



J-PAL

ABDUL LATIF JAMEEL POVERTY ACTION LAB

How to write a competitive proposal



What will this video cover?

- Practical advice for writing competitive grant proposals for randomized evaluations in low- and middle-income countries
- Tailored guidance for J-PAL proposals, but broadly applicable to any impact evaluation proposal
- Budgeting will be covered in another video. Written guidance on how to budget is available in our research resources [here](#)

What will this video cover?

J-PAL provides three main types of grants:

Proposal Development

Up to \$10,000

Exploratory work related to preliminary research ideas

Pilot

Up to \$75,000

Clear research question, but design and implementation requires further testing

Full randomized evaluation

Up to \$400,000

Open to Regional Scholars who have successfully completed a J-PAL pilot

This video will focus on proposals for full RCTs. Many elements are similar across grant types but we will highlight areas where there is a difference

Don't give up!

- Writing these types of proposals is a skill that takes work and practice no matter where you are based or your area of focus.
- Start drafting grant proposals early to allow time for feedback from colleagues, mentors, or implementing partners.
- Don't give up if your first grant application is unsuccessful!

All grant proposals should answer...

What...

1. What is your research question?
2. What is new (what is your contribution to the literature)?
3. What are your expected findings?

Why...

1. Why is the question interesting?
2. Why is the answer consequential?
3. Why isn't the answer obvious?

How...

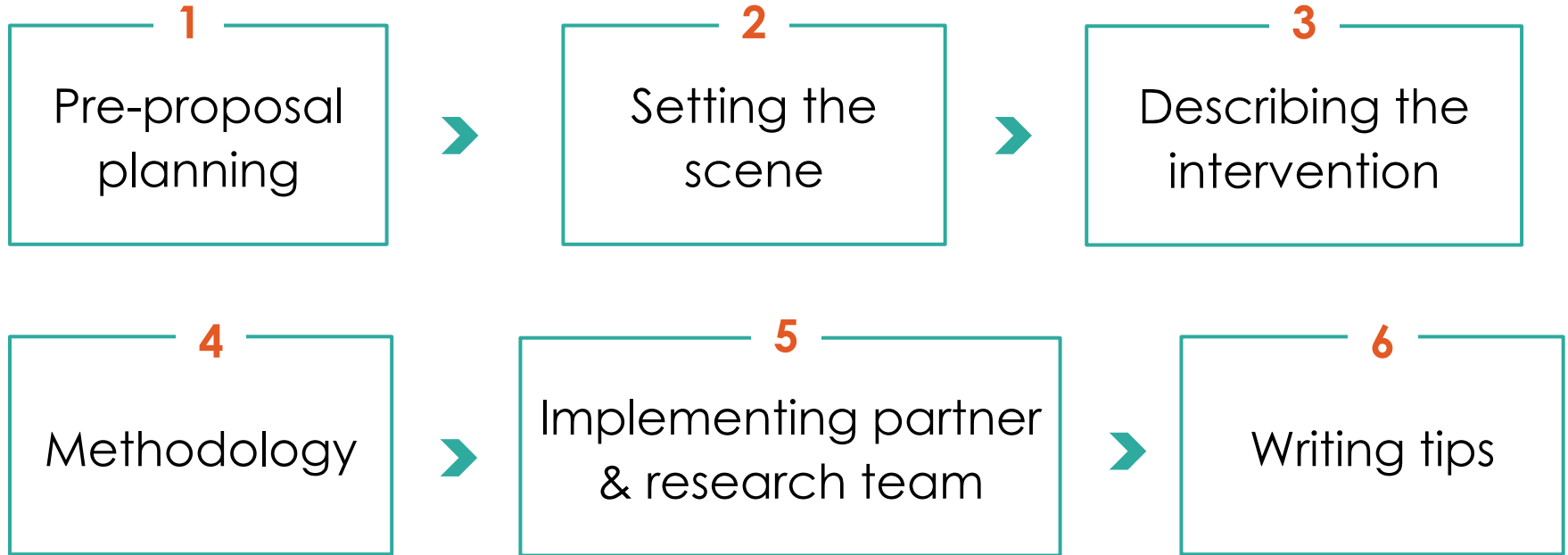
1. How do you proceed regarding the data?
2. How do you proceed regarding the empirical strategy?
3. *How would this lead to a randomized evaluation (for proposal development grants and pilots)?*

