When grant writing goes bad

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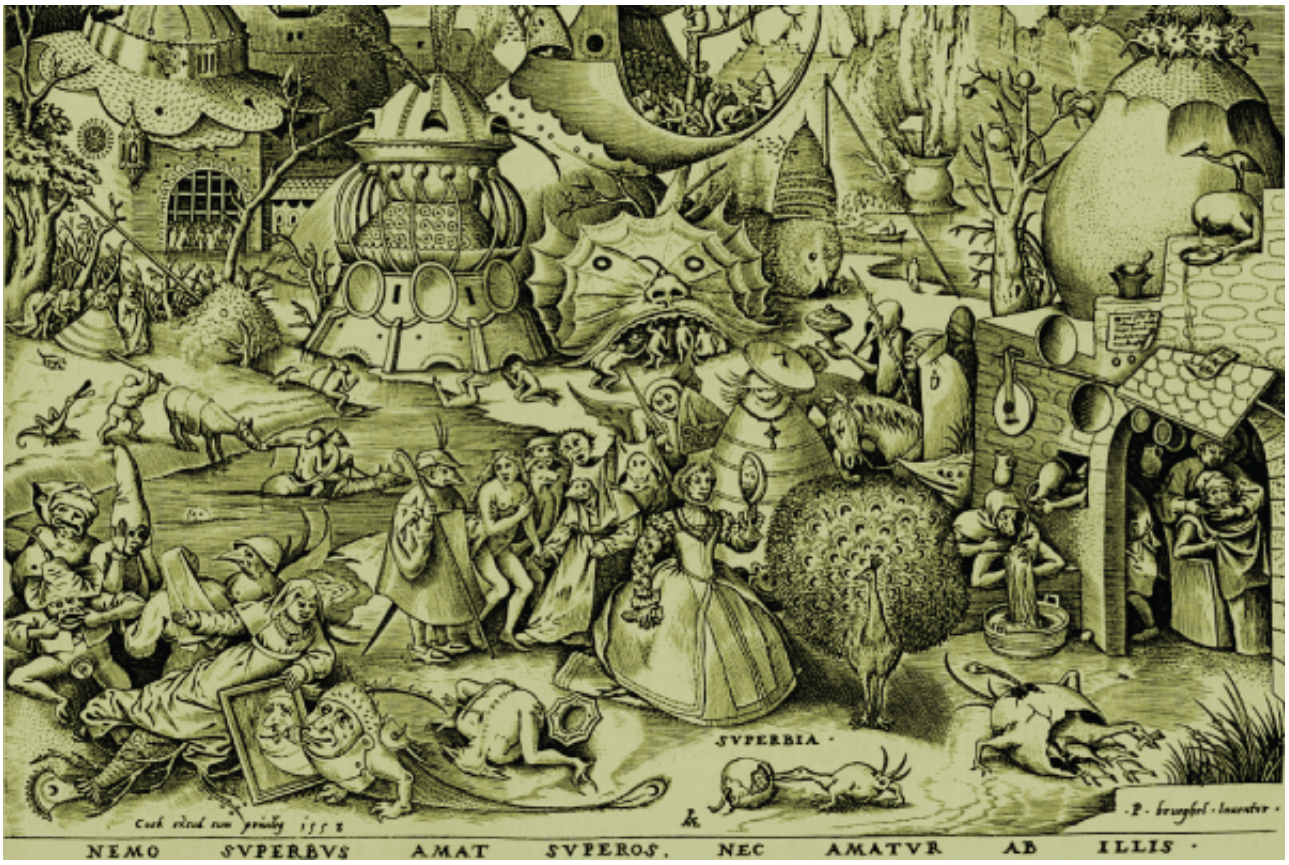

Whether new or experienced in grant writing, if you're reading this post you are likely to be in the process of writing a grant application. Andrew Derrington has over 30 years' experience of the research funding process through his own successful applications and sitting on research grant committees. Andrew shares seven key areas where grant writing often fails.

The seven deadly sins of grant writing

The first rule of writing is that you must think about the effect you want to have on your intended reader. From this perspective, a research grant is one of the easiest writing tasks imaginable: the effect you want to have is very simple and the readership is well-defined. This makes it very easy to work out that there are some things you should never ever do. Almost all grant-writers do them. These are the deadly sins of grant-writing.

To help you understand how bad these sins are, I will describe the effect

you want to have and the readership before I list the sins.

