

A Practical Guide to Writing an NSF Grant Proposal (NAN Edition)

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A Practical Guide to Writing an NSF Grant Proposal

Matthew Badger

You think that your research is going well. You have a shiny new theorem or a novel proof technique or a cool example. You also have some ideas on how to build on your recent research. You want to tell the US mathematics community about your recent successes and share the excitement that you have for your research program. Maybe your faculty advisor, postdoctoral mentor, or colleague suggests that you apply for a grant. Maybe you take the initiative on your own. Whether the reason is to obtain summer salary to support your research, fund travel to conferences, reimburse visitors, pay students, or all of the above, you decide to submit a grant proposal to the National Science Foundation (NSF). This is not something that you have done before—or at least it has been a while since you last prepared a proposal.

What exactly do you have to do?

Plan of the Talk

1. Overview: Types of NSF Grants for Mathematicians
2. Getting Started / Preparing Your Proposal
3. Discussion: What makes a good Project Description?

Disclaimer! Any opinions or recommendations expressed in this talk are my own and do not necessarily reflect the views of the National Science Foundation

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PLEASE ASK QUESTIONS

1. OVERVIEW

NSF Division of Mathematical Sciences at a Glance

- ▶ Annual Budget \$244 Million (as of Fiscal Year 2021)
- ▶ 73% of Funding Goes to Individual PIs (Principal Investigators)
- ▶ ≈ 6500 Researchers Supported Annually (Undergraduates, Graduate Students, Postdocs, Senior Researchers)
- ▶ ≥ 3000 Proposals Reviewed Annually, ≈ 750 Awards Granted

(Source: Juan C. Meza, AMS Notices, October 2023)

Types of Grants: Standard Grants

Division of Mathematical Sciences (DMS) at NSF is organized into

1. Algebra and Number Theory

2. Analysis

3. Applied Mathematics

4. Combinatorics

5. Computational Mathematics

6. Foundations

7. Geometric Analysis

8. Mathematical Biology

9. Probability

10. Statistics

11. Topology

Standard Grants

- ▶ 3 years, up to 2 months of summer salary / year, travel funds, etc.
- ▶ Available to researchers employed at US institutions of higher ed
- ▶ Postdocs are eligible and have received awards
- ▶ If you earned PhD ≤ 10 Years ago, then automatically considered an Early-Career Researcher
- ▶ Application deadline in fall, varies by program

Types of Grants: Career-Stage Specific Grants

MSPRF: Mathematical Sciences Postdoctoral Research Fellowship

- ▶ Salary for 18 Academic Months and 6 Summer Months at an Institution of Your Choice under a Sponsoring Scientist
- ▶ Eligibility: US Citizens or Permanent Residents, and PhD Held < 2 Years in January of Year of the Award (Year X+1)
- ▶ Applications due in mid October (Year X)

LEAPS: Launching Early-Career Academic Pathways in Mathematical and Physical Sciences

- ▶ Eligibility: Pre-tenure faculty at institutions that do not traditionally receive significant NSF funding, including minority-serving, predominantly undergraduate, or R2 institutions
- ▶ Awards are for 2 Years, Budget up to \$250,000
- ▶ Applications due in late January

Submission Process at a Glance

1. Proposals are submitted on the research.gov website to one of the **Disciplinary Research Programs** (e.g. Analysis) or in response to a **Program Solicitation** (e.g. MSPRF)
2. The individual who is responsible for carrying out research and other proposed activities is called the **Principal Investigator (PI)**
3. As the PI, you will need to prepare about 10 documents total. Ask university staff or senior colleague for help with financial parts of the proposal
4. Once reviewed by university **Sponsored Projects Office (SPO)**, the proposal is submitted by SPO on your behalf

Exception: The MSPRF is awarded to individuals directly and not a university. Budget is set by the NSF. You get to submit the proposal yourself

NSF Program Officers

What is a Program Officer?

Each of the research programs is overseen by NSF Program Officers, who make the final decisions about which grants to fund

Who are the Program Officers?

They are mathematicians! Names and email addresses of the current program officers for each program are on NSF DMS website

How can they help?

