

My experience at the other major funding agency  
Daniel Golombek  
Space Telescope Science Institute

Standard disclaimer: the success of the grants programs is entirely due to the effort and dedication of NASA's Office of Space Science, which despite hiring types like me seems to be thriving. The comments and suggestions are my own and not the agency's. I should also add that indirectly NASA keeps paying my salary as I work at STScI.

Thanks to the committee for the opportunity talk to you. I spent 2.5 years at NASA HQ as a discipline scientist in charge of the ADP, LTSA and ATP among other things.

The theme of this presentation will be similar to what you just heard. This should not surprise you as we are all part of the same team – we all *work hard* to expand the horizon of knowledge.

What would I like you to leave with from this session? That you need to participate! be part of the process – volunteer to be a member of a review panel, accept an assignment in a TAC. It is a truly rewarding experience, really. And you can learn – not only new insights on astrophysics but also that intangible we are trying to describe: a “good” proposal. This message goes especially to postdocs – the actual “peers” in programs like the LTSA. From my humble position of trying to do social engineering, also known as assembling, convening and running peer review panels, this is what I did. I was looking for breadth and depth in astrophysics but also diversity and peerness (if such a word exists) in the panelists. Not only because they learned how the system works, but also because they knew how to present their case. Time and again I saw that better proposals were submitted after people were part of the solution and not the precipitate. Don't be afraid – panels are excited by new ideas... stars, which you cannot see, do go supernova!

Anyway, my best advice to you to is to read the solicitation and if you did, do it again. Find out what you need to submit, how and by when. Talk with your local grants office and coordinate with them – give them time.

And of course call the contact listed, ask and ask again. Our discipline is fuzzy and not binary – what you want to do might be in-between programs. Find out which one will give you a better chance of success. And the officials are there to help you – despite what you might have heard. They are there to enable science and to run the programs. They are there to help – yes, they are!

One thing to consider is that NASA is a mission-driven agency. This is probably the biggest difference with other funding agencies. The proposals have to be compatible with this. So think about how what you propose benefits the agency.

Yes, I know what about theory? Beats me, I am an observational astronomer ☺  
Well, seriously, you will need to convince the panel and the agency that your theoretical work is important (fundamental?) to understand the data obtained by this or that space observatory or that the research will enable asking the necessary questions needed to develop a mission.

Other recommendations... speak truth to power! don't inflate your budget, don't make it cheap just because you think that in this way you'll be awarded the grant. Just include what it costs to do the science. And include it all, salaries, equipment travel, whatever.

And last but not least, think about your audience. Write your story in a convincing way, without jargon and without a strong desire to impress the reader with your post-modernist style. The reviewer will judge the science and whether you make the case that you can solve the problem. And something that quacks like a duck, walks like a duck, can't be a cat – not even Schrödinger's. spell check and proof read your proposal, ask a colleague to read it. You'll be surprised. Finally, don't write a novel, be short and to the point. As [the cartoon character] Calvin used to say: if you cannot explain something in 10 seconds it is not worth knowing – so don't write 20 pages if the maximum is 15.