A Guide for Investigator to Contacting the Program Officer (PO)

What a PO does

Please note that this advice is designed for contacting program officers at federal agencies. Please contact Corporate & Foundation Relations when applying to foundation or other private opportunities.

A program officer is your point of contact for understanding the organization’s response to your submission. POs manage a “portfolio” of grants, and they are rewarded for having a set of very solid grants – they want your grant submission to be good! The following advice is based on NIH, but much is applicable to other funders.

When you should contact a PO

At the start of the research proposal:

• To decide if your research idea is in line with the priorities of the program or agency, or if another division – or a tweak to your current plan – would fit better.
• To gauge the level of enthusiasm this particular agency has for your proposed area of research – particularly if you have multiple agencies (or NIH I/Cs) that you could submit to.
• When a major question of suitability or fit arises (e.g., if a division doesn’t deal with clinical studies; if a certain form of analysis is welcome).
• To discover if a particular foundation is interested in your proposal.

During the writing of your proposal when you have questions about:

• Specific agency policies such as Data Sharing, human subjects, etc.
• Grant award specifics, such as possible award minimum/maximums, whether or not a particular budget item can be funded, etc.
• Which study section to request when submitting your cover letter.

When you receive your score or reviews:

• The PO can help you interpret critiques, provide guidance on when to resubmit, what to focus on and, if he/she was present at the study section, provide additional input into reviewers’ responses.

What to prepare before contacting a PO

• Check the agency or program’s website and all available documents for answers to your questions, as well as the RFA.
  o Your question may not be answered there, but you can frame your question in terms of what information is already available.
• Prepare one or at most a few clear, succinct, relevant questions that are in the PO’s purview.
• Prepare a 1-page research summary (specific aims page works well) and include it in the body of your email, along with a specific question about your project or a request to discuss whether it is a good fit for the program. (The GWSW workbook suggests “maximize the programmatic relevance.”)
  o Assume a technically literate reader but not necessarily well-versed in your specific area.
  o Keep it focused, draw clear, explicit connections to significance and innovation, and make clear the expected outcomes and deliverables.

How to contact a PO

• Email first! This gives the PO a chance to get back to you on his/her own time.
• Introduce yourself and your project, with specific, focused information and questions that show that you’ve done your due diligence with publically available materials.
• Make sure that your inquiry makes it clear why you are asking, what information you hope to get from the PO, and what your deadline is.
• Give them ample time pre-deadline to respond, and expect delays in response right after an RFA comes out or just before a deadline.
• Make sure that you’ve examined their online documents and that you know the PO’s name.

For more information on POs and policies, see:

http://nexus.od.nih.gov/all/2011/06/29/should-i-contact-a-program-officer-before-i-apply/
http://www.molbiolcell.org/content/22/15/2661.full

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