Example proposals

- We will use examples from two J-PAL-funded projects to illustrate some points
- A Jobs and Opportunities Initiative pilot, “[Planning for Productive Migration in Niger](#)”, by Jeremy Weinstein, Darin Christensen, Allison Grossman, and Guy Grossman
- A Governance Initiative full RCT, “[Women’s Empowerment and Local Governance in Indonesia](#)”, by Eitan Paul



Steps to writing a competitive proposal



Pre-Proposal Planning

- Identify a clear path to an RCT
- Check grant requirements
- Check necessary approvals
- Get letters of support



Identify a clear path to an RCT

- For J-PAL and other organizations that exclusively fund RCTs, **there needs to be clear pathway to a randomized controlled trial** for the proposed study
- In most cases, the study should evaluate a program that is either brand new or already exists but is being adapted or expanded in some way
- Why?
 - Because this ensures a large enough population to create a control group
 - Often, implementing partners are less willing to conduct an RCT for existing programs if they are already confident it is effective / if participants already anticipate that they can participate

Check the grant requirements

Eligibility

- Qualifications
- Institutional affiliation
- Location

Priority match

- Is your topic within their thematic focus?
- Is your project in a priority region/country?
- Is your research question something they are interested in?

Deadlines

- Some grants have multiple stages each with a deadline (e.g. letter of interest and full proposal)

Check on necessary approvals

- Before committing to writing a proposal, be sure to:
 - Contact your university's office for grants to find out the approval process and internal deadlines
 - Leave enough time for your institution as well as project partners to review the budget and planned activities
- Be conservative during this step - approvals can take longer than you think!
 - E.g. university approval may take ± 2 weeks and you may need approval from multiple universities

Get letters of support

- Letters of support from close partners are required as part of the proposal
 - This does not include consultants or contractors hired for a narrow role
 - They are also not required for proposal development grants
- These include:
 - Letter of support / agreement / MoU with implementing partner, data collection company and other organisations playing an important role in the program delivery or evaluation activities
- They demonstrate the feasibility of the project which is a key criterion for reviewers!

Setting the scene

- Motivation for your study
- Research question
- Contribution to the literature



Motivation for your study

- Begin your proposal with a clear problem statement that motivates the research

For example:

Women's interests remain underrepresented in local policymaking despite the implementation of community-based and participatory planning and budgeting programs in much of the developing world (Parthasarathy, Rao, and Palaniswamy 2019). Preliminary research in Indonesia suggests male dominance in neighborhood institutions may make it difficult for women's voices to be heard even if female attendance quotas in village planning and budgeting meetings are met.

~Eitan Paul

- It sets the scene by describing challenges in the context the study is taking place
- Policy relevance and pathways to scale are particularly important!

Motivation - Common mistakes to avoid

- **Including a long literature review**

→ related literature should be referred to in the section on your study's contribution to the literature and should be as concise as possible

- **Including statements that are not backed up with data**

→ back up your statements with evidence such as summary statistics from the country in question

Research question

- State your question directly and show how it fits into the literature and field
- Make sure it is:
 - Clearly a fit for the research agenda of the funder & policy-relevant
 - Narrow and specific enough to answer with your proposed project

- For example:

Can trainings on women's empowerment and gender inclusion for 1) neighborhood-level women's groups and 2) neighborhood association leaders increase women's participation and representation in Indonesian neighborhoods?

