HOW TO CONDUCT GRANT SPRINTS
A more collaborative, efficient, and fun way to write proposals
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# TABLE OF CONTENTS

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Section</th>
<th>Page</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>INTRODUCTION</td>
<td>3</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>GETTING STARTED</td>
<td>4</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>GRANT SPRINT DAY 1</td>
<td>11</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>GRANT SPRINT DAY 2</td>
<td>20</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
Writing grant proposals can be a burdensome, lonely process. Staring at a blank screen with a flurry of proposal ideas can feel agonizing. Getting feedback from collaborators can be challenging with busy schedules and overflowing inboxes. As a result, grant proposal writing often stretches over long periods of time, much of which may feel unproductive.

We believe there is a better way to write grant proposals. We have developed Grant Proposal Sprints, a novel method to write grant proposals collaboratively in order to synthesize the ideas from the entire writing team. By bringing together all of the collaborators in a room, the team is able to focus deeply on the grant to maximize the quality of the proposal. Within two four-hour sessions, a group of 5-10 participants can create a robust draft of a grant proposal, including the specific aims and research strategy. After these sessions, the Principal Investigator and grant writer will make final edits to submit the grant.

For Grant Sprints to succeed, we have established a structured agenda for teams to follow that facilitates both generating ideas, asking questions, and collaboratively making decisions. In this document, we have outlined both the agenda, as well as principles to ensure a productive, collaborative Grant Sprint.
PRINCIPLES OF GRANT SPRINTS

A Grant Sprint requires a safe, open environment to maximize the experience of working together. To develop this type of environment, the Grant Proposal Sprint is organized into a series of divergent and convergent processes. During the divergent phase, the team seeks a wide range of ideas. During the convergent phase, the team deliberately evaluates these ideas to choose the best option. By being clear about when the team is in the divergent versus the convergent phase, the team generates more high quality ideas for the grant proposal than when working alone.

To achieve this experience, Grant Proposal Sprints depend on six core principles:

EVERYONE CONTRIBUTES
Information flow is often limited among team members when investigators write grants. The Grant Sprint provides a platform for everyone to contribute. During the divergent phase, all participants should contribute their ideas and perspectives. During the convergent phase, all participants should vocalize their questions and concerns.

EVERYONE IS RESPECTFUL
While the old adage of “There’s no such thing as a bad idea” may sound trite, the Grant Sprint intentionally separates the process of creating and evaluating ideas. During the divergent phase, participants should defer judgement. Judging an idea too quickly will make it impossible to generate any novel ideas. During the convergent phase, participants should express their concerns about certain ideas, while also being affirmative. That is, look for what is
good about an idea with the goal of improving it and facilitating learning, rather than judging an idea for the sake of criticism.

EVERYONE IS HONEST
The Grant Proposal Sprint provides an opportunity to not only look at the positive opportunities of a potential grant, but also why the grant might fail. By looking at the strengths and weaknesses of the grant proposal, the team will be able to create a better proposal altogether. However, this can only be achieved if all participants express their perspectives honestly throughout the process.

BUILD ON EACH OTHERS’ IDEAS
Academics often seek to find fault in ideas. At the same time, initial ideas often seem obvious or familiar. Instead of knocking down ideas, Grant Sprints seek to push the bounds of the team by building on these ideas. What is interesting or exciting about an idea? How might the idea be improved? Could you combine the ideas in a unique and novel way? This pattern of thinking will unlock new paths and opportunities for the team.

KEEP IT SHORT
The Grant Proposal Sprint is intended to be a democratic forum where all participants have equal say in the direction of the grant proposal. To achieve this, participants should be mindful about the length of their comments. Keep comments to two minutes to ensure everyone has an opportunity to provide their perspective.
PREVENT PLAGIARISM

Because there are many hands on deck during the grant proposal writing process, avoid copying and pasting sections from published work without citing it clearly. Otherwise, there is a risk that it will get lost in the grant proposal without an appropriate reference.

