



Submitting Grants with Minimal Effort

Université de Fribourg / Universität Freiburg

Research Promotion Service

22.06.2026

Practical Information

- **Timeline**

- 20 minutes presentation
- 10 minutes Q&A (+30 minutes informal discussion for onsite participants)

- **Content**

1. Context: how long does it take to prepare a proposal?
2. Proposed workflow: steps you can take to spend less time writing
3. Obligatory AI part: can LLMs help you prepare proposal faster?

- **Slides**

- Slides are available on unifr.ch > Research > News & Events > Research Seminars

- **Recording**

- The presentation is recorded.

The Perceived Time Cost of Proposal Writing

For a major scheme (e.g. SNSF Project Funding, ERC Starting Grant), the common perception is **1 month at full-time**.

This is backed by the literature:

Preparing a new proposal took **an average of 38 working days** of researcher time and a resubmitted proposal took 28 working days, an overall average of 34 days per proposal. (Herbert et al., 2013)

We find that the average proposal takes **116 PI hours and 55 CI** hours to write (Von Hippel & Von Hippel, 2015)

More Time Does Not Mean Better Chances

Key Result

More time spent does not increase the success rate

Variable	<i>M</i>	<i>SD</i>	1	2	3	4	5	6	7	8	9	10	11
1. Years at current institution	10.71	9.68	—										
2. Salary	6.02	2.82	.51**	—									
3. Money Requested (\$)	596056.42	1078921.90	.15	.33**	—								
4. PI Hours Spent	115.94	96.71	.08	.02	.01	—							
5. Total CI Hours Spent	54.96	78.96	.04	.08	.20	.27**	—						
6. Benefits of Writing	4.89	1.10	-.02	-.09	.17	.07	.05	—					
7. Total Applications	3.98	3.64	.01	.18*	.14	-.01	.06	-.05	—				
8. Total Grants Funded	1.05	1.27	-.04	.18*	.20	.04	.09	.05	.66**	—			
9. Academic Rank ^a	—	—	.68**	.67**	.15	.06	.05	.02	.01	.03	—		
10. Area of Study ^a	—	—	-.08	-.06	.15	.33**	.21**	.22**	-.28**	-.13	-.05	—	
11. Gender ^a	—	—	-.15*	-.20**	.01	.07	.01	.12	-.12	-.08	-.13	.30**	—

^aSpearman's Rho was used for all correlations with Academic Rank (where 1 = assistant professor, 2 = associate professor and 3 = full professor) Area of Study (where 1 = astronomy and 2 = psychology) and Gender (where 1 = men and 2 = women).

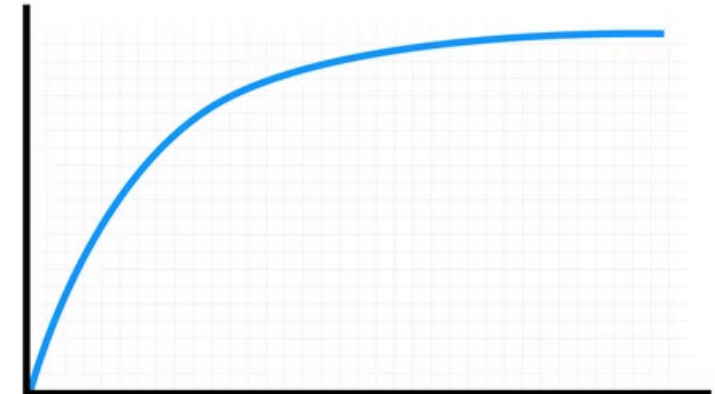
* $p < .05$

** $p < .01$

doi:10.1371/journal.pone.0118494.t001

Quality Threshold

Once you have reached a certain quality, additional effort has diminishing returns



(Von Hippel & Von Hippel, 2015, p.4)

The 80/20 rule (aka Pareto Principle): a relatively small fraction of the effort (roughly 20%) produces most of the value (roughly 80%).



Proposal Writing Does Not Have to Take That Long

The bad news

As a researcher, there is only so much you can do to spend less time here. Much of the time savings depends on the funder and the university processes.

