

Interactions with Authors of Center and Program Proposals: A Risky Business

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As an author's editor at an academic health center, I encounter my fair share of research on risk factors for different medical conditions. Some health risks are modifiable. For example, to reduce our risk of cardiovascular disease, we can improve our cholesterol concentrations and increase our physical activity. Other risk factors are unchangeable, such as genetics and increasing age.

This column is about mediating risk but of a different kind: the risk that an author-editor relationship will fall ill (become less effective) during the development of a proposal for a large center or program grant. How likely is that to occur? I can't cite an odds ratio, but I do have firsthand knowledge of the many challenges that editors and authors face while crafting high-page-count "mega-grant" proposals.

Time, of course, is a major issue. Grants are deadline driven, and more development time is needed as a proposal's complexity, length, and number of coauthors increase. The increased time needed for proposal development can leave fewer hours for editorial review and revision, even when the need for editorial help, such as that described in my previous column in *Science Editor* (2010;33(4):135-137), is particularly great.

Another issue is the need to work with multiple authors, each responsible for drafting a different subproject or core. How do editors best communicate with a grant-proposal-writing team? Which author's section gets higher priority if editing time is short? What if different authors have different editing expectations?

The workflow for center and program grant proposals can be particularly difficult to manage. Even when timelines are established in advance, busy authors sometimes miss their deadlines or overshoot their allotted page count. Consequently, the proposal's core content can be a moving target, coalescing only when the deadline is uncomfortably close.

In such a risk-laden scenario, what's an editor to do? We can't change a funding agency's deadline any more than a physician can keep us from becoming a year older. What we can do, I suggest, is adopt

some preventive measures and midstream intervention strategies to help us to maintain healthy relationships with authors.

Take a Thorough Medical (Project) History

For a mega-grant proposal, a little background knowledge can go a long way toward facilitating good author-editor relationships. The first thing I ask authors (after "What's the due date?") is, "Can you send me the program announcement, application kit, and review criteria?" Those background materials alert me to any required content, ensuring that I don't inadvertently "edit out" core material. I once edited a large training-program grant proposal that gave special funding priority to programs with an emphasis on geriatrics. Having learned that from the instructions, I didn't need to query the authors about why they included a seemingly tangential section on the institution's distinguished history of geriatrics care and research. Instead, I could immediately help the authors by suggesting ways to integrate and strengthen this essential section.

Another critical piece of background information is the investigators' overall vision for the proposal. Before I begin editing, I ask authors whether the proposal's aims are final. If not, it might be too early for editing. Once the aims are set, I assure the authors that my review will include evaluating how accurately the aims are reflected throughout the document. My interest in the proposal's core content sends a clear, positive message: I am more than the "grammar police"; I care about the investigators' work and share their goal of getting it funded.

In addition to content, I ask about structure. Are the authors of different cores or sections following the same basic template? If so, I am very careful to keep the intended structure intact as I edit. To disrupt a preset outline by moving text around could damage my credibility with authors and create more work for them—not exactly a boost to the relationship.

Establish a Treatment (Editing) Plan

It's always a good strategy to define the scope of work and timelines up front. It is mega important for a mega-grant proposal. Even

Between Author and Editor

continued

the nimblest editor will have a difficult time trying to “squeeze in” reasonable editing of a 100-plus-page document on short notice.

If there is breathing room before the due date, I will offer to attend one of the writing team’s planning meetings. In my experience, investigators have always welcomed that suggestion. Planning meetings are a great venue for editors to learn about a proposal’s core content and structure. Mostly, I just listen. But I also engage in a few minutes of “history taking”, ask authors about their time constraints (while sharing mine), discuss the timing and intensity of editing, and suggest strategies for organizing the workflow.

An editor’s involvement in writing-team meetings isn’t necessary; the same points can be covered in a conversation with the principal investigator. However, I’ve found that group discussions can help to clarify work expectations, and not just between editors and authors. Investigators tell me that one of the most frustrating problems they face when writing a mega-grant proposal is “diffusion of responsibility”—a lack of clarity about which author is responsible for what. As editors, we can be role models for authors and demonstrate how to define and follow through on a work plan—one that is characterized by clear roles, responsibilities, timelines, and communication of expectations.