~Paul

Contribution to the literature

- Include a literature review to:
 - Contextualize your research question
 - Demonstrate how your study fills a gap
- Avoid disparaging prior research; rather emphasize how your research builds on existing work
- Reliable sources include peer reviewed journal articles, working papers, and reputable think tanks
- Only cite studies that are directly relevant to your project
- Keep the literature review concise and to the point

Describe the intervention

- Theory of Change
- Intervention details
- Preliminary Research Activities



Theory of Change

- The description of the intervention should include discussion of the theory of change (ToC).
- This is an important component to include because it lays out the causal chain of the intervention:
 - How will program X affect outcome Y?
- Make sure to identify the assumptions behind your ToC and the risks to the causal chain being realised
- Include the ToC whether or not you were part of the team that constructed it

Theory of Change

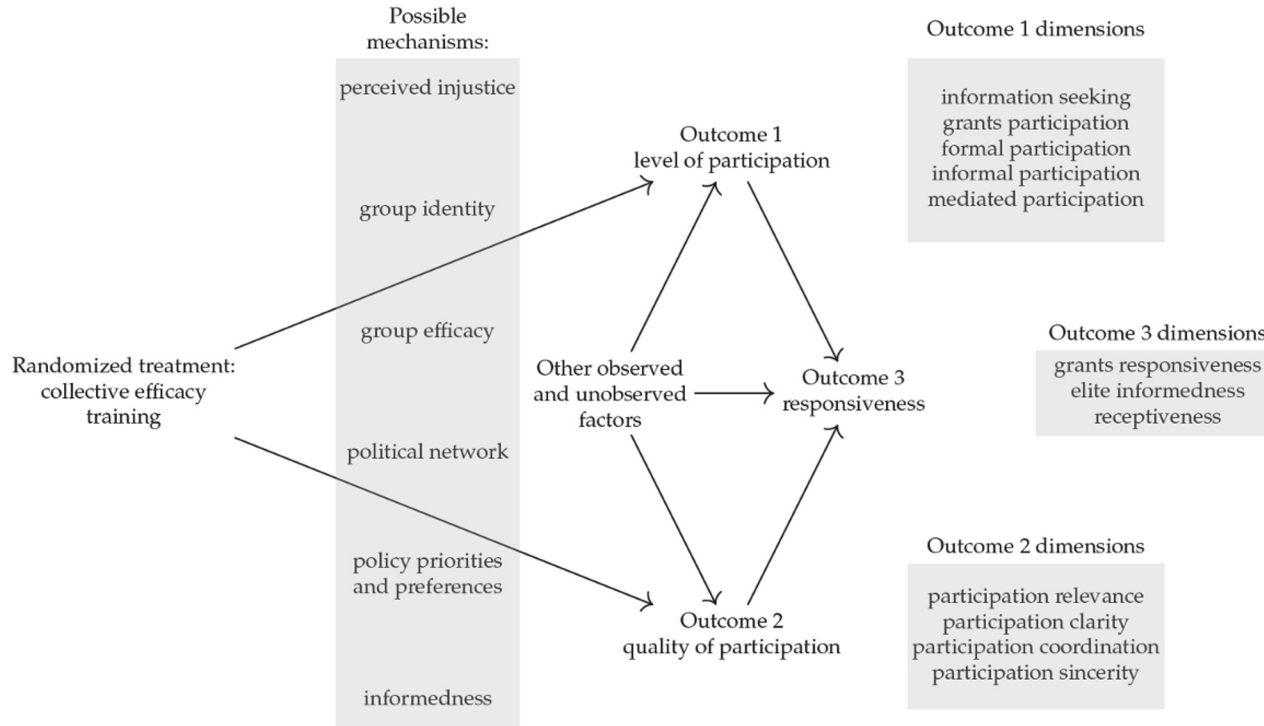
- For example:

Usually, only men participate in most neighborhood association meetings. Women meet separately in rotating credit associations (or women's groups) where they may discuss social issues but seldom discuss issues related to politics or governance. In cases where women do attend the neighborhood association meetings, they generally only prepare food for the meeting and do not voice their opinions.

