Tips from the Arts & Letters NIH/NSF presentation, March 23, 2009

Most important things to remember when creating proposals:

The Idea

The Development and Communication of the Idea
First and foremost is the idea. Basically, it has to be an idea that is new or that challenges existing theories. Simply adding a new variable to a model or another case to an existing model is insufficient.

Broadness of the Idea
Narrow ideas will not be funded. However, ideas that engage multiple disciplines or subfields have a higher chance of being funded.

The "so-what" question
Never lose sight of why your research is important. Do not assume that it is immediately obvious to the reader; state it up front and make sure you continue to answer the question throughout the proposal.

Contributions to a community of Science (Social Sciences)
Public tangibles, such as publicly accessible data sets or new methodological techniques, that benefit a broad community of scholars have a higher chance of being funded. In other words, purely theoretical based research receives lower funding priority.

The Proposal

Address the Guidelines
Each grant asks a series of questions and expects a certain format for the proposal. Be sure to check your proposal point by point and be sure the questions are clearly answered; preferably in the order they are asked. It is not your job to decide which questions are important – the reviewers are given a set of guidelines that generally follow the stated questions.

Up Close and Personal
State your purpose up front, preferably on the first page. Don't make the reviewer search for the reason for your project. They won't.

They can't say "Yes" if you don't ask
Write many grants. That said however, be aware that the 20% rule holds true for even the most accomplished grant-writers. In the grand scheme of things, you'll be successful with 1 in 5 proposals you submit.

Your budget will likely be cut, so make sure that you have enough resources in the budget to do the project. Cheap is not why they fund projects. If you do not have a reasonable budget, then the reviewers question whether you really know what you are doing, and whether you can accomplish the aims of the project.

A proposal that doesn't have strong justification or that won't add to the literature in the area is not competitive—the most important area for NIH is innovation.

The Program Officer (two points of view)

The program officer is your "friend," use them! If you have questions, don't know whether your idea would fit well in a particular study section, etc., call and ask!

Write the proposal for the review panel and not the program officers. Too many proposals are encouraged by program officers and some of them have no hope of getting out of a study section. You cannot get funded unless you have a good priority score and you have to get the score first. You can look at study section rosters ahead of time.

The Reviewers/Review Panel

Make sure that you consider the study section that your proposal goes to—it can make a big difference—"fit" is important.

Write the proposal for the people in your discipline – review panels are multidisciplinary but on many panels, economists review economics proposal, sociologists review demography/sociology proposals, etc.

Review panels like the use of consultants. If you are stepping outside your area of expertise to some degree, the review panel will wonder whether you are qualified to do the research. One way to pacify the panel is to have an expert you can go to for assistance.

Things that cause reviewers to reject proposals:

- Having to search for the statement of purpose and/or hypotheses
- Poor writing — lack of proof-reading, redundancy, tedious jargon, lack of logical progression
- Poorly crafted research design
- Proposals that ignore new developments in the discipline
- Out dated ideas
- Resubmissions that do not address the previous panel's concerns

- Lack of calculations – the review panels are sticklers for calculations
- Lack of specificity – R01s are very detailed (12 pages) and review panels nit pick about the most minor details. You have to be specific and complete – "trust me" proposals usually do not fly