How to write a competitive grant proposal

This guide offers advice on how to write a competitive grant proposal based on the expectations of J-PAL funding initiatives.

Contents

Overview of this guide

This guide provides the reader with practical advice on what J-PAL review boards are looking for in a strong proposal. From a reviewer's perspective, giving confidence in the feasibility of the implementation of the intervention and the research design is crucial. In this document, we make use of two successful J-PAL proposals as examples for how to demonstrate the feasibility of your proposed study.

The first was funded by the Jobs and Opportunities Initiative (JOI) for a pilot titled "Planning for Productive Migration in Niger", by Jeremy Weinstein, Darin Christensen, Allison Grossman, and

Guy Grossman. The second was funded by the Governance Initiative ([GI](#)) for a full randomized evaluation titled "Women's Empowerment and Local Governance in Indonesia", by Eitan Paul.

While the advice offered in this guide applies most directly to J-PAL proposals, this guidance will be helpful for any impact evaluation proposal.

All grant proposals should answer these questions

As you read through this guide, keep in mind that all research proposals for organizations funding randomized evaluations need to answer the following questions.

What?	Why?	How?
What is your research question?	Why is your question interesting?	How do you proceed regarding the data?
What is new (what is your contribution to the literature)?	Why is the answer consequential?	How do you proceed regarding the empirical strategy?
What are your expected findings?	Why isn't the answer obvious?	How would this lead to a randomized evaluation (for proposal grants and pilots)?

Types of funding provided by J-PAL

J-PAL provides three main types of funding grants: proposal development grants (sometimes also called travel grants), pilots, and full randomized controlled trials (RCTs). The first two grants are smaller in value and are intended to fund exploratory work that will lead to an RCT. For example, you may use the funding to travel to meet implementing partners, run focus groups, conduct quantitative surveys, and test uptake for the program. J-PAL Scholars are eligible to apply for either proposal development or pilot grants at any time. Eligibility for a full RCT grant is extended once a J-PAL-funded pilot has been successfully completed.

Proposal Development	Pilot	Full randomized evaluation
Up to $10,000	Up to $75,000	Up to $400,000
Exploratory work related to preliminary research ideas	Clear research question, but design and implementation requires further testing	Open to Regional Scholars who have successfully completed a J-PAL pilot

We focus primarily on proposals for pilots and full RCTs in this resource, but we will also briefly discuss pointers for proposal development grants. Proposal requirements may differ across different J-PAL funding initiatives; you will be able to find details on these differences on the respective Scholars program pages and RFP pages for each funding initiative.

This guide will go through the different stages and considerations throughout the different parts of a grant proposal: pre-proposal planning, setting the scene, describing the intervention, methodology, implementing partner, and research team. Lastly, we'll conclude with some writing tips.

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. Grant proposals from both more and less experienced researchers are often unsuccessful at first, especially when the proposal lacks sufficient clarity and detail.

Don't give up if your first grant application is unsuccessful! The review process at each organization can be idiosyncratic and a revised proposal may be more successful in a subsequent funding round or may be a better fit for a different donor.

Pre-proposal planning

Step 1: Identify a clear path to an RCT

For J-PAL and other funders that focus on randomized evaluations, it is imperative that there is a clear pathway to a randomized control trial in proposals for early stage exploratory projects, like proposal development and pilot grants.

Step 2: Check the grant requirements

To ensure the project and research team are a good fit for the grant, it is important to check the eligibility requirements and selection criteria, and it is helpful to understand the priorities of the funder outlined in the request for proposals (RFP).

Make sure to read the RFP and associated documents very carefully. Each RFP will highlight in detail what it is looking to fund and what questions fit. For example, a funding initiative may prioritize particular thematic areas, research questions, or countries.

You should also be sure to check the relevant deadlines. Grants often have multiple parts with different deadlines, such as for an expression of interest and a full proposal.

Step 3: Check on necessary approvals

Both partner organizations and the lead institution may want to review your budget and planned activities in advance, so it is important to account for this in your planning. These are often two separate reviews, for different purposes, and are ideally done sequentially.

The first review should be conducted by the implementing partner (or other project partners) to ensure the proposal reflects your agreement on the study activities and roles and responsibilities of those involved.

