
How to Deconstruct an RFP

A grant opportunity announcement, frequently called an RFP (request for proposals), is often a complex, voluminous document, detailing the many parts of the application to prepare, the documentation to produce, and formatting specifications to follow. If we are not careful in reading the RFP, we risk missing the purpose of the grant program and risk missing essential details that could disqualify our proposals from review. One strategy to avoid these hazards is to carefully deconstruct the RFP.

To deconstruct an RFP, we need to move every important thing from the RFP—and, in some cases, the agency's grant proposal guidelines, web pages, and FAQs as well—into an outline or checklist so they can be acted on. While initially time consuming, it can save you the time of repeatedly searching the RFP and related documentation for the information you need.

Below is a worksheet to aid you in deconstructing an RFP.

Basic Information

- When is the deadline?
- Is this deadline confirmed, or anticipated?
- If the deadline is recurring, when is the next deadline after this?
- What is your target deadline, and how far away is it from today?
- Is this enough time to develop a competitive application?
- What are the NDSU internal deadlines you need to adhere to? (See the page on [NDSU's internal requirements.](#))
- Is there an earlier deadline for an LOI or pre-proposal?
- Is there a webinar date to hear/do Q&A on it?
- Who are the program officers or contacts in case of questions? (See [tips for communicating with program officers.](#))
- Are there any deadlines for the submission of questions on this RFP?
- When was this RFP released or last updated? Bookmark it so you can check back—sometimes changes get published between the last update and the deadline.

Eligibility

- Are you eligible
 - Geographically and by citizenship?
 - By institution/organization type?
 - By credentials?
 - To serve as PI?
- Do you have all of the necessary expertise, or do you need to recruit some expert collaborators? What expertise do they need? Do you know whom you might ask?
- Do you need to complete any registrations prior to submission? (NDSU has SAM, DUNS#, and EIN# covered)
 - eRA Commons? (if yes, email ndsresearch@nds.edu)
 - Fastlane? (if yes, email ndsresearch@nds.edu)
 - Other?
- Is this a limited submission opportunity where only a limited number of applications from NDSU are allowed? If yes, email kay.sizer@nds.edu.

Program Description Information

- What are the funding agency's mission and goals?
- What are the mission and goals of this particular grant program?
- Does this RFP have multiple program tracks? What are their distinctions?
- Does your research or creative activity fit the agency objectives?
- If there are multiple program tracks in this grant program, which one fits your project?
- Are there help documents linked to the RFP? (outlines, templates, FAQs, grant application guidelines, sample proposals, previous awards?)
- Does the RFP include a list of recommended reference sources for you to consult? If yes, be sure to check them out! As your [reference librarian](#) for assistance if needed.
- If available, check the funding agency's past awards for further evidence of their programmatic preferences. Does anything sound too much like what you're doing? Or does yours sound very far from matching the previous awards?
- What is your institution's award history with this funder? Do you have any colleagues who were successful with this grant in the past?

Document Specifications

- What are the page limits?
- What sections of the proposal are included within the page limits?
- Can you find page length recommendations for these sections?
- What sections are excluded from the page limits?
- What are the allowable fonts and font sizes?
- What are the margin sizes?
- What are the spacing requirements?
- Are headers and footers allowed and/or required?
- Are there any citation style requirements?
- What is the submission method? Electronic or hard copy?
- If hard copy, how many copies to send to whom by when?
- If electronic, what rules do they have for file names? File types?

Narrative Structure

- Are there required sections of the proposal narrative that are standard to this funding agency/mechanism? If so, refer to the agency's proposal guidelines documentation for more information.
- Are there required or suggested subheadings?
- If there are not required subheadings, are there easily identifiable headings you can glean from the review criteria or guidelines? (Significance, Goals, Broader Impacts, Evaluation?)
- What keywords in the RFP can be reflected in your narrative?
- Are there any phrases or terms used which you are unclear about and need to look up?

Budget

- What is the budget cap?
- Can your research project be completed with the funds available?
- How many awards do they expect to make? (How competitive is this competition?)
- Is there a cost-sharing requirement? If so, consult your grant coordinator and/or department head to start the approval process.
- Is there a minimum time commitment, or minimum number of person-months? (Generally, PIs cannot have zero time committed.)
- Is there a salary cap?
- What forms or what format does your budget require? (Modular? Fully itemized?)
- Does the agency require inclusion of any specific costs (e.g., travel costs to attend a required meeting, participant stipend)?
- Are there any normally allowable costs that are not allowed under this RFP?
- Is there a cap on the recovery of indirect costs? (Aka facilities and administrative costs, F&A)
- What category of sponsored activity does your project fall under (instruction, research, other sponsored activity, on-campus, off-campus)? What is the [federally-negotiated F&A rate for NDSU for this category of project?](#)
- Is the grant's allowable F&A rate below the University's current F&A rate? If so, be sure to obtain a copy of the grant program's policy on indirects to include with your paperwork for budget review.
- Are there caps or constraints on the allocation of specific funds or line items (e.g., salary must not exceed X% of the total direct costs)?
- Will you be intending to request sub-awards? What requirements are in place for sub-awards? (NDSU requires a copy of the sub-awardee's budget, budget justification, scope of work, and authorized signatures.)
- What are the requirements for the budget justification? Does the sponsor have a recommended form for you to use?

Review Criteria

- What are the standard review criteria for this funding agency? Are there any special or unusual review criteria for this RFP? Note: Set up the review criteria in a rubric for self-review prior to submission.
- How does this agency's review system work? Will you have subject-area experts as reviewers, or more general-knowledge readers?
- Are you able to request or suggest particular reviewers for your proposal?
- How long does their review-process take? When do they expect to announce grant recipients?

Special Sections Required

- What sections other than the main narrative are required?
 - [Data management plan?](#)
 - Postdoctoral mentoring plan?
 - Multi-PI Leadership Plan?
 - [Protection of Human Subjects?](#)
 - Biosketch?
 - CV?
 - [Institutional info?](#)
 - Facilities and/or equipment?
 - ScienCV or MyBibliography?
 - Other forms?
- Are there required letters of support or collaboration? What kind and from whom? (Start the process of requesting these early. It is best if you have a draft of the content started for your supporters/collaborators.)
- Are appendix materials or supplementary documents allowed? What kind and how much?

Preparing for Action

- What are the lingering questions you have about this RFP after deconstruction? Where can you check for answers? (Grant agency's FAQs, your department or college grant coordinator, a colleague, a reference librarian, Sponsored Programs Administration, Research Development, your department chair, your dean?)
- Prior to your grant submission date, when are the compliance committees like IRB meeting to review research plans?
- Are all of your compliance trainings (like IRB) up to date?
- What deadlines do you want to set for yourself for certain components?
- Does your department or college have research support money to help you prepare the application?
- What personnel in your department or college are available for various types of grant support? (GRA, grant coordinator, writing consultant)
- What is my next action step towards moving on this RFP?