By upholding these principles, the grant team will achieve an engaging, productive dialogue that will lead to novel perspectives and mutual understanding about the grant proposal.
BUILDING THE TEAM

A Grant Proposal Sprint ideally has a team of seven people, though a range of 5 - 10 people can be accommodated. The team should represent individuals with diverse perspectives on the grant.

PRINCIPLE INVESTIGATOR: The Principal Investigator contributes the grant topic and target for the Grant Proposal Sprint. The PI also plays the “Decider” role, which means that he or she makes the final decision about the direction of the grant proposal during the convergent phases.

CO-INVESTIGATORS: The Co-Investigators provide added expertise -- typically from another discipline -- to the grant proposal.

GRANT WRITER: The Grant Writer will ultimately write the grant proposal. Grant Proposal Sprints are a great experience for grant writers to better understand the topic at hand.

QUANTITATIVE EXPERTS: The Quantitative Experts will be able to provide added context about the data and analytical methods required for the grant.

STUDENTS AND/OR FELLOWS: Students and/or Fellows often provide a novel perspective and important questions during the Grant Proposal Sprint.
Finally, the Grant Proposal Sprint requires a Facilitator, who ensures the team upholds the principles of the process, sticks to the timeline, and refocuses the conversation as needed. The Facilitator guides the team to reach their desired end goal. To do so, the Facilitator will lead the sessions, synthesize the conversation and maintain the democratic forum (i.e., make sure participants keep comments short by staying within their 2 minute limit).

The Facilitator must be an unbiased participant. That is, he or she cannot have a stake in the outcome of the grant proposal otherwise he or she will not about able to guide the team objectively. Most importantly, the Principal Investigator cannot be the Facilitator. Doing so will hinder the team’s ability to share openly and honestly.
TIME, SPACE AND SUPPLIES

The Grant Proposal Sprint requires two four-hour sessions on consecutive days. While this may seem like a lot of time to commit, it’s an opportunity to not only clarify your own thinking, but also synthesize your ideas with the team. We posit that you will achieve higher quality grant proposals in a more productive way by consolidating the time you spend into these two four-hour sessions.

To get started, schedule these two four-hour time blocks with your Grant Proposal Sprint team. We recommend doing this at least two weeks in advance if not earlier to accommodate everyone’s schedules.

In terms of space, you will need an open area with whiteboards, where it is easy for participants to move around. That is, avoid conference rooms where tables prevent participants from moving throughout the space. Ideally, the room should have a screen and/or projector that can be connected to a laptop, so that the team can review the grant document collaboratively.

We recommend a space that is different from where the team usually works together. The new environment can spark new ways of thinking. We have used IHPI Think Tank at the University of Michigan’s North Campus Research Complex as an effective collaborative space. A flat classroom with whiteboards and movable furniture can also be an effective space for the sessions.
In addition to whiteboards, the team will need whiteboard markers, 3” x 5” sticky notes (two separate colors), felt-tip medium-point markers, $\frac{1}{4}$” round stickers (aka dots) and a timer. On Day 1, devices are not allowed during the Grant Proposal Sprint unless the team does not have a space with a screen or projector. In this case, the team can view the grant proposal on their own laptops, but this is not recommended since it is easy to be distracted. On Day 2, participants will use their laptops to write and revise their respective sections.

**NOTE ABOUT GOOGLE DOCS**

The Grant Proposal Sprint is a collaborative writing exercise. As such, we strongly recommend that the team use Google Docs to outline and write the grant proposal. This will allow shared viewing, editing and commenting.

**RESOURCES**

To guide the outlining and drafting of the proposal, we have developed a grant-writing guide. The guide is a paragraph-level template that identify the headings and subheadings in the grant, along with the content that is often included in these sections. It has been compiled from the rich set of proposals related to health policy and health services research that have been developed at the University of Michigan. In addition to this grant writing guide, participants also have access to a folder containing examples of similar grants.