The second review is conducted by the university of the lead applicant, typically by an office of research and sponsored programs. In some instances, this office may submit the application on your behalf depending on your university's processes, so be sure to account for this in your grant preparation timeline. The time they request will vary by institution. For example, the University of Ghana requires professors applying for external grants to complete a Research Support Request Form, which can take up to two weeks to process.

In addition, if the research team includes researchers from multiple universities, some universities may require a research collaboration agreement between institutions to govern data sharing and management. The process of getting administrators from multiple institutions to sign this agreement can be quite lengthy. Be sure to factor in the time required to obtain these additional layers of approval.

Step 4: Get letters of support

The proposal will need to include letters of support from any close partners such as the organization implementing the program or any organizations helping to run the evaluation of the program. Note that this does **not** include consultants or contractors hired for a narrow role. They

also aren't needed for proposal development grants where you may be using the grant to establish these relationships.

It's important to have agreements in place with any organization receiving a sub-award or whose collaboration is critical to the project's success. This includes a Memorandum of Understanding, or MoU, between the lead institution and the organization in charge of data collection (such as the local J-PAL or IPA office). Letters of support submitted as part of your proposal help to demonstrate project feasibility and indicate partner buy-in, which are important criteria assessed by reviewers.

Setting the Scene for Your Research

Motivations for your study

Your proposal should begin with a clear problem statement that motivates the research. It sets the scene by describing the challenges in the context the study is taking place. For example, Paul's pilot proposal on women's empowerment and local governance in Indonesia begins with the following:

> *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 and village planning and budgeting meetings are met.*

The motivation section sets the scene by describing challenges in the context that the study is taking place. The contextual factors that motivate the intervention should be supported by data and findings from prior research, which could include statistics from government agencies and prior research conducted by the research team members.

For funders like J-PAL, policy relevance and paths to scale are especially important. Therefore, it is helpful to motivate the study with information about how the question addresses an important policy issue in your context and how the findings can inform policy decisions and/or how the intervention could potentially be scaled up if found to be effective.

Research question

It is important to directly state your question and show how it fits into the literature and field. The question should be understandable and compelling to researchers outside of your subdiscipline and should clearly demonstrate its relevance to the policy community. It should also be narrow and specific enough to answer with your proposed project and clearly respond to the eligible themes and topics in the request for proposals.

For example, Paul's proposal on women's participation in policymaking, which was submitted to a fund that prioritizes research on political participation, states the research question as follows:

> *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?*

Contribution to the literature

As in an academic paper, a literature review in a grant proposal should contextualize your research question and show that your proposed study fills an important gap. You can achieve this by showing that you know the relevant literature on your study's topic by citing important papers and by stating explicitly where the gaps are and how your study will fill them. In demonstrating the contribution of your study vis-a-vis existing research, it is important not to disparage prior research. Instead, you can highlight the ways in which your research will extend or complement existing work.

Peer-reviewed journals, working paper series, reputable think tanks, and research organizations are good sources for finding papers to include in the literature review. Be sure to only include relevant studies–that is, those that seek to answer the same or similar questions to your study (even if conducted in a different location) or provide support for your theory or methodology.

Related literature should be referred to in the section on your study's contribution to the literature (some initiatives may not ask for a dedicated literature review, in which case you should discuss your contribution to the literature in the policy/motivation section). While important, do not spend the bulk of your proposal on this section. The literature review should be concise, to the point and need not be exhaustive. It is the intervention and research design - not your discussion of other researchers' work - that should be the focus. For example, the proposal by Paul

includes the following section, highlighting different interventions that have been evaluated in the literature:

One common intervention aimed at improving the quality of civic participation involves mixed gender civic education programs (Ichino and Nathan 2017). These programs sometimes create backlash when asymmetric social norms lead men to erect barriers to increased female participation (Buntaine, Daniels, and Devlin 2018; Gottlieb 2016). Interventions targeted at female self-help groups have been more successful in increasing women's political knowledge and participation (Kumar et al. 2019; Prillaman 2018). However, other research shows that increased female knowledge and participation does not necessarily result in increased responsiveness by government officials to women's requests (Parthasarathy, Rao, and Palaniswamy 2019). Another intervention type involves mandating female participation in local government councils or community meetings (Beath, Christia, and Enikolopov 2013; Palaniswamy, Parthasathy, and Rao 2019). This type of intervention requires governments to agree to institutional reforms to increase space for female participation and does not always increase female political engagement (Casey, Glennerster, and Miguel 2012; Clayton 2015; van der Windt, Humphreys, and de la Sierra 2018).

