, 'Studies of renal disease' is accurate but generic. He suggests evoking a salient image or concept — something more like 'Contribution of anti-idiotypic antibodies to pathogenesis of acute glomerulonephritis'. He warns applicants not to let snappiness obscure the content of the proposal — something like 'Breakthrough treatment strategies to cure acute glomerulonephritis' draws attention but is sensationalistic and vague.

It helps to be positive and enthusiastic in project summaries, abstracts and research questions — but to include a back-up plan. "You need to say that you expect that this approach will work; however, if it doesn't, you will be prepared to do this and this," says Morrison. "It's all about asserting confidence in your ability to do this research, backed up by your fallback of alternative strategies."

Ultimately, once the mechanics are right, it boils down to convincing reviewers that the application deserves funding. "If you can't convey your excitement and the importance of your proposal and what you think your results will be," says Franko, "then you're not going to get good scores." ■

**Karen Kaplan** is Nature's assistant Careers editor.



**"You have to show that you're an independent-thinking scientist taking a different track."**

Gerlind Wallon

## UNITED STATES

## Charity supports science

At least 10 of the top 50 US charitable donors of 2011 gave funds to support scientific research, according to the *Philanthropy 50* report released on 6 February by *The Chronicle of Philanthropy* in Washington DC. The top 50 donors gave a total of US\$10.4 billion, up from \$3.3 billion in 2010. The *Chronicle* speculates that the increase is due to some economic recovery and a perceived need for funds at universities. Donations included \$70 million to the Allen Institute for Brain Science in Seattle, Washington, for neuroscience and genomics research; \$59.2 million to the Ellison Medical Foundation in Bethesda, Maryland, for biomedical research; and \$25 million to Yale University in New Haven, Connecticut, to launch an energy-research institute.

## CHILE

## Tax credit for research

The Chilean government hopes that a tax incentive will boost investment in research and development (R&D), and create jobs. The scheme triples the maximum tax credit for research-investment costs; eliminates a 15% tax on gross sales, easing the financial burden for entrepreneurs and start-ups; and can offset costs related to securing intellectual-property rights. The law will come into effect this year. Pablo Longueira, Chile's economics minister, expects companies in mining, forestry, energy, agriculture and aquaculture to expand their research. "We believe that many of the new PhDs that are currently being trained outside of the country will return to work for R&D projects under this new law," he says.

## ANIMAL HEALTH

## Allen school expanding

Recruitment has begun at Washington State University's Paul G. Allen School for Global Animal Health in Pullman, where a new research facility will open in May. By 2015, administrators hope to hire 13 researchers to detect emerging cross-species diseases, develop vaccines and work on transmission control, says director Guy Palmer. Hiring is supported by US\$51 million in donations from Microsoft co-founder Paul Allen and the Bill & Melinda Gates Foundation in Seattle, Washington; another \$14 million is earmarked for programmes including training students in East Africa.