ISLA Proposal Writing Guide for Graduate Students

Grant writing is intrinsic to professional academic life. In addition to supporting research and creative work, ISLA's grant programs provide graduate students with an opportunity to develop grant-writing skills and become better equipped to apply for future external grants and fellowships. This guide outlines eight general principles for crafting strong ISLA proposals, which are also generally applicable to other internal and external grant programs.

1. **Start your application early, well in advance of deadlines**. This will allow you to work through multiple drafts prior to submission. Starting early will also help you secure carefully prepared letters of recommendation. By providing letter writers with an advanced draft or final version of your proposal, you give them the opportunity to incorporate specific commentary on your project in their letters.

2. **Understand the purpose of the particular grant program**. This includes eligibility requirements and restrictions, and the criteria by which proposals will be evaluated. Mastering these details at the outset of the grant-writing process will prevent you from applying for something for which you are not actually eligible, and prepare you to write a proposal tailored to the grant programs goals. Both at ISLA and elsewhere, program officers and reviewers are first and foremost looking for proposals that fit their funding aims. Even if a project has excellent intellectual merit, it will be declined if it does not clearly meet program criteria.

3. **Conform to specific proposal requirements**. These may include required components such as abstracts, project descriptions, budgets, and timelines, as well as stipulations about proposal format and page/word limits. It is important to adhere to these requirements; applications that are incomplete or that disregard stated expectations are routinely rejected.

4. **Write clearly for a general academic audience and avoid unnecessary technical jargon**. Selection committees often strive to obtain disciplinary expertise related to submitted grant applications, but it is likely that reviewers will only know as much about your particular topic as you provide in your proposal. This means providing sufficient background information to understand the nature and importance of the work you are proposing. ISLA grant programs are broad in scope, encompassing all the disciplines in the College of Arts and Letters, and selection committees are made up of representatives from the arts, humanities, and social sciences. It is imperative that you find ways to describe your project and its significance for readers who are not familiar with your discipline, let alone your subfield. When you must use technical language in your proposal, be sure to explain your terminology.

5. **Develop a compelling narrative that will engage the attention of readers**. Remember that the selection committees are reading a large number of proposals in a short amount of time. Make yours stand out by presenting your work in an engaging way. Like a good story, think of your proposal as having a beginning, middle, and end, in which you introduce an interesting problem or question, describe how you plan to address it, and how you will bring your research to a satisfying conclusion.

6. **Strive to be as detailed as possible about the concrete aspects of your proposal**. Award decisions often hinge on the feasibility of a project. Your methodology, budget, and timeline for project completion will be scrutinized by reviewers to see if you have actually thought through how you would use grant funds. Each aspect of your research plan and budget must be justified, so be specific in the explanation of your choices. If reviewers have to read between the lines of your proposal to understand what you will be doing, or make assumptions about your methodological or analytical approach, your application is less likely to be successful.

7. **Proposals may be organized in various ways, but should have several basic elements.** Successful proposals provide a clear overview of the project's objectives, an explanation of the ways in which the proposed work stems from existing research *and* makes a novel and significant contribution to theory, a discussion of research methodology, an acknowledgement of limitations and/or future directions, and a proposed completion timeline. For more senior students it is often helpful to state how your proposed project connects to your prior work and future goals.

8. **Ask faculty with grant-writing experience to read and critique drafts of your proposal.** This may be the most important principal in this guide. Grant writing is an acquired skill, and experienced scholars—such as an advisor or committee member—can often spot weaknesses in your proposal. Their feedback will enable you to address deficiencies prior to submission and improve your chances of success. When a proposal is not selected for funding, very often it is because it was obviously not developed with input from relevant faculty. ISLA also recommends workshopping proposals with the Offices of Grants and Fellowships (gradgrants@nd.edu) before submission.