We also recommend that the team shares other material in advance of a sprint, including important literature or background materials.
To prepare for the Grant Proposal Sprint, the Principal Investigator, in collaboration with co-investigators, develops a concept for the grant and drafts the Specific Aims page defined topic for the proposal, as well as some initial aims concepts. We have experimented with starting the Grant Sprint at different phases of the grant idea process and have found that the Grant Sprint is more productive when the idea is “baked enough” so that a Specific Aims page can be drafted.

Additionally, the Principal Investigator should define the funder (e.g. the Agency for Healthcare Research and Quality (AHRQ), the National Institute on Aging, Robert Wood Johnson Foundation, etc) and the award mechanism (e.g. R01, R21).

Lastly, the Principal Investigator will assign who will write and revise each section of the grant on Day 2. More on this later.

On the next page is the overview of the Day 1 schedule. We will dive into the purpose and process of each session next.
## DAY 1 SCHEDULE AT A GLANCE

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Activity</th>
<th>Duration</th>
<th>Details</th>
</tr>
</thead>
</table>
| **INTRODUCTION**              | 15 min   | + Introduce participants in the room  
+ Describe roles of the Facilitator and Decider  
+ Explain the goal of the sprint and the overall agenda |
| **DESCRIPTION OF PROJECT**    | 15 min   | + PI explains theory of the project and constraints. This includes the study cohort, study years, and data available. |
| **MODIFYING THE PROJECT AIMS**| 40 min   | + Modify the project aims |
| **WHY MIGHT WE FAIL?**        | 30 min   | + Participants document the reasons why the grant might not be funded |
| **BREAK**                     | 15 min   |         |
| **COLLABORATIVE OUTLINE SESSION** | 135 min | + Group will discuss the content for the following sections:  
  - Conceptual framework  
  - Preliminary data  
  - Data sources  
  - Study population  
  - Study outcomes  
  - Aim 1 study design and analysis  
  - Aim 2 study design and analysis  
  - Aim 3 study design and analysis  
  - Significance  
  - Innovation |
DAY 1 STEP BY STEP

INTRODUCTION
Team members introduce themselves and describe their role on the sprint team. The facilitator then describes the principles of the sprint and the agenda over the two sessions.

DESCRIPTION OF PROJECT
After introductions, the Principal Investigator explains the purpose of the grant proposal and the initial aims. He or she will explain why the team is doing the project and the desired outcomes. In this session, the team is encouraged to ask clarifying questions about the grant proposal. Additionally, participants should take notes about what they find innovative and significant, as well as notes about their concerns. These notes will be used in the following sessions.

MODIFYING THE PROJECT AIMS
Based on the description of the project, the team will explore the project aims to generate new approaches and/or structures. There will be a divergent and convergent phase to this session.

DIVERGE
Participants propose alternative aims for the grant proposal. All participants will have a stack of 3” x 5” sticky notes and a felt-tip marker. In 10 minutes, participants will silently write new aims statements -- one per sticky note. Participants are also encouraged to write ideas for other sections of the proposal, for example, the Significance or Innovation sections, on sticky notes.
Here’s an example for how participants should capture their sticky notes.

While participants are writing their sticky notes, the Facilitator should prepare the whiteboard to have a section for the Aims, Significance and Innovation, as well as extra space for any additional sections, for which participants generated ideas.

**CONVERGE**

Next, the team will begin to converge these new ideas for the aims statements. The Facilitator will ask a participant to read out loud what he or she had written on the sticky notes and post them on the wall. The Facilitator will then ask the next participant to do the same and continue until all participants have read all of their sticky notes. After reading all of the sticky notes, the wall will look like this:
Now, the team will begin to organize and categorize the sticky notes into themes. Participants will identify related notes and group them together. One of the team members will write on a new different colored sticky note the topic of that theme. Overtime, the team will categorize all of the sticky notes into themes.

