# Common comments on grant proposals

## What is this document?

As Dean of Research, I review all grant applications worth over £100,000. This is a demand management requirement from UKRI who ask that we put in place measures to make sure we do not swamp their system with low quality applications that are unlikely to be funded.

I make formative comments on applications. If they are not yet likely to succeed in UKRI or quite up to the standard UKRI will expect I suggest further work to get it there. The comments I make are based on several years of membership of funding panels in the UK and internationally.

Since July 2017 when I took up the role, I have reviewed 340 applications. In doing those reviews I find myself making the same comments in different reviews, and this document summarises the general points I often make. It would be great if you could read this before starting your drafting.

## Title

Does your title match your project? The title is the first thing anyone reads – let it be descriptive so the reader immediately gets what your project will do.

## Organisation and sub-headings

Order your proposal in exactly the same way as the commissioning brief or guidance suggests. If they want aim and objectives first do that, if they want the problem described first do that, and so on. Sub-headings help the reviewers and panel members read quickly.

## Summary

The abstract/summary should cover all of the project – even if you have only 150 words you need to be clear on the problem you are addressing, what the aim is, the methods and the outcomes.

Don’t use references in the summary.

If you have enough words, consider using sub-headings (overview, aims and objectives, methods, outcomes and impact or something like that) to aid skim reading.

## Layout and Style

Arial, font-size 11, with *at least* 4 points between paragraphs works best because it makes good use of valuable space. White space is important to enable quick or skim reading – your reviewers are busy.

Short, succinct sentences are better than long sentences with multiple clauses.

Short paragraphs also aid skim reading (your reviewers are busy). Ideally, the reader would ‘get’ your line of argument by reading the first line of every paragraph.

## Aims and objectives

When expressing aims and objectives in different parts of the application always use the same terms. Exactly the same words. It’s okay to repeat the aim – it reminds the reader of what they are and shows you are being completely consistent.

Know the difference between aims and objectives. The aim is the what of the research, and the objective is the how: <https://patthomson.net/2014/06/09/aims-and-objectives-whats-the-difference/>

Make sure your aims and objectives match your methods. Objectives can cover both the research and the knowledge exchange and impact(s).

Think it through with a table before you begin. The first ‘thinking’ table used the [Derrington 10 key sentences approach](https://parkerderrington.com/key-sentence-skeletons/) with aims that match objective and methods and outputs associated with them.

|  |  |  |  |
| --- | --- | --- | --- |
| **Title** | | | |
| Aim | Objective | Method | Outputs |
| 1 | 1 |  |  |
| 2 | 2 |  |  |
| 3 | 3 |  |  |
| These can then be arranged around workpackages, phases, stages or whatever | | | |

You can also have a single aim and several objectives:

|  |  |  |
| --- | --- | --- |
| **Title** | | |
| **Aim** | | |
| Objective | Method | Outputs |
| 1 |  |  |
| 2 |  |  |
| 3 |  |  |
| These can then be arranged around workpackages, phases, stages or whatever | | |

You can also articulate objectives as Research Questions.

## Methods

Make sure you include enough details on methods for the reader to believe you know what you are doing and can deliver. Include: sampling frame, sampling, recruitment, data collection, data management, data analysis, data integration / interpretation. If you are using case studies, say something about the rationale for their selection. If the cases are comparative, say something about the benefits of the comparison.

Structure the methods to clearly address objectives.

If you are using mixed methods don’t forget to say how you will bring data from different methods together.

Make use of a technical appendix (if allowed) to explain your methods in more detail if you are short of space in the main body of the application (e.g. Case for Support). Too few applications make use of the technical appendix permitted by UKRI/ESRC for example.

Don’t forget to discuss the ethical issues related to your proposed research. Show that you have considered them and are adopting approaches to address them. The more expansive you can be about Ethics, the more convincing you will appear as experienced researchers. Make use of the 4,000 character-limit box on the JeS form for UKRI.

## Beneficiaries

Be specific and say how you will reach them. Include academic and non-academic beneficiaries.

If you have already engaged with non-academic partners, say so and what they contributed. If they are co-applicants or collaborators so much the better.

If you are claiming that you will have impact upon policy and practice, be as specific as you can about which area of P&P you will impact upon. Explain *how* you will bring about this impact – what activities you will undertake and what connections you will utilise. If you can also say how will monitor or evaluate your impact in the future, even better.

## Capacity Building and Career Development

Increasingly, funders are looking to applicants to make a contribution to research capacity and the career development of researchers. If you are employing research staff on your grant, show that you are committed to their career development through training, mentoring, networking, and inclusion in research outputs. This is often a blind spot in applications.

Say how you will support their careers and that UofG offers a wide range of transferable skills programmes that will help them develop their careers both within and outwith the Academy. Be specific and check out the courses and support [available](https://www.gla.ac.uk/myglasgow/research/development/).

## Dissemination

Consider ordering the dissemination routes by type of audience. To reach other academics we will do a, b, c. To reach decision makers in government we will do x, y, z and so on.

## Project management

Say how you will manage the project especially who will do what.

If you are a new PI, that’s fine – it’s good – but say who will mentor or support you and mention in the justification for resources that this is free (unless they are Co-I).

Consider using a diagram for explaining the overall management.

## Further guidance

I often refer people to the [Parker Derrington set of blogs](https://parkerderrington.com/blog/) to learn a good way to organise your project and hone your grant crafting skills.

The [ESRC’s guidance](https://esrc.ukri.org/funding/guidance-for-applicants/how-to-write-a-good-research-grant-proposal/) is also excellent