Describe the intervention

Theory of change

The description of the intervention should include discussion of the theory of change (TOC). It describes how you expect the program to affect the outcomes you will measure. This element is important to include because it lays out the causal chain of the intervention and the assumptions that need to hold for that causal chain to be realized. Part of laying out the TOC includes identifying the assumptions that you are making behind the causal chain and the risks that exist that might prevent it from being realized.

In the case where you are evaluating a program that already exists, the TOC may have been laid out by the implementing partner. Alternatively, if you are evaluating an intervention that you helped to design, you will be part of the team to construct the TOC. In either case, it is important to include the TOC in your proposal.

For example, the proposal by Paul explains why the intervention should increase women's participation in neighborhood association meetings as follows:

> *Usually, only men participate in most neighborhood association meetings. Women meet separately in rotating credit associations and/or prayer groups where they may discuss social issues but seldom discuss issues related to politics or governance. The training will help increase common identity, identify common needs and goals, highlight the benefits of collective action, and provide information about how women 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.*

You can see in this example that the author first lays out the challenge, then describes the intervention's design with its outputs and immediate outcomes, and concludes with the final outcomes that the TOC is expected to bring about.

The following illustration demonstrates a way that you can convey your TOC. You don't necessarily need to present a theory of change in such a detailed way in your proposal but this is a nice example of what a more fleshed out version might look like. Note that detailed TOCs are typically not required for proposal development grants because the research is still at an early stage and you may be using the grant to develop the theory of change for your intervention. Please also note that not all proposal forms will provide space to insert or upload images of any kind.

Theory of change in the form of a directed acyclic graph
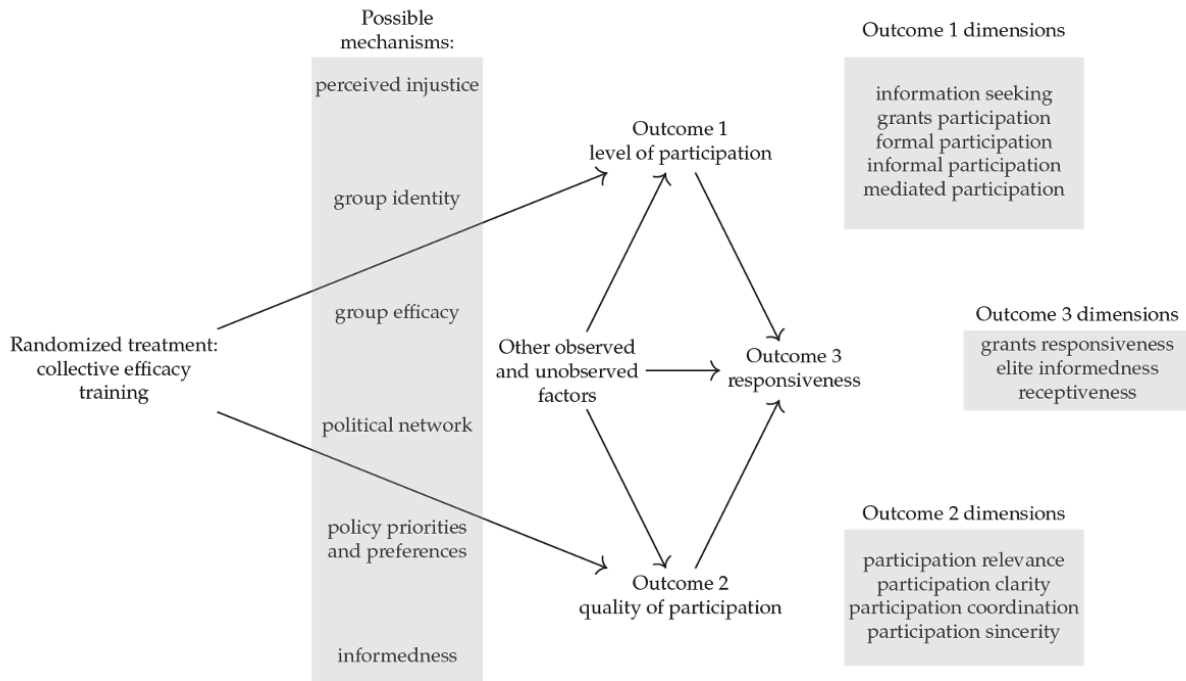
Intervention details

