What You Need to Know About Submitting NSF Proposals in 2014

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<th>Starting Now</th>
<th>Faculty preparing NSF proposals must begin using updated guidance in the new NSF Grant Proposal Guide (GPG) (v14-1). But not to worry: not much has changed.</th>
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<td>What is the GPG?</td>
<td>The Grant Proposal Guide is a 179-page umbrella document intended to guide proposal development. Individual solicitations provide more specific details.</td>
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<tr>
<td>The Bottom Line: Avoid Getting Your Proposal Returned</td>
<td>Faculty research support staff members think there’s not much that’s new in the GPG. Rather, the message in this update seems to be,</td>
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Remember what we said in the last update? Well now we mean it.

In other words, the NSF primarily wants to remind you of rules from the guide that went into effect a year ago (v13-1). We think the rationale for the 2014 update is to tell you that the NSF will be stricter about compliance. So you should not be surprised if the NSF finds fault with details that in the past would not have been a problem, and even return some proposals without review. Illustrative of this is a GPG update specifically indicating that when a proposal is not accepted or returned without review that the NSF will include references to relevant sections of the Grant Proposal Guide and clarify the language.

| What to Do | Review the four pages of significant changes beginning on the next page, and then go to the Grant Proposal Guide (GPG) (v14-1) online for detailed information about items that likely apply to you. Faculty research support staff members are also here to help you with questions or concerns. |
FROM THE SOURCE
Here are the Grant Proposal Guide summary pages directly from the NSF.

Significant Changes and Clarifications to the Grant Proposal Guide (GPG),
Effective February 2014

Significant Changes to the GPG

- Chapter I.A. NSF Proposal Preparation and Submission, has been revised to describe, at the beginning of the chapter, proposal preparation and submission via FastLane and Grants.gov.

- Chapter I.G.3. Requirements Relating to Data Universal Numbering System (DUNS) Numbers and Registration in the System for Award Management (SAM), has been updated to include language that SAM will become the NSF system of record for organizational financial information as of October 1, 2014. The section also emphasizes that organizations are responsible for updating SAM registration information as it changes.

- Chapter II.B. Format of the Proposal, has been revised to add instructions that, upon entering the proposal preparation module in FastLane, the PI will be prompted to select whether or not the proposal is a collaborative proposal and the type of proposal being developed.

- Chapter II.C.1 e. Proposal Certifications, includes an addition to the Certification Regarding Conflict of Interest. The language states that if research proceeds without the imposition of conditions or restrictions when a conflict of interest exists, this must be disclosed to NSF via use of the Notifications and Requests Module in FastLane.

- Chapter II.C.2. Sections of the Proposal, has been augmented to include a list of required sections for a full proposal submitted via FastLane. The section also clarifies that, if the submission instructions do not require a section to be provided, the proposer should insert text or upload a document in that section of the proposal that states, “Not Applicable.”

- Chapter II.C.2 b. Project Summary, clarifies that a Project Summary containing special characters that is submitted as a PDF file in the Supplementary Documentation section must be formatted with separate headings for the overview, statement on intellectual merit, and statement on broader impacts.

If you are uncertain about which type to select, see your Office of Sponsored Programs (OSP) representative.

Submit most Project Summary documents directly into FastLane fields. Submit as an Adobe Acrobat (.pdf) file only when you must include specialized formatting such as math equations.
This reminds you to include **Intellectual Merit** and **Broader Impact** headings, as shown in the example on page 6.

You must now add unfunded collaborators to the **Facilities, Equipment and Other Resources** document.
Chapter II.D.1, Grants for Rapid Response Research (RAPID), has been updated to indicate that the “RAPID” proposal type must be selected in the proposal preparation module in FastLane.

Chapter II.D.2, Early-concept Grants for Exploratory Research (EAGER), has been updated to indicate that the “EAGER” proposal type must be selected in the proposal preparation module in FastLane.

Chapter II.D.4.b, Submission of a collaborative proposal from multiple organizations, has been supplemented to clarify required sections of the proposal for lead organizations versus non-lead organizations.

Chapter II.D.5, Proposals for Equipment, has been revised to explain what information should be included in different sections of the proposal.

Chapter II.D.8, Proposals for Conferences, Symposia and Workshops, has been augmented to explain that such proposals should include a description of plans to identify resources for child care and other types of family care at the conference site to allow individuals with family care responsibilities to attend.