When time is distressingly short, clear decisions have to be made quickly about what type of editing is feasible. Otherwise, authors can have unrealistic expectations about what an editor can do (for example, expect an editor to fix every error and improve the clarity of every sentence while cutting out five pages), and editors can make unrealistic suggestions for revision (request far too many changes, far too late).

I recently worked on a center grant proposal with a very tight production timeline. To deal with it, the investigators asked other internal reviewers to look at the proposal’s major (25-page) research project while I reviewed and edited text for the pilot research project, four interdependent cores, and proposal-overview sections. Early agreement to this division of labor set a very good tone for our working relationship.

On other projects, I’ve negotiated the depth of the editing. For example, I might focus only on egregious problems and easily

incorporated revisions. When my time is the limiting factor, I might offer to diagnose problems quickly, leaving it to the authors to identify revision solutions.

Coordinate Care (Communication) Among the Team

Miscommunication can cause trouble in any relationship. During the production of a mega-grant proposal, editors must know who’s on the writing team and to whom we should direct our comments.

One communication model is to identify a single author—typically the principal investigator—as the recipient of all comments and queries. That works well if you are editing close to the deadline and one author is integrating sections and putting the final proposal together. Alternatively, comments can be delivered to the individual writers of a proposal’s sections. That model works best during the earlier stages of a mega-grant proposal’s development, when coauthors are still heavily involved in their sections. But even in this scenario, it can be helpful to send a copy of the communication to the principal investigator and sometimes other members of the writing team.

Besides determining *whom* to communicate with, there’s the issue of *what* to communicate and *when*. In an ideal world, I would edit the full text of a mega-grant proposal twice—once early to provide macro-level feedback on the document’s organization, depth and clarity of information, and logic flow; and a second time near the deadline to polish the prose. In reality, I’m lucky to get one look at a center or program grant proposal. As a compromise, I’ve adopted a strategy of communicating my more substantive concerns and revision recommendations to authors quickly, usually through comments in the body of an e-mail. That allows the authors to strategize about major revisions while I continue editing.

Time constraints might dictate that authors send you drafts of their sections at different times with the expectation that you edit and return each section independently of the others as soon as possible. That sounds reasonable. However, as new sections arrive, there’s a good chance that you’ll identify at least one important problem that affects a section that you’ve already returned, such as repetition or

inconsistencies between sections. Or you may recommend a major change that needs to be carried over into the rest of the proposal, but the other sections are now out of your hands. In this scenario, authors appreciate a quick telephone call or e-mail with the prominent subject line “important update to my editing”, alerting them to additional changes that are needed in previously edited material.

Adjust Treatment as Needed (Adapt Your Approach to Editing)

As illustrated by the examples I’ve given, a willingness to adapt might be the most effective strategy for maintaining healthy author–editor relationships during a mega-grant proposal’s development. If timelines aren’t adhered to by authors, we can cheerfully negotiate a new schedule that makes the best of the time we have left. If we have only a half-day of editing to offer, we can confidently suggest the best use of that time (for example, focus on the sections most carefully scrutinized by reviewers, such as overview sections). To accommodate the viewpoints of different coauthors, we can suggest more than one alternative for fixing a problematic piece of text.

Being adaptable isn’t always easy. In the spirit of adapting to authors’ needs, I’ve worked my share of long nights and weekends to finish a center or program grant proposal. That isn’t always possible, but a willingness to go the extra mile has created great trust and respect in my working relationships. That makes it easier when, in the future, I have to say, “I’m sorry, I had time blocked for you, but that window has passed and I’m now committed to other projects.”

Even for experienced grant-proposal writers, the development of a center or program grant proposal is a complicated, time-consuming, and stressful process. Thus, my final advice to editors of these proposals is to take every opportunity to be a positive and calming influence. It takes just a minute to share enthusiasm for the work being proposed and to compliment authors on their ideas and their writing. Positivity is contagious, so spread it liberally, particularly when stress is taking its toll on authors. Not every proposal will be funded, but every author–editor relationship can survive, and even thrive, with some risk-management behaviors.