It is important to provide sufficient detail about the intervention to convince the reviewers that your study is feasible and that your findings will be reliable and answer the question you are asking.

This comprises two separate but equally important components:

1. A clear description of what the intervention is (i.e. what the actual program involves or delivers to the recipients)

2. A clear description of the logistics involved (by the implementing partner) in delivering the intervention in the context of a randomized evaluation and why you believe these logistics are feasible for the partner.

This is important because your proposal must convince the review board of two things: that the partner is credible and running a well-thought out program and that your study design makes

sense and is feasible. In the case of a new program, you are also convincing the reviewers that the implementing partner's plan is feasible. The review board will be looking out for research that will fail because the underlying program wasn't well designed, won't plausibly affect the outcomes, or won't have sufficient take up to be evaluated. Note that this advice is applicable for both pilot and full-scale RCTs but not for proposal development grants.

For example, in Paul's proposal, the intervention description includes details about how the treatment will be implemented that increase confidence in the research team's ability to implement the proposal. After describing the content and format for trainings in each treatment arm, the proposal discusses strategies to maximize compliance and take-up and minimize risk:

> *In order to maximize treatment compliance and minimize risk, we have secured permission from the [relevant local authorities]. Before delivering the placebo and treatment interventions at the neighborhood level, [the implementing partner] will deliver an orientation to the village government, and coordinate with them to schedule training meetings and send invitations. Neighborhood-level 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.*

For studies with multiple treatment arms and/or a placebo group, the distinguishing features of each treatment arm should be clearly described in addition to a description of the primary treatment. The treatment arms should be described both programmatically and in terms of what specific research question the different arms and comparisons across arms will answer. Details about the intervention will help reviewers understand the relevance of the study and whether the outcomes (which will be described later in the proposal) are appropriate measures of the intervention's impact.

Preliminary research activities (proposal development & pilot grants)

For proposal development and pilot grants, the proposal should describe the preliminary research activities and how they will inform the research design of a full RCT that will come afterwards.

It is important to review the RFP to see if there is a preference for particular types of pilot research activities. For example, some J-PAL initiatives prefer that pilots be used to:

1. Test the take up rate of the intervention or the factors that drive take up so that when you progress to a full RCT, you can ensure take up is sufficiently high for you to detect an effect (take up directly affects the power of your study).

2. Practice the logistics of the intervention with the partner to make sure they can actually deliver the program. This is especially important for new programs that have not been implemented before.

A proposal development grant is for a research idea that is at a very early stage - you have an idea of an intervention and possible evaluation but you still need to collect some qualitative or quantitative data to test your idea, build relationships with implementing partners or travel to areas where the intervention would take place.

The Weinstein et al. proposal (below) is a great example of the kind of detail that you should include in a pilot proposal. They specified that they would use the pilot funding to test all elements of the intervention, estimate the rate of program take-up, deploy, test and refine protocols to minimize attrition, measure short term outcomes of the program and test measures in the field that are designed to ensure fidelity to the intervention and research design. It also clearly lays out the timeline of these activities and mentions other activities which are already underway. However, please note that this may be too long for the word limits in some proposal forms so you could consider providing this kind of information in a condensed format.