The training will help make common grievances salient, increase common identity, identify common needs and goals, highlight the benefits of coordinated action, and provide information about the village apparatus and how women can participate in local governance through neighborhood, hamlet and village-level meetings and how they can raise issues with relevant community leaders to address concerns in the community.

We expect that by activating women's sense of self- and collective efficacy and increasing their knowledge about local governance, women will feel more empowered to participate in community decision-making and engage in collective action to advocate for their preferences.

Theory of Change



→ Detailed TOC not expected for proposal development grants, which can be used to develop TOC

Intervention details

- It is important to include the following two points in this section:
 - A clear description of the intervention → What does the program involve/deliver?
 - A clear description of the logistics involved in delivering the intervention as part of an RCT
- This is to convince the review board that:
 - Your partner is credible and the program is well thought-out
 - Your study design is feasible and makes sense

Intervention details are required for both pilots & full RCTs but not proposal development grants

Intervention details

- For example:

In order to maximize treatment compliance and minimize risk, we have secured permission from the district government.

Before delivering the placebo and treatment interventions at the neighborhood level, PATTIRO [Indonesian NGO implementing partner] will deliver an orientation to the village governments, including the village heads. PATTIRO will coordinate with the village governments to schedule training meetings and send invitations.

Village heads generally comply with programs endorsed by the district government and neighborhood association chairs generally follow guidance from their village head.

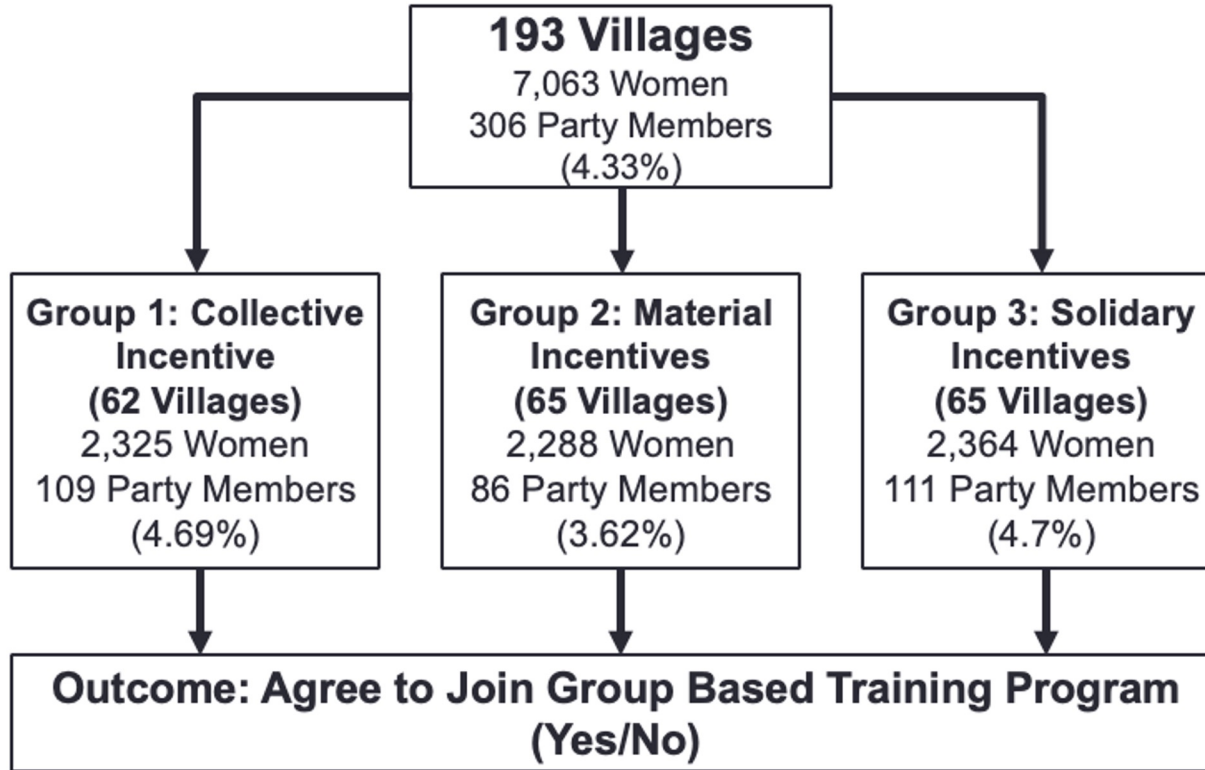
Women's groups already meet at least monthly and participation rates are high.