At this point, the team may have ended up with more than three Aims statements. If this is the case, the team will vote on the top three Aims for the grant proposal. Each participant will be given three ¾” round stickers, aka dots. Participants will stick their dots on the top three Aims statements. If there remains a tie, the Principal Investigator will make the final decision about the Aims statement based on the outcome of the vote.

**WHY MIGHT WE FAIL?**

Now the team will repeat the process above, but focused on why the project might fail. Again, there will be a divergent and convergent phase to this session.
DIVERGE
Participants will have 5 minutes to silently generate reasons why the project might fail on the 3” x 5” sticky notes. However, participants should reframe their concerns into questions. For example,

**Concern:** The data set does not have sufficient income variables to determine the impact on low-income populations.

**Reframed question:** In what ways might we capture income variables to determine the impact on low-income populations?

By reframing concerns as questions, the team will be engaged in overcoming these concerns, rather than viewing them as barriers. An easy way to flip a concern into a question is to use the phrases “How might we…?” or “In what ways might we…”

CONVERGE
Again, the team will read aloud their concerns and stick their notes on the wall. Next, the team organize the notes into categories as before, remembering to write the summarized topic of the theme on a new, difference colored sticky note. Finally, the team will again vote on the topic of most concern for the grant proposal. Each participant receives three dots to vote.

After the voting, the team will debrief the top three concerns generated. How will you overcome and/or navigate these concerns?

TAKE A BREAK!
The team has accomplished a lot already! Take a 15 minute break to let the ideas and conversations incubate before moving into drafting.
COLLABORATIVE OUTLINE SESSION
At this stage, the team will begin generating a rough outline for the grant proposal. The team will review each section of the grant proposal one by one to discuss the content for that section. The goal is:
• To generate consensus about what each section will include
• Create a starting point for the person writing each section in Day 2
The team will discuss each section in the following order with the associated time allotment:

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>COMPONENT OF APPROACH</th>
<th>TIME</th>
<th>ACTIVITY</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>CONCEPTUAL FRAMEWORK</td>
<td>10 min</td>
<td>+ Each participant sketches a conceptual diagram</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>+ Participants review and discuss alternative diagrams</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>+ Decided determines “best” diagram(s)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>PRELIMINARY DATA</td>
<td>10 min</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>DATA SOURCES</td>
<td>8 min</td>
<td>+ Facilitator leads team in a group discussion to identify key ideas for each of these sections</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>STUDY POPULATION</td>
<td>8 min</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>STUDY OUTCOMES</td>
<td>8 min</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
## COLLABORATIVE OUTLINE SESSION

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>COMPONENT OF APPROACH</th>
<th>TIME</th>
<th>ACTIVITY</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>AIM 1 STUDY DESIGN AND ANALYSIS</td>
<td>15 min</td>
<td>+ Facilitator leads team in a group discussion to identify key ideas for each of these sections</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>AIM 2 STUDY DESIGN AND ANALYSIS</td>
<td>15 min</td>
<td>+ Each participant documents a significant contribution of the study on a sticky notes + Team organizes sticky notes on whiteboard according to themes + Team assigns a name to each of these contributions</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>AIM 3 STUDY DESIGN AND ANALYSIS</td>
<td>15 min</td>
<td>+ Each participant documents a significant contribution of the study on a sticky notes + Team organizes sticky notes on whiteboard according to themes + Team assigns a name to each of these contributions</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>SIGNIFICANCE</td>
<td>15 min</td>
<td>+ Each participant documents a significant contribution of the study on a sticky notes + Team organizes sticky notes on whiteboard according to themes + Team assigns a name to each of these contributions</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>INNOVATION</td>
<td>15 min</td>
<td>+ Each participant documents a significant contribution of the study on a sticky notes + Team organizes sticky notes on whiteboard according to themes + Team assigns a name to each of these contributions</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
The Facilitator will need to guide the conversation and monitor the time during these sessions to make sure the team achieves its goal in creating a robust outline. The Facilitator will ask the grant writer to document the conversation in each section in bulleted format. The grant writer will have his or her laptop connected to the screen or projector, so that the team can view the progress in each section.