If you have technical questions as you prepare your proposal (“Am I allowed to...?”, “Should I...?”), the best way to get answers is to ask a program officer

Review Process

What happens after you submit your grant proposal?

1. Program officers skim your proposal to determine its topic and group it with similar proposals
2. Proposal sent for review by anonymous experts (mathematicians).
Anyone that you may have a conflict of interest with, including colleagues, collaborators, and former mentors, will not be chosen to review your proposal!
3. After it is reviewed, your proposal will be ranked by a panel of experts.
Program officers take the ranking into account when deciding whether or not to fund your proposal. Other considerations such as demographics, geographic diversity, and academic age may also be factored into the decision
4. You will receive reviews of your proposal at the end of the review process, which takes about 6 months

Evaluation Criterion

Intellectual Merit

- ▶ Perceived importance of proposed research within contemporary mathematics
- ▶ Whether the proposed research is creative, original, or potentially **transformative**
- ▶ How well qualified the PI is to carry out the proposed research
- ▶ Likelihood that the project can be carried out in the proposed time frame (3 years)

Broader Impacts (to Society)

- ▶ Activities in the proposal or carried out by the PI with the potential to benefit society or to achieve specific, desired societal outcomes
- ▶ Notably does not include applications to other areas of math or science!

What is Broader Impact?

Max Lieblich

Introduction

This is a brief discussion of the notion of “Broader Impact” in an NSF proposal. The NSF has a nice website [NSF21] about what Broader Impact means, with several examples. The NSF Proposal and Award Policies and Procedures Guide (PAPPG) [NSF20] currently states: “The Broader Impacts criterion encompasses the potential to benefit society and contribute to the achievement of specific, desired societal outcomes.” Peter March wrote a useful (but perhaps slightly dated) memo [Mar07] in 2007, laying out a vision for the types of societal goals that a proposal could seek to achieve.

This article is written more or less as a series of examples meant to complement the documents above, phrased in the form of questions that I hope will stimulate thought and (perhaps) conversations with mentors. My examples start with things that are not Broader Impacts, and proceed to those that are.

I have drawn on my own experience talking to people, reading proposals, and serving on panels to generate examples. One reason I encourage you to talk to other senior

Max Lieblich is Craig McKibben and Sarah Merner Endowed Professor of Mathematics at the University of Washington. His email address is 1ieb1ich@uw.edu.

DOI: <https://dx.doi.org/10.1090/noti2316>

AUGUST 2021

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2. GETTING STARTED

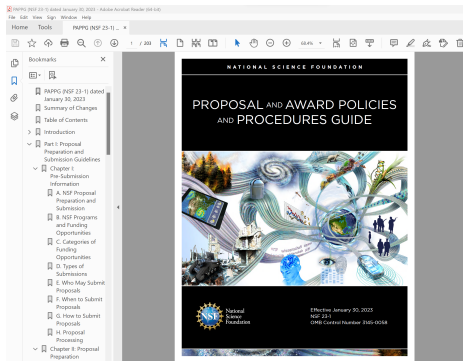
How to Get Started in 5 Steps

1. Identify the NSF submission deadline. Before you do anything else, look up the deadline for the program that you want to apply to on NSF website. Ideally, start work ≥ 2 months in advance.

2. Identify any internal deadlines and reach out to university staff. University SPO may require an internal submission deadline anywhere between 5 days to 14 days before the NSF deadline. Ask your mentor or supervisor about the local procedure.

How to Get Started in 5 Steps

3. Create a folder. Download the PAPPG. Make a separate folder for each proposal that you work on. Download a copy of the current Proposal & Award Policies & Procedures Guide (PAPPG). This is a very long document that specifies the rules for all grant proposals to the NSF. Refer to the PAPPG as you work on each part of the proposal



How to Get Started in 5 Steps

4. Get an NSF ID. Login to research.gov. Start a new proposal. If you do not already have an NSF ID, you can request one on research.gov. After logging in, find the link to create a new Full Proposal

(screen shots on the next page)

5. Begin working on the proposal. Most required documents may be prepared in LaTeX, Google Docs, or Microsoft Word, and uploaded to research.gov as a PDF. Exceptions are the Budget and Cover Sheet, which are entered directly on research.gov, and a trio of Senior Personnel Documents, which are filled-in using NSF supplied templates. It is time to work on these documents.