Chapter II.D.13, Projects Requiring High-Performance Computing Resources, Large Amount of Data Storage, or Advanced Visualization Resources, has been updated to describe NSF-supported resources at University of Illinois, Urbana-Champaign, and National Center for Atmospheric Research, which are in addition to XSEDE.

Clarifications and Other Changes to the GPG

Chapter II.C.2.d(iii), Results from Prior NSF Support, has been amended to clarify that in cases where the PI or co-PI has received more than one award (excluding amendments) they need only report on the one award most closely related to the proposal.

Chapter II.C.2.f(i), Biographical Sketch(es), has been modified to add that, if a biographical sketch(es) is not required, the proposer should insert text or upload a document in this section of the proposal that states, “Not Applicable.” In FastLane, if biographical sketches for all senior personnel are uploaded in a single PDF file associated with the PI, the proposer should insert text or upload a document that states, “Not Applicable” for any co-PI or Senior Person.

Chapter II.C.2.g, Budget, has been modified to include “Budget Justification” in the section heading. The language has been amended to clarify that, if a program solicitation does not require a budget, and there is no budgetary information to justify, the proposer should insert text or upload a document in the budget justification section that states, “Not Applicable.”
FOUR COMMON NSF PROPOSAL COMPLIANCE ERRORS

1. **Format and Length Wrong in the Project Summary**
   The NSF updated Project Summary requirements a year ago, but many aren’t using the three required headings (Overview, Intellectual Merit, Broader Impact), nor are they aware that they must usually enter the Project Summary directly into FastLane (the NSF’s online system). This change has introduced real format restrictions as you can no longer use bold, italics, bullets, or dashes. Also, the NSF now uses character count to establish document length at no more than 4,600 characters. Karen Marker has a template you can use to prepare the initial draft and count characters. Contact her if you’d like the tool.

2. **Too Much Content Sneaking In**
   The NSF does not take kindly to proposal content that exceeds page limits, even if inadvertent. Content must be “self-contained.” This means proposals must not include hyperlinks except in the References Cited document (links may suggest that reviewers click for details as part of the review.) However, References Cited is only for references: do not include any descriptive content. The NSF has returned at least one Boise State proposal for this error.

3. **Not Enough about the Broader Impact in the Project Description**
   The NSF knows you will describe the merits of your science in your proposal. What they frequently do not see are thoughtful broader impact details. Therefore, as per last year’s GPG update, you are no longer required to include an “Intellectual Merit” section in the Project Description—it’s optional. However, you are still required to include a “Broader Impacts” section with a distinct call out label. When reviewers evaluate your proposal, intellectual merit likely still maintains the utmost importance. However, the most competitive proposals apply rigor to addressing broader impacts. Therefore, consider and address broader impacts throughout proposal development so the content does not come across as an afterthought.
Project Description “Results from Prior NSF Support” Section Needs Two Sub-labels

Every Project Description document must include a “Results from Prior NSF Support” section, even if only to identify no prior support. As shown in the example below, each listing must include both Intellectual Merit and Broader Impact sub-labels. In addition, the new GPG reminds preparers that when the PI or co-PI has received more than one award (excluding amendments) that he or she “need only report on the one award most closely related to the proposal” (our bolding). At the same time, however, you can allocate up to five pages to this section. It does not appear that the NSF will penalize you for including more than one award per PI. Nevertheless, if your team has been fortunate enough to have obtained several NSF awards, think carefully about how much to include in this section since the Project Description limit typically remains at 15 pages. Here is an example showing the two required sub-labels.

RESULTS FROM PRIOR NSF SUPPORT
Here is a list of all prior NSF PI and Co-PI research support within the last five years.

Microstructure Deformation. DMR-1500002. PI A. Holmes, co-PIs L. Aditi, B. Landrew. 1/15/12–1/31/14.

Intellectual Merit: We studied the interface structure and motion at macroscopic length scale and developed a defect-based model. Our partner at Oregon State developed a dynamics code to simulate and validate experimental results. Broader Impact: In this collaboration, both partners and graduate and undergraduate student researchers visited counterparts multiple times. Student researchers included underrepresented groups in engineering (women, Pacific Islanders). Monthly visits with two industry partners helped validate potential use. Results reported at national conference and in journal article [27].

MRI: LC-MS Acquisition. CHE-0933385. PI S. Vlani, co-PI P. Roberts, 8/09….Etc.