> *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); and*

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

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

The proposed pilot will take place in November 2021, ahead of the January – April 2022 migration season. We have identified five main goals for the pilot:

1. *Finalize and field test all elements of the PPM program;*

2. *Estimate the rate of migration following the PPM program (program take-up);*

3. *Deploy, test and fine-tune protocols to map participants' contacts and remain in touch via WhatsApp and thereby estimate the resulting attrition;*

4. *Measure short-term outcomes including migrants' ability to travel safely and find housing and work; and*

5. *Field test risk mitigation protocols and identify additional contingencies prior to scaling.*

Methodology

Experimental design

It's important to explain your research design, including the details of the experimental design. This is the most important part of your proposal so do not skimp on details in this section. The kinds of information you include in this section are the number of treatment arms, the intervention each treatment arm will receive, the unit at which you're randomizing and the sample size.

Note that for pilots, some of these details may still be uncertain and for proposal development grants you may well not know any of this yet. Include what you can at these exploratory stages. In the accompanying grant proposal guidance document, you will find an example of an

experimental design taken from the Paul proposal which explains the different interventions that are received by a placebo group and two treatment groups.

> *Neighborhood associations (RT) are distinct units within Indonesian villages with their own leaders, groups, and activities. However, to conservatively avoid inter-neighborhood spillovers, we will conduct random assignment at the Rukun Warga (RW) level, which is a conglomerate of an average of five RT. RW will be randomly assigned to one of three treatment arms: 1) Placebo, 2) Women's Group Only, and 3) Women's Group + Neighborhood Leaders. Fifty percent of neighborhoods will be randomly assigned to placebo, 25 percent to T1 (Women's Group Only) and 25 percent to T2 (Women's Group + Neighborhood Leaders).*

The randomization procedure should also be described. For example, will randomization be weighted to place more units in the control group? Are there cross-cutting treatments? Does the experiment use a phase-in or encouragement design, will you stratify and what is your unit of analysis? Your design choices should be described and accompanied by theoretical or contextual justifications.

Note that which experimental designs are possible and appropriate will be affected by how your implementing partner can deliver the program. For more information on these different types of experimental designs, see the J-PAL Research Resource on Randomization and J-PAL North America's "Real World Challenges to Randomization and their Solutions" which we link to in the proposal guidance document.

Hypotheses

It is important to state your key hypotheses and outcomes, and how you will measure them. For short grant proposals, such as those used by J-PAL, the hypotheses and outcomes don't have to be as specific as one would include in a pre-analysis plan. However, they should still specify what outcomes you expect the treatment to affect and where the data to measure the outcomes will come from. Please note that there may not be room to include this as a separate subsection in most J-PAL applications. In this case, it could be integrated into the TOC within the research design section (e.g., description of treatment, description of outcomes, and explanation of how treatment is expected to affect outcomes).

For example, the Paul proposal includes the following hypotheses:

H1 [Efficacy]: Women who receive the empowerment training will have greater self-efficacy than women in the placebo group.

H2 [Knowledge]: Women who receive the empowerment training will have greater knowledge of local governance than women in the placebo group.

H3 [Participation]: Women who receive the empowerment training will be more likely to participate in community affairs than women in the placebo group.

Outcomes

If you will use administrative data, describe how you will get access to the data and what specific measures from the administrative dataset will be used to test each hypothesis. If you have already gained access (or permission) to access the data, it will strengthen your proposal to mention that as it indicates buy-in from your research partners. It may also be helpful to comment on the expected reliability of the administrative dataset.

If you will use survey data, you should describe when and how the survey will be conducted (and by whom if you already know which survey firm you intend to work with). In longer grant proposals and in pre-analysis plans, one would also specify which survey questions will be used to test each hypothesis.

If there is space for this in the word limits for the proposal you are submitting, you could also specify the study timeline and a justification for that timeline. For example, if the endline survey will be conducted one year after the treatment is delivered, why should we expect results to be observable within this time period and would we expect the results to persist over a longer time horizon? The justification may cite results from existing related research.

Less experienced researchers often underestimate the time and cost required to collect data for pilots and full-scale RCTs. It is helpful to consult experienced implementing partners and researchers who have done research in similar contexts to get a realistic sense of approximately how long each stage of the study may take to implement and how much each research activity will cost.

The Weinstein et al. pilot proposal specifies the following outcomes of interest, which are designed to inform the design of the full-scale version of the intervention, related to information take-up, subsidy utilization and migration choices, household buy-in, and attrition. While this is included

as an illustration of the kinds of information you should include, please note that it is likely too long for current word limits for J-PAL funding initiatives and would need to be condensed or abbreviated.