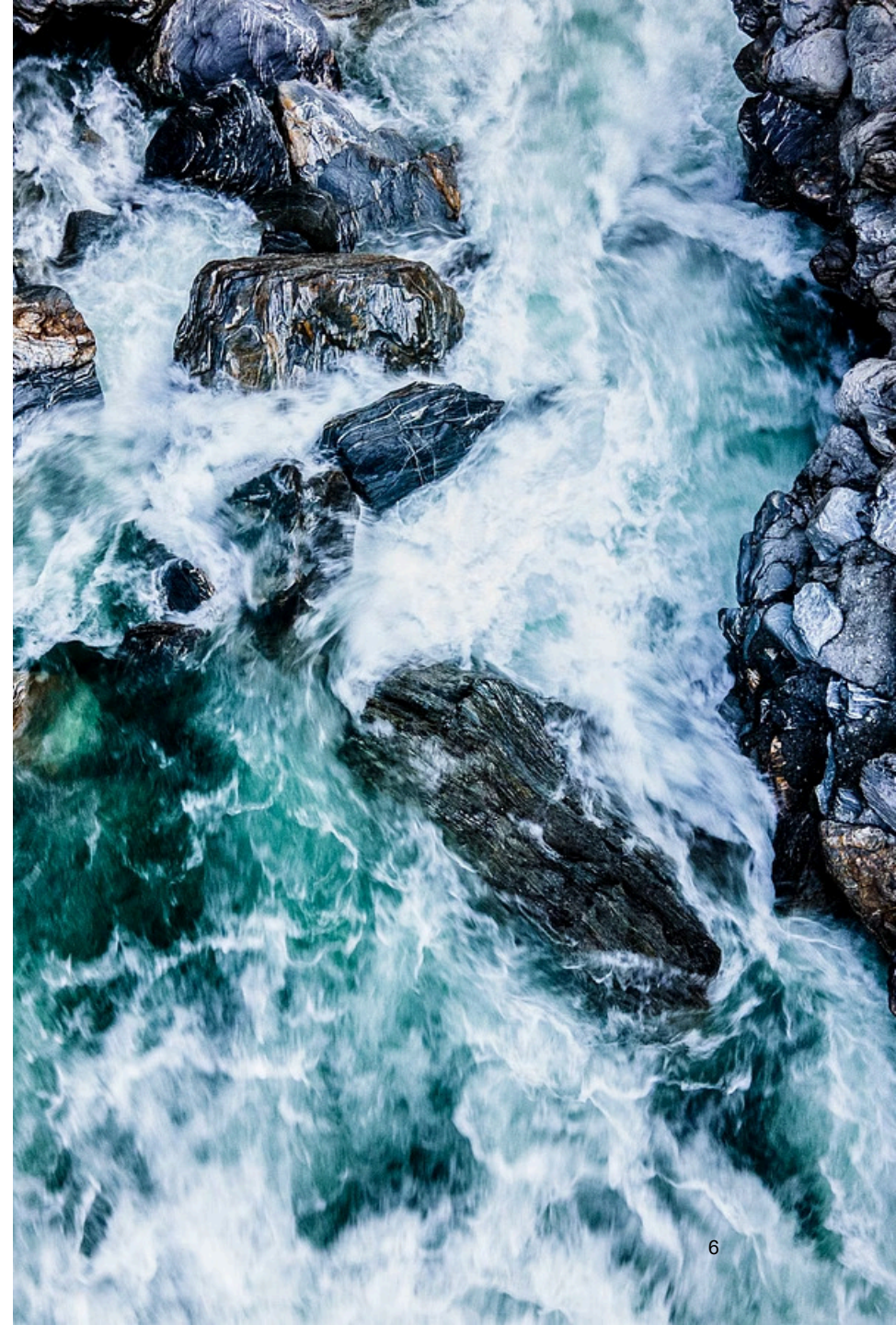
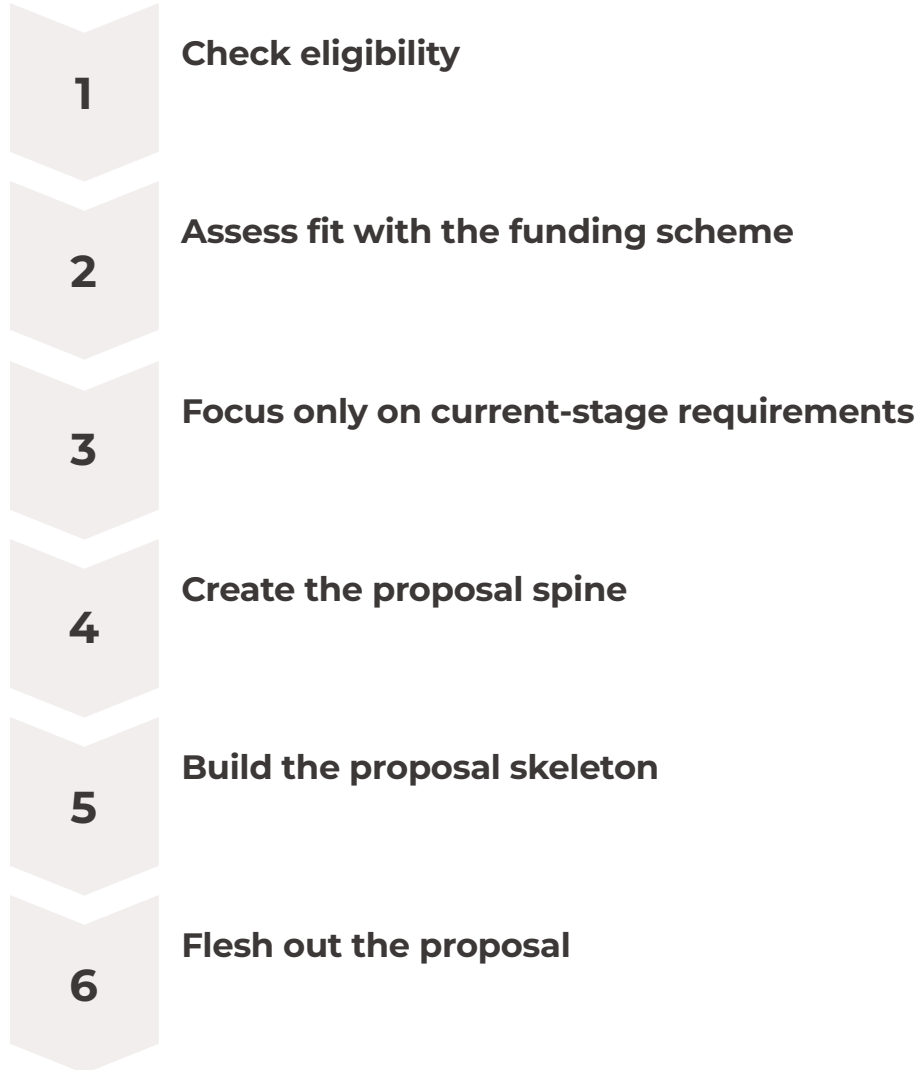
Still...