Start and Submit Your Proposal on Research.gov



Research.gov
ONLINE GRANTS MANAGEMENT
FOR THE NSF COMMUNITY

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- ❗ Due to maintenance, the Research.gov Notifications & Requests No Cost Extension and PI Transfer modules and Individual Banking will be unavailable from 6:00 PM ET on 9/22 – 6:00 AM ET on 9/23.
- ❗ ACMS will be disabled from approximately 2:00PM ET on Monday, September 25th to 7:00AM ET on Monday October 2nd.
- ❗ **URGENT ALERT:** Organizations will lose access to LOIs, proposals, and supplemental requests submitted in FastLane at 11:00 PM ET on Sept. 29, 2023. See the [FastLane Decommissioning](#) page for details.

+ [Show all notifications](#) (Viewing 3 of 5 notifications)

Research.gov Demo Site Now Available!

*FAQs &
Video Tutorials*

Explore initiating and developing Research.gov proposals before you prepare them in the actual Research.gov Proposal Submission System.



Prepare & Submit Proposals

Prepare, submit and check status of proposals

- 🔗 Letters of Intent and Proposals
- 🔗 Demo Site: Prepare Proposals
- 🔗 Check Proposal Status

FASTLANE PROPOSAL FUNCTIONS

- 🔗 Additional proposal functions



Proposal/ Panel Review

Review proposals, participate in panels

FASTLANE PROPOSAL REVIEW

- 🔗 Proposal Review

FASTLANE PANEL REVIEW

- 🔗 Panelist Functions



Awards & Reporting

Submit project reports, notifications & requests, and supplemental funding requests

- 🔗 Project Reports
- 🔗 Demo Site: Project Reports (Training)
- 🔗 Notifications & Requests
- 🔗 Deposit Public Access Publication



Fellowships & Honorary Awards

Nominate colleagues, apply for awards

- 🔗 Graduate Research Fellowship Program (GRFP)
- 🔗 Honorary Awards
- 🔗 Manage Reference Letters (Writers)

Start and Submit Your Proposal on Research.gov


The screenshot shows the Research.gov website interface. At the top left is the Research.gov logo with the text 'ONLINE GRANTS MANAGEMENT FOR THE NSF COMMUNITY'. At the top right is a navigation bar with links: 'Welcome Matthew Badger | Sign Out (Home) | My Profile | Contact | Help | About'. Below this is a dark blue navigation menu with buttons for 'Proposals', 'Reviews & Meetings', 'Awards & Reporting', 'Fellowships', 'Manage Financials', and 'Administration'. An orange attention banner below the menu reads: 'Attention: Research.gov supports preparation of all proposal and submission types. View the Research.gov Proposal Submission Capabilities for details.' The main content area is titled 'Prepare and Submit Proposals' with a subtitle 'Letters of Intent, Preliminary, Full, Renewal, Postdoctoral Fellowships, and SBIR/STTR'. Under the heading 'What would you like to work on?', there are three columns of options:

- Prepare New:** Answer a few questions to set up letters of intent or proposals (including [renewals](#)). A button labeled 'Prepare New' is present.
- In Progress:** Continue working on a previously prepared letter of intent or proposal that has not yet been submitted to the NSF. A button labeled 'Work with In Progress' is present.
- Submitted and Updates:** View or download a submitted letter of intent or proposal. Perform a Proposal File Update/Budget Revision on a submitted proposal. Buttons labeled 'View/Update Submitted' are present.

Information icons (i) are located below each column:

- Under 'Prepare New': 'What information will need to be provided?'
- Under 'Submitted and Updates': 'Proposal File Update (PFU) / Budget Revision' and 'Proposal Withdrawal'

Start and Submit Your Proposal on Research.gov



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Proposals

Reviews & Meetings

Awards & Reporting

Fellowships

Manage Financials

Administration


Attention: Research.gov supports preparation of all proposal and submission types. View the [Research.gov Proposal Submission Capabilities](#) for details.