- *Information take-up: post-training quizzes will allow us to check comprehension and focus groups will help fine tune the training delivery mode, surveys of participants will enable us to estimate the share of participants who make preparatory steps for migration (e.g., acquiring documents, contacting family or friends in their intended destination, etc.).*

- *Subsidy utilization and migration choices: the pilot will allow us to estimate the % of participants who request the available transit subsidy for the 2022 migration season; % of participants who migrate and whose arrival in their intended city we can confirm; destinations of those who choose to migrate. These are key parameters for the 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 will allow us to estimate the share of participants with whom we are able to stay in touch during the program, during migration, and at endline. Attrition too is a key parameter feeding into sample size calculations of the RCT at scale.*

In addition, we will measure the following preliminary outcomes for migrants and their families:

- *% of migrants who find satisfactory accommodation at destination;*

- *% of migrants who are able to find work in the destination city;*

- *% of migrants who report that their work is not exploitative.*

- *measures of income, food security, health, psychosocial wellbeing of the migrant;*

- *% of migrants who send remittances to their household;*

- *measures of income, assets, consumption, remittances, psychosocial wellbeing of the household*

Mechanisms

Drawing on your theory of change, it is helpful to set up tests of mechanisms that can provide evidence of how or why the treatment causes (or fails to cause) its desired effects. For example, let's consider a simplified version of the Paul proposal where we hypothesize that an increased sense of self-efficacy and community-efficacy, combined with improved knowledge of local governance processes, leads to greater empowerment in decision making and increased engagement in decision making.

In this case, our hypothesized mechanism is that attitudes plus knowledge will lead to a change in behavior. To test this, we must measure attitudes, knowledge and behavior. If we find that all three change, this would constitute evidence in favor of the hypothesized mechanism. Alternatively, if, for example, the study finds positive effects for efficacy and participation outcomes but not knowledge, this would suggest that increasing knowledge is not a necessary condition to increase participation.

Other studies may test mechanisms by conducting mediation analysis, unbundling treatment components into separate treatment arms, or through subgroup analysis. EGAP (Evidence in Governance and Politics) has a useful resource on this topic, "10 Things to Know about Mechanisms."

You can also describe how contextual or demographic factors may moderate the effects of your intervention. For example, we might expect a women's empowerment treatment to be more effective in villages with female village heads. Or, we might expect the treatment to make more of a difference for women with fewer years of schooling.

Some proposals may also provide space for you to describe plans for implementation monitoring to ensure that the intervention is implemented as planned. If the intervention was not implemented as planned it is hard to determine the mechanisms at play (e.g., if there are null results, it could be because of implementation problems or because treatment would have been ineffective even if implemented properly). More information about implementation monitoring can be found in J-PAL's research resource on this topic.

Power calculations

Power calculations are required for full RCT proposals but typically not required for proposal development grants or pilots. Note that in such proposals, you should provide an indication of the expected sample size in the follow-on RCT, if possible.

Power calculations should indicate:

1. The minimum detectable effects for the intended sample size.

2. Assumptions about take up and compliance.

3. Variance of the outcome variable.

4. The intra-cluster correlation coefficient.

5. Expected rates of attrition and survey response.

It is helpful to justify these assumptions and contextualize the plausibility of the minimum detectable effect and take-up based on results of related existing research. If the study analyzes outcomes with different units of analysis (e.g., individual and village), the power calculations should be conducted for both accordingly. For cluster-randomized designs, power analyses should show how different levels of intra-cluster correlation would affect the minimum detectable effect for individual-level outcomes.

Pay particular attention to your assumptions and justifications for expected take-up, non-compliance, and attrition rates. Insufficient take-up, non-compliance, and attrition effectively reduce the sample size and increase the minimum detectable effect. If, for example, related studies show typical take-up rates of 75% for the type of intervention you're evaluating, you should adjust the expected sample size in your power calculations accordingly. If differential attrition (between treatment and control) or non-compliance are likely in your context, you should incorporate attrition and non-compliance parameters into the minimum detectable effect size formula.