The effect you want to have and the readership.

Obviously, the effect you want to have is to get funded. For this to happen, your main readership, the grants committee, must understand your aims and believe that they are important and that your project will fulfil them. Then they must rank your application high enough to fund it. Typically, the committee will read your application in parallel with about 80 others and to get funded you need them to rank it the top 15 or so.

Few if any of the committee will be familiar with your research area. Mostly they will be struggling to understand what you are going to do and why it might be important to do it. They won't spend long reading your application. A couple of them may spend as much as an hour on it because they will be tasked with explaining your application to the rest of the committee. Most of the others will probably just read the summary and 'speed read' (glance through) the case for support during the discussion. At the end of the discussion they will all vote on your score.

Your application will also be read by referees, who tend to be more knowledgeable about your research area and who will probably spend a couple of hours on it but they will not contribute directly to the decision. They will read your application in detail and write an evaluation of its strengths and weaknesses for the committee to consider. They probably will not read any of the applications you are competing against.

Anything that makes it hard for a committee member to pick up a clear understanding of the rationale of your research project, what it will discover and why that is important, is a sin. So is anything that makes it hard for a referee to get a clear picture of the detailed reasoning in your argument and the detailed description of your intended research activities. Referees and committee both work under time pressure, so anything that slows them down is also a sin.
It may be helpful to distinguish sins of commission, things that you do deliberately, from sins of omission, things that you do because you just

can't help it.

Sins of commission, sins 1-3

1. Elegant variation, using synonyms to avoid repeating yourself, is my top sin. It's not the worst, but it is the easiest to avoid. I have heard many reasons why you should say things in different ways when you repeat them. None of them applies to grant-writing. Elegant variation is bad for two reasons.
   First, it cuts down on repetition. Repetition is good in a grant application because it helps the reader to remember what you are writing about long enough to join in the discussion. It also helps them become familiar enough with your technical terms to feel comfortable using them.
   Second, synonyms are dangerous because members of the committee may not realise that they are synonyms. They will get hopelessly confused.
   People justify elegant variation in a variety of ways. Most of them are wrong and none of them applies to a grant application. Trust me.
2. Space between paragraphs, and coining new abbreviations. They all make the reader's real problem, reading and understanding your text, harder. And the reader will not love you for that. It is better to cut text than to cram it in and make it unreadable. Removing white space and coining abbreviations are particularly bad.
   Removing white space makes speed-readers (most of the committee) lose the plot. Completely. Normally a speed reader will read the first line of every paragraph: their eyes automatically land on the edges of the white space at the top of the paragraph. That means that the speed reader understands your proposal and thinks it is very clear because they pick up all the essential messages – you do start every paragraph with the topic sentence don't you? Without the white space the speed-reader's eye movements will go all over the place and they will pick up four or five random phrases from each page.
   Coining abbreviations can't do any harm can it? Surely it's ok if you spell out each abbreviation the first time you use it? Well, no. I mean

NO. Imagine reading 80 grant applications, all of them with half a dozen sets of abbreviations. Then imagine trying to re-read the difficult parts to try and understand them. What happens with the abbreviation when you start reading half-way through the grant? I can tell you: searching backwards through the text for the point where the abbreviation is spelled out makes a reader grouchy. Grouchy readers give grants low scores. So my advice is that if you have to spell out an abbreviation you can't use it.

3. Over use of the passive voice – or of any convention that breaks up the natural flow just makes it hard to decipher your meaning. Of course sometimes your meaning is made clearer by using the passive. If you would like some helpful ideas about how and when to use the passive have a look at this excellent post, which gives very clear advice on when it's bad and when it's good, including a brilliant sentence made shorter and sharper by using the passive voice 5 times.
   It should be easy to avoid all these sins of commission because they are things you decide to do.
   The sins of omission are much harder to avoid.

Sins of omission, sins 4-7

The sins of omission just creep into your writing without you noticing and you have to make special efforts to remove them.

The sins I want to deal with are 4. Complex Sentences, 5. Long Paragraphs, 6. Poor Flow and 7. Failing to match the background to the project. They all meet the definition of sin that I coined last week: "Anything that makes it hard for a committee member to pick up a clear understanding of the rationale of your research project, what it will discover and why that is important, is a sin. So is anything that makes it hard for a referee to get a clear picture of the detailed reasoning in your argument and the detailed description of your intended research activities. Referees and committee both work under time pressure, so anything that slows them down is also a sin.

