

"Grant writing: it's a matter of mindset"

I just sent off a R01 grant application yesterday to the National Institutes of Health for mucho dollars and as my reward, I am just about to pick up a sewing project I started a while back, making some colorful quilted placemats. The grant is DONE. Yay. Today I regroup. I confess to starting a couple of different craft projects while working on the grant application. I like being creative—in both work and play.

But I also want to confess that I kind of like, or at least don't hate, putting together a grant application. I know what you are thinking. "No way." "She has got to be kidding." Nope folks—sorry to disappoint—I am actually ok writing grants.

So why am I Ok? For one thing, I have had a few successes along the way which helps lower the general angst of it all. Also important, I have a partner who will cook and generally take care of me until the grant is submitted. And I drink beer—not in the morning but one for dinner (ok...sometimes maybe two).

But let's get back to this grant thing and why I do not absolutely hate the process. Mainly it is about the fact that during grant prep phase, I get to put on my blinders and ignore all those pesky little things that we professor-types have to attend to, and do what I love most—Read. Learn. Think. The "high" for me comes when I begin to see apparently disparate fragments of information start to assemble in what becomes a coherent whole. It is like making a quilt. When this happens, I reach a state of calm. It is just so cool, knowing that I have achieved a deeper understanding of the problem. And it was exciting getting there.

So for me, successful grant preparation and writing is about FULL IMMERSION. I openly and freely go on that adventure, following my nose as one paper leads me to another and another. The questions come and I

find the answers. At some point though, I realize that I have ventured far enough and it is time to write. It is time to tell my story. At that point, I imagine my reader—I take their hand to guide them through what may seem like an apparently complicated maze that I am going to do my best to make seem simple. Because I am the guide, I take steps to make sure they do not get lost or discouraged, like using plenty of headers. And for every sentence, or paragraph I write, I ask myself “what is its purpose? “Must I keep it (so the reader won’t get lost) or can it be jettisoned?” (It is no time for a love affair with my most eloquently constructed sentences if its purpose is not clear to me.) For every graphic I include, I try to make sure there is a “so what” message; i.e., I am literally telling the reader why this is important and why they should care.

So I had 12 pages to convince my audience of the following:

- 1) The problem is important, compelling and worthy of attention (Significance).
- 2) I am an expert and my unique perspective is worth listening to (Innovation and Biosketch).
- 3) I know how to design experiments to ensure that they yield rigorous and reproducible data that will have high impact (Approach).

And like any (news)story, the grant application needs a succinct introduction with obvious selling points and headlines that tell my readers the entire story in one spelling-binding page (Specific Aims).

Okay, so this is not to say that grant writing is not a lot of work and does not feel like a marathon. It *is* a marathon. But remember, you have been in training for this for quite some time. Now enjoy the ride. Forget about the likelihood that it will be funded (we all know the dismal stats) and just think about the science. This is your opportunity to tell your story (and what a great story it is) and if told well, it will shine and people will pay attention.

These days, I tell my students "play to win." Every time I write a grant, I play to win.

And along the way, I do try to take care of myself. This year I enjoyed going to the East Lansing Arts Festival. I also kept up with other routines like after-dinner story hour, spending time with family and friends, and watching one hour of Netflix a night. And there was always my knitting and sewing. My main occupation for the last month has been reading, writing and thinking, with all of the stuff I just mentioned as the fillers, but important fillers that helped to keep me calm, rested and focused.

And now I celebrate. Win or lose, it is done and that is an **ACCOMPLISHMENT** worthy of celebration.

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