Prepare and Submit Proposals

Letters of Intent, Preliminary, Full, Renewal, Postdoctoral Fellowships, and SBIR/STTR

What would you like to work on?


Prepare New

Answer a few questions to set up letters of intent or proposals (including [renewals](#) .

- Prepare New 
- Letter of Intent 
- Preliminary Proposal 
- Full Proposal**
- Renewal Proposal
- Accomplishment-Based Renewal


In Progress


Continue working on a previously prepared letter of intent or proposal that has not yet been submitted to the NSF.


Work with In Progress 

Submitted and Updates

View or download a submitted letter of intent or proposal. Perform a Proposal File Update/Budget Revision on a submitted proposal.

View/Update Submitted 

 Proposal File Update (PFU) / Budget Revision

 Proposal Withdrawal

Navigation icons: back, forward, search, refresh, etc.

Start and Submit Your Proposal on Research.gov

The screenshot displays the Research.gov interface with a modal dialog titled "Select Organization for New Proposal". The dialog contains the following text:

Select Organization for New Proposal

You have multiple organizations associated with your profile. Please choose the one you would like to associate with your new proposal.

Organization

Select Organization

Note: The Cover Sheet will automatically default to this organization, but can be updated later. This organization will also be associated with the Principal Investigator shown on Manage Personnel and Subaward Organizations and Senior Personnel Documents, and display on Budget and Budget Justification.

Select and Continue Cancel

The background shows the Research.gov logo and navigation menu. The main content area is titled "Prepare and Submit Proposal" and includes a section "What would you like to work on?" with three options: "Prepare New", "In Progress", and "Submitted and Updates".

Prepare New
Answer a few questions to set up letters of intent or proposals (including [renewals](#)).

Full Proposal

In Progress
Continue working on a previously prepared letter of intent or proposal that has not yet been submitted to the NSF.

Work with In Progress

Submitted and Updates
View or download a submitted letter of intent or proposal. Perform a Proposal File Update/Budget Revision on a submitted proposal.

View/Update Submitted

Proposal File Update (PFU) / Budget Revision
Proposal Withdrawal

Start and Submit Your Proposal on Research.gov

My Desktop > Prepare and Submit Proposals > Prepare New Full Proposal

Prepare New Full Proposal

1. Funding Opportunity

2. Where to Apply

3. Proposal Type

4. Proposal Details

Select Funding Opportunity [Find Funding Opportunity Number](#)

i Please note the following:

- If your funding opportunity is not displayed, [check whether you have the appropriate roles](#), and if needed, [add a new role](#).
- If this full proposal will be related to a preliminary proposal, the preliminary and full proposals must use the same funding opportunity

Show All

analysis

Showing 1-4 of 4



Select	Funding Opportunity Number	Funding Opportunity Title
<input type="radio"/>	NSF 23-613	Research Security and Integrity Information Sharing Analysis Organization
<input type="radio"/>	NSF 23-583	NSF-DFG Lead Agency Activity in Measurements of Interfacial Systems at Scale with In-situ and Operando aNalysis
<input type="radio"/>	PD 22-1265	Geometric Analysis
<input type="radio"/>	PD 20-1281	Analysis

Show All

Showing 1-4 of 4



Previous

Next

Start and Submit Your Proposal on Research.gov

My Desktop > Prepare and Submit Proposals > Prepare New Full Proposal

Prepare New Full Proposal

1. Funding Opportunity ✓ 2. **Where to Apply** ✓ 3. Proposal Type ✓ 4. Proposal Details

Select Proposal Type

What type of proposal will be used? [Proposal Types](#)