To incentivize participation for the neighborhood leader training, the training will be framed around "leading community development" instead of focusing exclusively on gender empowerment. In addition to discussing gender inclusion, the training will discuss the needs of the poor, children, and vulnerable villagers and strategies for addressing the concerns of these groups.

Intervention details

- If your study will have multiple treatment arms, clearly describe each treatment arm.
- Describe treatment arms both programmatically and in terms of the specific research questions they will answer.
- Intervention details allow reviewers to assess the relevance of the study and whether the outcomes are appropriate measures of the intervention's impact.

Intervention details



Preliminary research activities

Proposal development & pilot grants

- For earlier stage grants, the proposal should describe the preliminary research activities and how they will inform the design of a full RCT that will come afterwards.
- A pilot can be used to:
 - Test the take up rate of the intervention or collect data to understand the factors affecting take up to inform sample size calculations
 - Practice the logistics of the intervention with the partner
- A proposal development grant can be used to:
 - Collect initial qualitative or quantitative data to test your idea
 - Build relationships with implementing partners
 - Travel to intervention sites

Preliminary research activities

Proposal development & pilot grants

- For example:

We see a pilot as an important first-step in generating evidence on whether supporting productive cross-border migration in the ECOWAS region is an effective livelihoods strategy.

The proposed pilot complements two other ongoing and fully funded research activities:

(1) a survey of over 1,200 household heads and men ages 18-40 in Niger about their migration histories and intentions (completed by the end of April 2021)

(2) labor market and service assessments in cities likely to be destinations for Nigerien migrants (ongoing activity, expected to be completed in July 2021).

These three activities will inform program design, targeting, and outcome measurement for a full-scale RCT that will begin in November 2022.

Preliminary research activities

Proposal development & pilot grants

- The Weinstein et al. proposal describes its pilot activities as:
 - Testing all elements of the intervention
 - Estimating the rate of program take-up
 - Refining protocols to minimise attrition
 - Measure short-term outcomes of the program
 - Test measures to ensure program and research fidelity
- It also clearly lays out the timeline of these activities and mentions other activities which are already underway

Methodology

- Experimental Design
- Outcomes, Hypotheses, and Mechanisms
- Power Calculations



Experimental design

- **Explaining your research design is the most important part of your proposal.**
 - While brevity overall is encouraged, do not skimp on details in this section!
- In this section, you should include:
 - The number of treatment arms
 - What each treatment arm will receive
 - The unit of randomization (clustering)
 - Individual? Household? School? Village?
 - The number of units in each treatment arm (i.e. sample size)

→ For **pilot grants**, some of these details may still be uncertain

→ For **proposal development grants**, you may not know any of these details!