4. Complex sentences are really difficult to avoid. They appear

spontaneously in your draft. Most people can't avoid writing them whenever they are trying to write something difficult – like a grant application.

That's OK. Writing complex sentences isn't the end of the world. Not unless your first draft is the end of your writing process. You must expect your first draft to be full of sins and you need to cast them out. You need to hunt through your draft and convert all the long, complex sentences into short, clear simple sentences. As a rule of thumb, you should redraft any sentence longer than 30 words or containing more than 1 verb or beginning with a digression – a phrase that is introduced by a word like "although". And if it's the first sentence of a paragraph you also need to make sure that the main message of the sentence fits on the first line.

It's OK for complex sentences to appear in your first draft because that is usually the easiest way for you to write it. But it's not OK to leave them there. You have to replace them with simple sentences. This may involve breaking them up, or turning them round and it will take time, but you will get quicker with practice. Your final draft must be easy to read, and to speed read. Most of the people voting on your grant application will speed-read, or skim it. So if what you send them is full of complex sentences that have to be decoded carefully then they will not get your message, and you will have less chance of getting funded.

5. Long paragraphs are bad for two reasons.

Most of the people scoring your grant will speed-read your case for support. Speed-readers read the first line of every paragraph provided there is white space between them. The longer your paragraphs, the less you communicate with speed readers.
Long paragraphs are usually very hard to digest. They are usually a sign that what you are writing is either very complex, or just a bit disorganised. The few readers who really want to read the detail in your case for support will find it hard.
If your paragraphs are longer than about 5 lines, try to break them up. If they are not too disorganised it will be fairly straightforward but if they are

disorganised it may be easier to attend to the flow first.

6. Flow refers to the sequence of ideas that you present, sentence by sentence and paragraph by paragraph. Within paragraphs, good flow occurs when each sentence connects naturally to its successor. There are several ways of achieving this. If you have never thought hard about it (and I hadn't until a few months ago), Google will find you countless sources of advice. I recommend that you read the Using English for Academic Purposes Blog, which has a section on paragraphs and flow. The basic approach is that you should always start the paragraph with the topic sentence, the one sentence that sums up the paragraph. Then, to get good flow within the paragraph you make sure that the first sentence leads naturally to the start of the second sentence, which leads naturally to the subject of the third sentence and so on. This makes it easy for the reader to read through the paragraph without having to pause and analyse the wording to work out what you mean, or having to keep several ideas in mind in order to follow what you are saying.

Flow between paragraphs is also important and again Google throws up hundreds of ways to help you make it smoother. I think that the best approach here is to reverse outline, as suggested on the Explorations of Style blog, which is full of good advice on how to make your writing more readable.

7. Failing to match the background to the project is a sin against Derrington's first commandment. You won't go to hell for the sin but you may enter the purgatory of grant rejection. The commandment requires that before you describe your project and the outcomes it will produce, you use the background section to make the case that we need exactly those outcomes. It's a pretty basic selling technique. It persuades the customer that they want what you are selling before you describe what you are selling. I have explained before how you use key sentences to create a structure that implements the technique by creating a background section that deals with the outcomes in the same order as the description of the project, and that explains, outcome by outcome, why we need them.

The key sentences also give you the best way to fix a mismatch between background and project. Basically, you create the key sentences and then you use them to re-organise your text. And then you use them to write an introduction.

If you read a few successful grant applications, you will realise that the sins are not fatal: most successful grant writers commit them. However, the sins all make it less likely that you will get funded because they make it harder for time-pressed committee members and referees to do their job. Of course, you may be lucky enough that the committee sees the merit in your application despite you making it difficult. But why take the chance?

This is a combination of two blog posts that were first posted on Andrew's blog.

Andrew Derrington has in-depth experience of the research funding process. He obtained his first research grant, a Beit Memorial Fellowship for Medical Research, while he was writing his PhD. His research was continuously funded by fellowships, project and programme grants for the next 30 years. He served on research grant committees for The Science and Engineering Research Council, the Medical Research Council and the Wellcome Trust.

His book, The Research Funding Toolkit, which he co-wrote with Jaqueline Aldridge, research and enterprise associate in the School of Psychology at the University of Kent, is the definitive guide to grant writing for early career academics and research professionals.