There is some things over which you have control.

Anecdote

The 1-million grant written in a single night that was accepted.

Proposed Workflow



STEP 1

Confirm Eligibility Before You Start

- Confirm your own eligibility
- Verify co-applicants and partners eligibility (especially for international projects)
- When in doubt, reach out to the Research Promotion Service

STEP 2

Assess Fit with the Funding Scheme

Scope

Is your project within the scope of the call?

- Fundamental *versus* applied research?
- Large-scale *versus* small-scale
- Low-risk *versus* high-risk

Competitiveness

Is your project (and, for career schemes, your profile) competitive enough for that scheme?

STEP 3

Identify Exactly What the Funder Requires

and Provide Exactly That

Identify the information required by the funder, then provide exactly that — nothing less, nothing more.

Multi-Stage Calls

For multi-stage calls: do not anticipate future stages prematurely; only prepare what is needed now.

Think Ahead Wisely

This does not mean that you should not already think about the later stage, but only do it as long as it is needed to improve your current stage.

Build the Proposal Spine

1 What is the main research objective?

For example, "To examine and defend necessitarianism, the view that everything is necessarily what it is, or, more provocatively, nothing could have been otherwise."

2 What are the research questions?

For example, "what could have been otherwise?"

3 What is the relevant literature?

This include your own work

4 What is the methodology?


In non-empirical disciplines (philosophy, theology, literature, etc.), "methodology" often means discussing the choice of sources or the background assumptions.


5 How will the project be run?

Work packages, distribution of responsibilities among team members, timeline, outputs, risk assessment and contingency plan.

6 What is the impact?

On your specific field, for your discipline, for science and society.

 You are primarily describing a project, not answering a question or making an argument (although this is certainly something you can do as part of a project description).

 Once this step is complete, reassess project fit. Be ready to discard and restart if necessary.



Bonus: Distill Your Project to Its Core

To help you create the spine, try the following exercise:

Describe your project in 5 sentences, then in 3 sentences, then in 1, then in emoji.