If you have multiple measures for the same outcome concept, you should also discuss what multiple hypothesis testing standard error corrections you will do. Such corrections also reduce statistical power and can be modeled in power calculations by adjusting the significance level. For more guidance, see J-PAL's research resource on power calculations.

Implementing partner and research team

In your proposal you'll want to briefly describe the role and experience of implementing partners (e.g., government agency, NGO, data collection partners) and members of the research team.

Implementing partners

In this section you will describe the role and experience of implementing partners. These include the organizations running the program or intervention like a government agency or NGO. They also include a partner you may be working with to implement the evaluation, for example a survey and data collection team. The more experience your partners have with this kind of research, the more feasible your project. Remember that feasibility is a key criterion that the review board considers, so make sure to demonstrate the feasibility of your evaluation as much as possible.

Research team

The experience of research team members is especially relevant to discuss if researcher CVs are not submitted as part of the application and if the researchers are not already known to or specifically invited by the funder. For example, a researcher who has not previously implemented an RCT but has worked with the implementing partner on an observational study on a similar topic should discuss this experience and how it helped prepare them to design and implement this RCT. Junior researchers should also mention any relevant experience such as working as a research assistant on an RCT or taking courses on field experimental methods (including courses from the online J-PAL DEDP MicroMasters program).

Writing tips

Build a strong structure before you start writing

It is a good idea to build a strong structure before you start writing. What is your main argument or point? You always want to have this in mind before anything else. Make sure it is highlighted early, clearly, and often. Always outline a piece of writing before you start. What are the sections, and what are the clear headers and sub headers? What information or pieces of data will go in each section? What is the appropriate length of each section?

The first sentence of a paragraph is its topic sentence and it should help the reader understand the main point of that paragraph without having to read every word. Anytime you switch topics, you should start a new paragraph.

Use a clear title for the proposal

Use a clear title for your proposal. It should present your research in a clear and ideally eye-catching way. These are some examples from projects J-PAL has funded:

- 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

Each of these titles is linked to the paper in the proposal guidance document.

Be careful when citing related literature

This section is critical to help the reader better grasp your contribution to the literature. Make sure to only cite and present the papers that are closely linked to your research question. When citing a paper, use your own words. Do not give the impression that you copied and pasted from previous papers!

Explain how your research would improve upon existing papers, but without making gratuitous negative remarks about them:

- For example you shouldn't say "the deficiency of X's approach is…" or "the problem of these papers is…" or "these papers suffer from X shortcomings",… etc

- Rather, you could phrase it as "We complement these approaches in a number of ways. First we do this…, second we do this… and third we do this…".

Use clear, concise language

Tips on how to make your language more clear and concise:

- Avoid use of superlatives such as "very", "extremely" or "highly".

- Write in active voice instead of passive voice. As a very simple example, this means saying "I will do X" as opposed to "X will be done by me"

- Don't start sentences with the word "this" unless you follow it with the associated noun. For example, you would say "this evidence indicates that x, y, z" instead of saying "this indicates that x, y, z". Using this sentence structure will make your writing clear, more elegant, and more persuasive.

- Check paragraph breaks to make sure that each paragraph contains one and only one fully articulated idea.

- Readers are subconsciously looking for open space. As a consequence, no paragraph should be longer than half a page. Ideally, each full page will include more than 2 paragraphs.

Review your own proposal

It is very helpful to re-read your own proposal several times with these questions in mind:

- Did you clearly identify the intervention you plan to study, and did you clearly identify the research plan for how you will study this intervention?

- Can you shorten the piece or cut unnecessary words?

- Did you write in an active voice?

- Did you use superlatives unnecessarily?

- Was the structure of the piece clear?

- Try reading just the topic sentences in your piece. Can you understand the main message without reading more than just the topic sentence in each paragraph?

Another trick is to read each paragraph backwards (sentence by sentence) to see if you spot any grammatical mistakes.

Ask others to review your proposal

Lastly, ask someone you trust to review your proposal. Ideally, someone in your field should read it to review the substance of your proposal. It is also helpful to have someone you know to be a good writer to review it for clarity. You can also look for a writing buddy or a writing workshop where you can review proposals with your peers who may be preparing proposals at the same time.