

# Grant Funding: A Guide for Graduate Students

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## What are grants?

Grants are funds that are awarded on a competitive basis to individuals or organizations for a specific purpose, such as research, over a specific period of time. Grantwriting is the process of developing and submitting a grant *proposal*—an application for a grant.

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## Why apply for grants?

Grants can help fund the research or creative activities you expect to complete for your thesis or dissertation. Some types of grants, such as fellowships, also include a stipend to help support you during your career in graduate school. Being awarded a grant can therefore enable you to accomplish goals that otherwise might be out of reach. It brings recognition to you and to your department. Familiarity with grantwriting also is necessary or advantageous in a wide range of professions, from science to the arts.

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## When should I start?

It's never too early to start looking for grant funding possibilities. The sooner you become familiar with the grant application process, the sooner you can put that knowledge to practical use. It is important to begin the process early in your graduate career. You must plan well ahead: several months can elapse between a grant proposal deadline and the agency's funding decision.

Investigating possible grant sources **before** you begin work on your thesis or dissertation project increases your chances of being funded. If you will need research support, you should begin searching for funding sources as soon as you formulate a general topic. If you have a strong idea, present it well, and do your homework, you can be very competitive for this type of external funding. The grant process is similar to the process of developing your thesis or dissertation, and writing a grant proposal may actually help you in the process of defining or clarifying your project.

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## How should I start?

The first step in looking for funding is to decide what your goal is. Are you seeking funds to support yourself, to support a project, or both? This will help you determine what type of support would be appropriate.

If you are primarily seeking support for yourself while in graduate school, you can first investigate SIUC sources and scholarships. Academic departments and the Graduate School Assistantship and Fellowship Office have information about SIUC fellowships, teaching/research assistantships, and scholarships. The Financial Aid Office has information about campus student work options available to graduate students. Finally, the Office of Major Scholarship Advisement has information on non-SIUC graduate scholarships, as well as fellowships and grants.

If you need funding for a specific project, consider applying for externally funded **grants**, such as:

- individual research grants;
- dissertation research support programs;
- research fellowships; and
- travel grants for research.

Your department should be your first source of information about grants. Check bulletin boards for notices of funding opportunities. Talk to your adviser and other faculty about funding. Faculty often fund students through grants that they receive for their own research/creative activities, or they may know of other opportunities that would be appropriate for you.

If you are seeking support for your thesis or dissertation project, you will probably want to conduct your search for resources in several stages. A general search for funding can be conducted when you have selected your research topic. After you have written your prospectus and done some preliminary work on your topic, follow up with a more extensive search to narrow down the possibilities and identify the best funding match for your project.

OSPA's web site provides free access to a database called Community of Science (COS) that covers grant programs in all disciplines (not just the sciences). You can search for grant programs by keyword, program type, and academic qualifications and you can arrange for customized funding alerts to be sent to you automatically. To get started, see our COS How-To page. If you have difficulty, contact OSPA (453-4540). Our web site also contains pages with grant deadlines, funding agency links, and resources of special interest to graduate students, including graduate fellowship listings. Also check the graduate section of the Major Scholarship Advisement web site for fellowship and grant listings.

Study Abroad Programs has information about study and research programs overseas, including extensive resources (by field and region) on foreign universities and SIUC's exchange programs. Students who have a specific field or research topic in mind should contact Thomas Saville, coordinator, at 453-7670, B220 Northwest Annex. Students interested in Fulbright programs, the National Security Education Program, and related grants also should contact Thomas Saville.

If you have difficulty finding grant funding sources for which you are eligible, contact OSPA for assistance.

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## How do I find the best funding match?

When you're searching databases, use keywords that are specific and appropriate to your field of interest (e.g., *learning disabilities*, *climate change*, etc.). It is important to use several keywords to make the search thorough and complete. You're looking for the best fit between the objectives of your project and the priorities of the funding agencies you're considering.

Take the time to review agencies' web sites, guidelines, and Requests for Proposals (RFPs) carefully in order to gain a good understanding of the kinds of projects that these sponsors fund. You'll save time in the long run by avoiding applying for support from inappropriate sources. Once you locate some potential funding sources, you may need to contact them for more information to determine if submitting a proposal would be appropriate.

In reviewing information about funding agencies and grant programs, pay particular attention to **deadlines** and **notification dates**. Also consider these basic questions:

- Does the agency or program fund graduate students?
- What limitations does the agency put on its programs? Are there geographical restrictions? Does the agency only fund certain types of institutions or individuals? Does it limit its funding to target populations such as women, minorities, or people with disabilities?
- Does the agency or program fund projects that are similar in size and scope to your proposed project?
- What research expenses will the agency or program cover?
- How large is the funding pool? How many grant proposals does the agency or program receive each year, and how many does it usually fund?
- Is the information about the agency or program current?
- What are the deadlines for applying?
- What method of application is required?

By keeping these points in mind, you can quickly narrow down the number of potential sponsors for your work and eliminate from consideration programs for which you are not eligible or not a strong candidate.

Note that many agencies do not make grants to individuals, but only to organizations. Don't rule out these potential sponsors—your faculty adviser may be able to apply for funding through the University to support your project.

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## How do I write the grant proposal?

**First and foremost, do your homework.** Get all of the information you can about the funding agency, who they fund, and what they fund. Find out how they want to be contacted.

**Follow agency guidelines and instructions.** Some organizations ask for a letter of intent, concept letter, or query letter that briefly outlines the proposed project and level of funding requested. Some agencies request a preproposal, which is an abbreviated application. Others have application packets that you will need to complete according to their instructions. Follow the directions to the letter, including agency specifications for proposal organization, length, and formatting. Funding agencies can and do turn down grant proposals that don't meet these requirements.

Next, **make sure you answer** the basic question that any potential sponsor will have: "Why should I fund your grant proposal?" This involves writing about the significance of the project in terms that will be readily understood by the funding agency—from their perspective, not yours.

Your proposal should **clearly describe the project objectives and methodology.** Explain exactly what you plan to do, how you plan to do it, and why grant funding is necessary. Many grant proposals are rejected because they are too vague. Don't let yours be one. For example, don't simply say that you will do statistical analyses of data; instead, specify what statistical procedures you will use and for what purpose. Check the proposal-writing resources on OSPA's web site.

If the grant application must be submitted through the University (this is often the case), **consult your faculty adviser and contact OSPA**; all such applications must be processed through this office. Even if you will be responsible for submitting the grant application on your own, it's a good idea to **get advice** from someone in your department who has written grants. If you are not working with a faculty member on the grant application, you can contact one of OSPA's research project specialists for guidance (453-4540).

**Ask faculty mentors to read your proposal** and give you suggestions. Their feedback can be invaluable in making your proposal more competitive and maximizing your chances of being awarded a grant.

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## What in-depth help is available?

Each semester OSPA offers a **Proposal Writing Workshop for Graduate Students.** Notices of upcoming workshops are sent to each academic department. They're also posted on OSPA's home page and on the University's Public Events Calendar.

Morris Library has useful books on grantwriting, and OSPA's web site has detailed information on proposal preparation and submission. An excellent overview of proposal

writing is Proposal-Writing Tips; **we recommend that you read this before getting started.**

For more guidance, contact one of OSPA's research project specialists (453-4540). Given enough lead time, these staff members can discuss your proposal with you and offer advice.

Good luck with your research endeavors!