STEP 5

Turn the Spine into a Proposal Skeleton

- Build a structured document with all headings in place
- Start from the funder templates or recommendations when available
- Add subheadings where needed
- Enforce the structure using your editor's built-in heading styles (e.g., Styles feature in Word)
- Aim for an "hourglass" structure



STEP 6

Flesh Out the Proposal

Use the content you have created for the **spine** to fill up the sections in your **skeleton**.

STEP 6

Flesh Out the Proposal

Use the content you have created for the **spine** to fill up the sections in your **skeleton**.

📄 This will by far be the most time-consuming step.

How to draw an Owl.

"A fun and creative guide for beginners"



Fig 1. Draw two circles



Fig 2. Draw the rest of the damn Owl

Tips to Flesh Out the Proposal



Maintain the Hourglass Structure

Maintain the hourglass structure at the **section** and **paragraph** levels



Use Smart Repetitions

Whenever presenting a complex idea, tell the reader what you are **going to tell** them → **tell** them → tell them what you **just told** them



3 Stylistic Devices for your Proposal

Beautiful butterfly: start with an inspiring idea

Make your project engaging and intuitive, even if the topic is complex or dry.

Where: summary

Family-portrait: show yourself among the others

Position your work within existing research and clearly identify your unique role and added value.

Where: literature review / related work

Before–after: highlight your contribution

Clearly show what changes thanks to your project

Where: state of the art, impact

STEP 7

Complete the Administrative Parts Last

- Complete admin data and budget after the research plan (ensure consistency)
- Work directly in the submission portal whenever possible (avoid reformatting later)

Can LLMs Really Speed Up Proposal Writing?

Yes, but with limitations

Create a successful SNSF Project Funding proposal on digital democracy and political participation in Switzerland.

- This will yield bad results that will take much time and effort to correct.
- Even with a better prompt, you will likely not be able to create a good proposal from scratch.

OpenAI or Anthropic only markets their models as having "PhD-level intelligence"

Where LLMs Can Help in the Grant Writing Workflow

To create the spine

From existing material such as published papers, drafts, notes, etc.


To flesh out the proposal


To fill the sections from the spine

During the polishing phase

Grammar, better headings, shortening text, etc.

You will always have to go back and improve the text (either manually or using another prompt)

 Reviewers may have a prejudice against LLM-generated text. Make sure your text does not sound LLM-generated (no filler words, don't overuse dashes, etc.)

 Introduction

Let's try with an example. Assume you want to do research on topic in the attached document. Give me relevant bullet point for each of the following proposal section:

1. State your main research objective
2. Develop your research questions
3. Review the relevant literature (including your own work on the subject)
4. Present your methodology
5. Say how you will run the project (work packages, responsibilities, timeline, planned outputs)
6. Discuss the project impact (on your field, and perhaps beyond this)

Take-Home Messages



Be Wary of Diminishing Returns

Don't waste your time on things that have no impact on the quality of your proposal



Be Willing to Discard and Restart

Don't fall for the sunken cost fallacy



Follow a Structured Workflow

Whether the one suggested here or another



Don't Expect LLM to Save You (Much) Time

Use them to save you effort.





How can we help?

Proposal review

Reviewing your proposal, giving advice to make it stronger

Administrative support

Budgeting, answering questions about edge cases, etc.

Sanity check

Confirming your proposal complies with the SNSF rules

...

- The sooner you reach out to us, the better. We cannot guarantee that we will be able to support you in time if you reach out very close from the deadline.



Questions?

Danke!
Merci!
Thank you!

Dienststelle Forschungsförderung

Service Promotion Recherche

Research Promotion Service

research@unifr.ch

www.unifr.ch/research/



Nehmen Sie an unserer kurzen
Zufriedenheitsumfrage teil.

Participez à notre court sondage de
satisfaction.

Take our quick satisfaction survey.

References

Herbert, D. L., Barnett, A. G., Clarke, P., & Graves, N. (2013). On the time spent preparing grant proposals: An observational study of Australian researchers. *BMJ Open*, 3(5), e002800. <https://doi.org/10.1136/bmjopen-2013-002800>

Von Hippel, T., & Von Hippel, C. (2015). To Apply or Not to Apply: A Survey Analysis of Grant Writing Costs and Benefits. *PLOS ONE*, 10(3), e0118494. <https://doi.org/10.1371/journal.pone.0118494>