- Research
- Planning [PAPPG II.F.1](#)
- Rapid Response Research (RAPID) [PAPPG II.F.2](#)
- Early-concept Grants for Exploratory Research (EAGER) [PAPPG II.F.3](#)
- Research Advanced by Interdisciplinary Science and Engineering (RAISE) [PAPPG II.F.4](#)
- Grant Opportunities for Academic Liaison with Industry (GOALI) [PAPPG II.F.5](#)
- Ideas Lab [PAPPG II.F.6](#)
- Facilitation Awards for Scientists and Engineers with Disabilities (FASED) [PAPPG II.F.7](#)
- Conference [PAPPG II.F.9](#)
- Equipment [PAPPG II.F.10](#)
- Travel [PAPPG II.F.11](#)
- Center [PAPPG II.F.12](#)
- Research Infrastructure [PAPPG II.F.13](#)
- Postdoctoral Fellowship
- Small Business Innovation Research Program (SBIR)
- Small Business Technology Transfer Program (STTR)

[Previous](#) [Next](#)

broposaloreo/#

Start and Submit Your Proposal on Research.gov

My Desktop > Prepare and Submit Proposals > Prepare New Full Proposal

Prepare New Full Proposal

1. Funding Opportunity ✓
2. Where to Apply ✓
3. Proposal Type ✓
4. Proposal Details ✓

Proposal Details


What type of proposal are you submitting?

Single proposal (with or without [subawards](#))

Separately submitted collaborative proposal [?](#)

What is a Collaborative Proposal?
A collaborative proposal is one in which investigators from two or more organizations wish to collaborate on a unified research project.
[? Methods to submit collaborative proposals](#)

Proposal Title

Lipschitz maps beyond dimension one 

35 of 180 characters

[Previous](#) [Prepare Proposal](#)

Start and Submit Your Proposal on Research.gov

My Desktop > Prepare and Submit Proposals > In Progress: Proposals (Full and Renewals) > Proposal - 141696

Proposal - 141696

✔ The Due Date has been updated successfully. ✕

Proposal Title: Lipschitz maps beyond dimension one [✎ Edit](#)

Funding Opportunity: PD 20-1281 [✎](#) - Analysis

Where to Apply: Direct For Mathematical & Physical Scien (MPS) - Division Of Mathematical Sciences (DMS), ANALYSIS PROGRAM
[✎ Manage Where to Apply](#)

Proposal Type: Research

Submission Type: Full Proposal

Collaborative Type: Not Collaborative

⚠ Due Date: 10/02/2023 [✎](#)

[📅 Date Type: Window](#)

Proposal Actions	Proposal Sections	Last Updated	Compliance Status [Key]
🔒 Share Proposal with SPO/AOR ℹ	Required		
✔ Check Error(s) and Warning(s)	Cover Sheet		Form not checked
👤 Manage Personnel and Subaward Organizations	Project Summary		Document unavailable for check
🖨 Print Proposal	Project Description		Document unavailable for check
🗑 Delete Proposal	References Cited		Document unavailable for check
	Budget(s)		Form not checked
	Budget Justification(s)		Document unavailable for check
	Facilities, Equipment and Other Resources		Document unavailable for check
	Senior Personnel Documents ℹ		Document unavailable for check

Proposal Details

Required Documents

Project Description & References Cited (75% Effort)

Budget & Budget Justification (10% Effort)

Project Summary (5% Effort)

Senior Personnel Docs (5% Effort)

- ▶ Biosketch
- ▶ Current and Pending Support
- ▶ Collaborators and Other Affiliations

Miscellaneous Docs (4% Effort)

- ▶ Data Management Plan
- ▶ Facilities, Equipment, and Other Resources

Cover Sheet (1% Effort)

See AMS Notices article for detailed descriptions of each document

3. PROJECT DESCRIPTION

What is the Project Description?

This is the heart of the proposal, where you should say:

- ▶ What you want to do
- ▶ How you will try to do it
- ▶ Why it is important
- ▶ Why is it feasible
- ▶ What are the broader impacts
(of the proposal or from other activities by the PI)

Formal Requirements

- ▶ 8.5 × 11 inch paper, 1 inch margins, standard fonts
- ▶ 15 pages maximum (5 pages maximum for MSPRF), not including references
- ▶ You **must** have a separate section labeled Broader Impacts
- ▶ There is not a requirement to have a separate section labeled Intellectual Merit. It is understood that the bulk of your project description will discuss Intellectual Merit.
- ▶ (Conditional) If you were supported by an NSF award with an end date in the last 5 years, you must describe the outcomes of this support (Intellectual Merit and Broader Impacts) in ≤ 5 pages
This section counts against your 15 page limit!