Avoid getting caught up with word choice. In Day 2, the team will have a lot more time to refine the language used in each section.
<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Time</th>
<th>Activity</th>
<th>Description</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>9:00</td>
<td><strong>DRAFT SESSION 1</strong></td>
<td>45 min + Participants draft corresponding components of the proposal. • Significance • Innovation • Conceptual framework • Preliminary data • Data sources</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>10:15</td>
<td><strong>DEBRIEF QUESTIONS</strong></td>
<td>15 min + Discuss questions generated during Draft Session 1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>11:00</td>
<td><strong>REVISE SESSION 1</strong></td>
<td>30 min + Rotate participants to revise Draft Session 1 components</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>11:30</td>
<td><strong>BREAK</strong></td>
<td>15 min</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>12:00</td>
<td><strong>DRAFT SESSION 2</strong></td>
<td>45 min + Participants draft corresponding components of the proposal. • Approach, Aim 1 • Approach, Aim 2 • Approach, Aim 3 • Study coordination</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>13:15</td>
<td><strong>DEBRIEF QUESTIONS</strong></td>
<td>15 min + Discuss questions generated during Draft Session 2</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
REVISE SESSION 2
30 min + Rotate participants to revise Draft Session 1 components

CONCLUSION AND NEXT STEPS
15 min + Review outstanding gaps for the proposal and assign who is responsible
+ Determine next steps for continued revisions and submission
GRANT SPRINT DAY 2

DAY 2 STEP BY STEP

After creating the robust outline for the grant proposal, the team is ready to write! Day 2 is divided into two drafting sessions. Each session will handle a different set of sections from the grant proposal.

DRAFT SESSION 1

During this session, the team will draft the following sections of the grant proposal:

- Significance
- Innovation
- Conceptual framework
- Preliminary data
- Data sources

Before the sprint, the Principal Investigator will assign 1-2 people to draft each section. While there are no hard and fast rules to assigning participants to each section, you may want to choose individuals who are best informed about each section to write them. For example, the quantitative experts would be best equipped to write the preliminary data or data sources sections. Depending on the number of participants in the session, the specific sections addressed may be modified.

WRITE

Next, each team member will spend 45 minutes drafting their assigned section. Participants should use the notes generated on Day 1 to guide their writing. While writing, participants should identify additional questions to be clarified with the team. These
questions can be added as comments to the grant proposal document.

**DEBRIEF**

After completing their initial draft, the team will regroup to discuss the questions raised during the drafting session. Once all of these questions have been reviewed, the team will transition to revising.

**REVISE**

Team members will now rotate from the section that they wrote to a new section to revise. The team will spend 30 minutes revising their assigned section.

**TAKE A BREAK!**

You’re almost there! Take a 15 minute break before starting the next drafting session.

**DRAFT SESSION 2**

The team will repeat the process outlined in the Draft Session 1 for the following sections of the grant proposal:

- Approach, Aim 1
- Approach, Aim 2
- Approach, Aim 3
- Study coordination
Again, team members will assigned to one section to write and another section to revise. Depending on the number of participants in the session, the specific sections addressed may be modified.

CONCLUSION AND NEXT STEPS

Now, the team has in hand a well-developed draft for their grant proposal. To wrap up, the team should discuss any outstanding gaps remaining in the proposal, as well as who is assigned to complete these tasks. For example, these might include:

- Bio sketches
- Letters of recommendation
- Additional data sets
- Additional background information or preliminary data

Finally, the Principal Investigator should share the next steps for completing and submitting the grant proposal.

Congratulations! You’ve finished the Grant Proposal Sprint! We hope that you’ve found this experience fun, productive and engaging with your team!