Experimental design

- For example:
Neighborhood associations are distinct units within Indonesian villages with their own leaders, groups, and activities. However, to avoid inter-neighborhood spillovers, we will conduct random assignment at a higher level, where five neighborhood associations that are close to each other are grouped together. Each of these will be randomly assigned to one of three treatment arms:

Placebo	T1: Women's group	T2: Women's group + Neighborhood Association
<ul style="list-style-type: none">• Financial literacy training for women's group• Budget training for neighborhood association chair• 150 neighborhoods (50 neighborhood clusters)	<ul style="list-style-type: none">• Collective empowerment and political skills training for women's group• Placebo budget training for neighborhood association chair• 75 neighborhoods (25 neighborhood clusters)	<ul style="list-style-type: none">• Collective empowerment and political skills training for women's group• Gender inclusion training for chairs of neighborhood association and women's group• 75 neighborhoods (25 neighborhood clusters)

Experimental design

- Randomization procedure:
 - Split between treatment and control groups
 - Cross-cutting treatments
 - How the randomization will be carried out:
 - Lottery? Phase-in? Encouragement? In the bubble/at the margin?
 - Will you stratify to achieve adequate representation of key groups?
 - Unit of analysis
 - Individual? Household? School? Village?
 - Note: The unit of analysis does not have to be the same as the unit of randomization!

Resource tip!

J-PAL's Research Resource on
*Randomization and Real World
Challenges to Randomization
and their Solutions*

Hypotheses

- Next, **state your key hypotheses** and outcome measures
- J-PAL's grant proposals are relatively short → hypotheses and outcomes can be less specific than in a pre-analysis plan.
- Important to specify:
 - what outcomes you expect the treatment to affect
 - where the data to measure the outcomes will come from

Outcomes

- **Describe the data you will use to measure the outcomes** listed in each hypothesis
- Administrative data
 - How will you access the data? Do you already have access?
 - What specific measures will you use? Is the data reliable?
- Survey data
 - How and when will the survey be conducted?
 - Who will conduct it?
- Timeline
 - Specify the timeline for data collection and justify why it makes sense given your intervention

Be conservative when estimating timelines - it often takes longer than you think!

Full RCT example

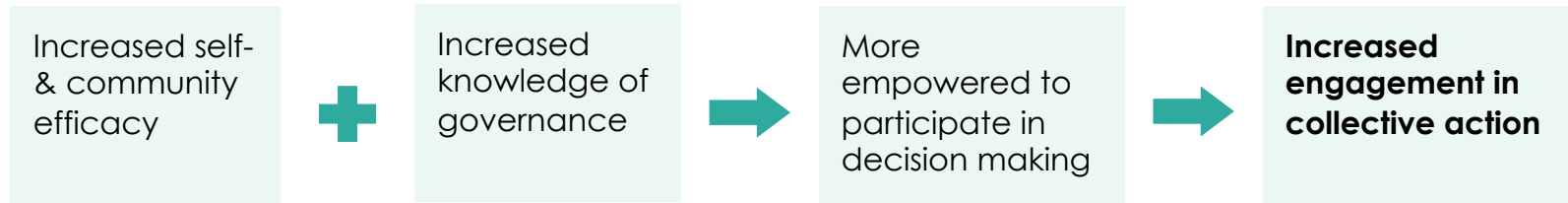
Informal Participation (Level)	MU03. In the last six months, have you ever reported any problem to neighborhood, hamlet, or village officials?	<i>Women's survey</i>
Informal Participation (Quality)	MU11. How easy was it for you to understand the issues raised to you by women in your neighborhood?	<i>Neighborhood chair survey</i>
Formal Participation (Attendance)	PG05. In the past six months, have you ever attended any community consultations at the neighborhood, hamlet, or village level?	<i>Women's survey</i>
Formal Participation (Active)	PG09. At the community consultations you attended, did you give your opinion or submit a proposal?	<i>Women's survey</i>
Formal Participation (Quality)	PG06. Do you think that the women at the meeting clearly communicated their issues/proposals/opinions?	<i>Female neighborhood leader survey and neighborhood chair survey</i>
Proposal Submission	SP2. Would you like us to share your response with your neighborhood association chair?	<i>Women's survey</i>