Tips, Tricks & Suggestions

1. Always write for your reviewers. You may imagine these will be mathematicians in the same general area, but not someone who works on the same flavor of problems.
2. Advocate for yourself. Put your work in context and explain why it is important (not in a boastful way).
3. Propose a variety of problems, some easier, some harder, none out of reach (“I will prove the general Keakeya conjecture”)
4. Problems can take a variety of forms (question, conjectures, “Prove ... or find a counterexample”). Number them so you and your reviewers can refer to them easily.
5. Write your project description in a highly structured way (see next slide)

Idea: Include Labeled Context & Strategy Paragraphs

Problem 3A. Carry out variations on the theorems of Bourgain and Wolff on the dimension of harmonic measure ω in \mathbb{R}^n with the goal of estimating Bourgain's constant.

Context. The (upper) Hausdorff dimension of a measure μ on \mathbb{X} is the least Hausdorff dimension of a set E with full measure in the sense that $\mu(\mathbb{X} \setminus E) = 0$. It is a more refined gauge than the support of a measure that describes the size of the set where the measure “lives”. For any $n \geq 2$, define Bourgain's constant $b_n \in [0, 1]$ to be the largest number such that the Hausdorff dimension of harmonic measure is at most $n - b_n$ for every domain $\Omega \subset \mathbb{R}^n$. In [Bou87], Bourgain showed that $b_n > 0$ for all $n \geq 3$. It is now known that $b_2 = 1$ by a deep theorem of Jones and Wolff [JW88] (also see Makarov [Mak85] and Wolff [Wol93]) and $b_n < 1$ for all $n \geq 3$ by an incredible example of Wolff [Wol95] (also see [LVV05]). However, the exact value of Bourgain's constant b_n (let alone an explicit lower or upper bound on b_3) has not been determined. Bishop [Bis92] has conjectured that $b_n = 1/(n - 1)$, because of $|\nabla u|^{(n-2)/(n-1)}$ is subharmonic when u is harmonic and $(n - 1) + (n - 2)/(n - 1) = n - 1/(n - 1)$, but there has been no meaningful progress to date. Recently, the PI and Genschaw [BG21] implemented Bourgain's theorem for caloric measure on arbitrary domains in \mathbb{R}^{n+1} , which have given the PI insight into the proof. The PI and Genschaw discovered

Strategy. The first task that must be accomplished is to track through all constants in the proofs of Frostman's lemma, Bourgain's estimate (Lemma 1) and Bourgain's alternative (Lemma 2) in [Bou87] in the case $n = 3$ in order to get an explicit lower bound on b_3 to use as a benchmark. The PI and Genschaw already wrote a sharper version of the “dimension lemma” at the end of Bourgain's paper in [BG21]. The proof of Lemma 2 uses a crude alternative (Bourgain's underlying idea is ingenious): either (i) some great-grandchild of an m -adic cube has small net content or (ii) every great-grandchild has large content. If (i), then you get a weak estimate on net content relative to the scale of the children. If (ii), it is difficult for Brownian motions to penetrate the center of the cube without hitting the boundary near the outside of the cube. The PI wants to try introducing

Tips, Tricks & Suggestions

6. Write in the third person and refer to yourself as “the PI”
7. To tell a better story, use Author-Year Citation Labels [Bad12], [BET17] instead of numerical labels [11], [15]
8. Despite appearances, there is a lot of freedom in the organization and tone of your Project Description. Write something that you would want to read if you were a reviewer
9. Mathematics is about the details, but try to keep it simple. If you have to display a complicated formula, you must also explain what it means. Remember your reviewers are **adjacent** to you
10. Include a picture (this is a personal bias)

A Parting Thought

Virtually every researcher who has been funded by the NSF has also had a grant proposal rejected

- ▶ There are more worthy proposals than the NSF budget can support
- ▶ Review panels and the other competing proposals change each year

Moral: If you don't get an award one year, then it may be worthy trying again the next year. (By induction...)

Thank's for your attention!

Questions? Comments?