Pilot example

- **Information take-up:** post-training quizzes to check comprehension and focus groups to fine tune training delivery mode, surveys of participants to estimate the share of participants who make preparatory steps for migration
- **Subsidy utilization and migration choices:** % of participants who request transit subsidy for the 2022 migration season; % of participants who migrate; destinations of migrants.
➔ These are key parameters for future RCT sample size calculation.
- **Household buy-in:** % of households that report collaborative decision-making around migration; % of households that were aware of the timing of the planned migration; % of households that feel optimistic about the potential returns to migration.
- **Attrition:** pilot tracking protocols to estimate share of participants with whom we can stay in touch during program, migration & at endline.
➔ Also feeds into sample size calculations of the RCT at scale.

Mechanisms

- Drawing on your TOC, **explain how you will test mechanisms** that can provide evidence of how or why the treatment causes (or fails to cause) its desired effects.
- For example, consider this simplified TOC from the Paul proposal:



- Mechanism: Attitude + knowledge = change in behavior
- To test this, measure knowledge, attitude and behavior
 - If all 3 change → hypothesized mechanism is supported
 - If attitude & behavior change but not knowledge → suggests mechanism not fully correct (change in knowledge not necessary to change behavior)

Resource tip!
EGAP's guide,
*10 Things to Know
about Mechanisms*

Mechanisms

- Explain factors that may moderate the effect of the intervention
- For example:
 - Empowerment treatment may be more effective in villages with female village heads
 - Empowerment treatment may make more of a difference for women with less education
- Describe any implementation/process monitoring you intend to conduct as part of the evaluation

Resource tip!

J-PAL's research resource,
Implementation Monitoring

Power calculations

When are these required?

1. Always for full RCT proposals
2. Not typically for earlier stage grants, but you should include an indication of sample size

Power calculations should indicate:

1. Minimum detectable effects for the intended sample size
2. Assumptions about take up and compliance
3. Variance of the outcome variable
4. Intra-cluster correlation coefficient
5. Expected rates of attrition and survey response

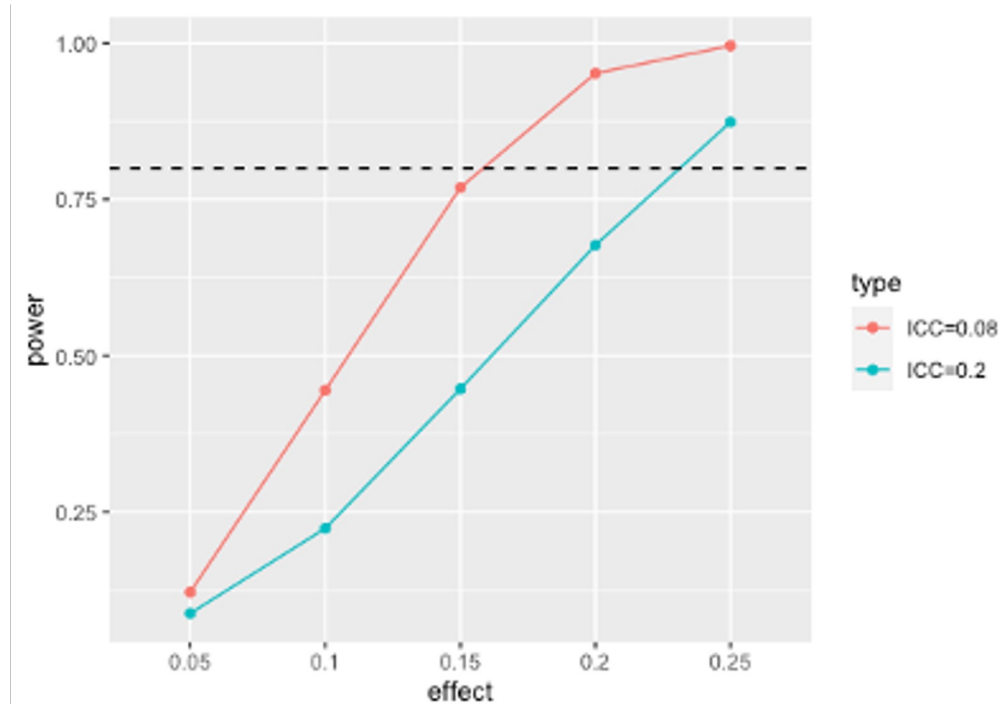
Pay particular attention to your assumptions and justifications for expected take-up, non-compliance, and attrition rates!

Power calculations

- Consider depicting the results of power calculations in a graph or table.
- Visuals can show how power varies with changes in key parameters such as effect size

Resource tip!

J-PAL's research resource,
Power Calculations



Implementing partner
& research team



Implementing partner(s)

- Describe the role and experience of implementing partners
- Implementing partners include the organizations running the program/intervention
 - e.g., government agency or NGO
- They also include a partner you may be working with to implement the evaluation
 - E.g. survey firm
- The more experience your partners have with this kind of research, the more feasible your project

Research team

- Describe the role and experience of members of the research team.
- This is especially important if:
 - Researcher CVs are not submitted as part of the application
 - Researchers are not already known to/invited by the funder
- For example:
 - Experience working with implementing partner before and how it helped preparation for this project
 - Experience working as a research associate on an RCT and/or relevant coursework (e.g. courses in the DEDP MicroMasters)

Writing tips



Build a strong structure **before** you start writing

- What is your **main argument or point**?
- Always **outline** a piece of writing before you start:
 - Sections with clear headers and subheaders
 - Content of each section
 - Length of each section
- **Topic sentence**: should allow reader to understand the main point of a paragraph without having to read every word.
- Any time you switch topics, you should **start a new paragraph**.

Use a clear title for the proposal

The title should clearly present your research question in an eye-catching way:

- “Risk Sharing and Transaction Costs: Evidence from Kenya's Mobile Money Revolution”
- “Call Me Maybe: Experimental Evidence on Using Mobile Phones to Survey Microenterprises”
- “When Should Governments Subsidize Health? The Case of Mass Deworming”

Use a clear & catchy title for your proposal

The title should clearly present your research question in an eye-catching way:

“When Should Governments Subsidize Health? The Case of Mass Deworming”

“Call Me Maybe: Experimental Evidence on Using Mobile Phones to Survey Microenterprises”

“Risk Sharing and Transaction Costs: Evidence from Kenya's Mobile Money Revolution”

Be careful when citing related literature

- Demonstrate your contribution to the literature
- Only cite papers **closely** linked to your research question
- Use your own clear words. Do not give the impression that you copied and pasted from previous papers!
- Explain how your work improve upon existing papers, but don't denigrate them

Use clear, concise language

- Avoid the use of superlatives
- Write in “active voice”
- Don’t start sentences with “This” unless you follow it with the associated noun
- Check your paragraph breaks; each paragraph must contain one (and only one) idea
- Readers like open spaces → No paragraph should be longer than half a page!

Review your own proposal

- Re-read your proposal several times, with these questions in mind:
 - Did you clearly describe the **intervention** and **research plan**?
 - Can you **shorten** the piece or **cut unnecessary words**?
 - Did you write in **active voice**? Did you use **superlatives** unnecessarily?
 - Was the **structure** of the piece clear?
- Read just the **topic sentences** in your piece
 - Can you understand the main message?
- Read each paragraph **backwards** (sentence by sentence)
 - Do you see any grammatical mistakes?

Ask others to review your proposal

Ask someone you trust to review your proposal

- Ask someone in your field to review **substance**.
- Ask someone who is a good writer to review it for **clarity**.
- Find a writing buddy and workshop each other's proposals before submission.





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Good luck!

