DELTAS Africa II
10 Tips to Winning a DELTAS Africa Grant

Developing Excellence in Leadership, Training and Science in Africa

December 2019
10 Tips to Winning A DELTAS Africa Grant

Over the years the Accelerating Excellence in Science in Africa (AESA) team at the Academy has conducted several grant-writing workshops across the continent and shared materials with applicants offering useful tips on how to write quality proposals. Below are 10 tips extracted from a recent article (Secrets to writing a winning grant. Nature Vol 577 January 2020), with additional inputs from the AESA team gathered over the past five years of making funding calls and conducting grant writing workshops.

1. Track record:
   Take time to review your Curriculum Vitae (CV) to bring out the key strengths of your research and leadership credentials that can place you and your collaborators in a winning position. Being a renowned scientist counts in your favor but does not ensure success. However successful your career may be, it is the job of reviewers to always question whether you really know what you are doing. Experienced researchers will know this very well and are always prepared for winning or rejection (accepting that rejection is always disappointing).

   Remember it’s about quality, not the length of your CV. For DELTAS Africa II applications, the maximum length for the lead applicant’s CV is three (3) pages, while that of the co-applicant is one (3) page. Showcase your track record within these confines; the style of your CV is entirely up to you.

2. Read the guidelines very carefully:
   To increase the likelihood of funding success take time to carefully review the DELTAS Africa guidelines to understand the types of projects financed by a DELTAS Africa type mechanism. DELTAS Africa will fund research and research capacity building; it will fund basic science that addresses big, conceptual questions; it will also fund translational and cross-disciplinary sciences that inform social change or that have practical implications that fit into Africa’s key R&D challenges and the mission of the AAS. That effort of carefully reviewing guidelines can save time in the end, helping potential applicants to work out whether a DELTAS Africa type award is a good fit, otherwise it may not be worth your time in writing the grant.

   Experienced scientists and reviewers suggest studying successful proposals, which can often be acquired from trusted colleagues and supervisors, university libraries or online databases. A website called Open Grants https://www.ogrants.org/, for example, includes more than 200 grants, both successful and unsuccessful, that are free to peruse.

3. Contact the DELTAS Africa programme staff with your questions:
   Applicants should not fear e-mailing or calling the DELTAS Africa/AESA team to talk through their potential interest in the DELTAS Africa call. This allows for the applicant to make a “soft pitch” that presents a brief case for the application and to find out whether what they are trying to do aligns with the strategic goals of the DELTAS Africa programme/ theory of change.

   Contact details are:-
   Email: deltas@aasciences.africa
   Phone: call +254 20 8060675, and ask to speak to Dr Alphansus Neba.

4. Compelling story telling:
   Applicants should put themselves in the shoes of grant reviewers, who might need to read dozens of applications about complicated subjects that sometimes lie outside their own fields of expertise, often while juggling their own research. “Imagine you’re tired, grumpy and hungry.
You’ve got 50 applications to get through,” says Cheryl Smythe, international grants manager at the Babraham Institute, a life-sciences research institution in Cambridge, UK. “Think about how you as an applicant can make it as easy as possible for them.” Remember however that a grant is about convincing a jury (reviewers and decision committees) that your ideas are worthy and exciting, so you can make some pretty sweeping generalizations about what your proposed ideas might do for science and society in the long run (unlike in a peer-reviewed journal paper which requires every claim to be backed by quality data).

5. Formatting:
Formatting is an important consideration. White spaces and bold headings can make proposals easier to read, as can illustrations/schematics. Applicants will sometimes feel that they need to squeeze in as much information as possible, which leads to all kinds of tricks to fiddle with the margin sizes, or to make the font a little bit smaller so that you can squeeze in that one last sentence, all of which is exhausting to read for a reviewer. Avoid basic mistakes such as spelling errors, grammatical slips and lengthy proposals that exceed word limits. These kinds of mistake can cast doubt on how rigorous applicants will be in their research.

The DELTAS Africa online application template has word limits for sections that require description. As you input your information within the text boxes, an online prompt will indicate the number of words in the field and the number of words remaining before you hit the limit.

Always use the Validation page of the AAS online grant application form to check fields which you might have missed or word limits that you might have breached to enable smooth submission of your application. Details that need to be addressed before submission are usually listed on this page.

6. Technical details:
These will be necessary for a DELTAS Africa type application, but the advice is to follow up a complex sentence with one that sums up the big picture. Use clear language instead of multisyllabic jargon. Don’t just cram in words but instead you should get quickly to the point, for example…I propose to study the metabolomics of subterranean arthropods….can be succinctly explained as a proposal to …….study small molecules in insects that live below ground. If a list of key words or thematic areas is requested, which is crucial for indexes and search engines and for assigning reviewers, these should be carefully thought out and not just thrown in as an afterthought. While it is tempting to want to claim that you and your network can solve enormous, challenging and complex R&D problems for Africa in a single five year programme of work, realistically, that’s usually not feasible, so a clear focus can help to boost a grant to the top of a reviewer’s pile.

7. Invest in your science communication:
Experts agree that getting some science communication training can be a worthwhile investment for strengthening grant-writing skills. We see lots of applications from scientists who can not fully explain why their work mattered. DELTAS Africa applications are a three-stage process and for each of these stages the written and oral pitches during the interviews should be clear and compelling. Scientists who send strong — albeit unsuccessful — applications are more likely to get funding from other sources or from the AAS for future projects. There are free communication tools e.g. from COMPASS called the Message Box Workbook, or from Story Collider (a science-storytelling organization), which can help to identify key points and answer the crucial question for every audience, funder or reviewer i.e. the ‘So what?’ question- So what if you get the funding, how is that going to impact science and society?

Communication trainings can teach applicants how to talk about their work in the manner of a compelling storyteller. In proposals and interviews, one learns how to include the right level of details (including personal ones when relevant), that explain the problems to be addressed and why they are motivated to address the challenge — an example of the kind of conflict and resolution that builds a good story. These sorts of approaches can strike a chord with reviewers and decision committees.

8. Choosing the right partners and collaborators:
Teaming up with the right partners and collaborators will increase your chances of success (and is a mandatory requirement for DELTAS Africa grants). This can lead to quality applications based on a broad base of ideas, including from clinicians, policy leaders or other non-academic partners. The collaborative approach can help to focus attention on a real-world need and reduce the chances of overreaching for the proposed network; it can identify a study’s limitations instead of trying to meet preconceived expectations;
and different voices are more likely to propose a different
tack and innovation from the type of research that had
been tried before.

On the DELTAS Africa online application form, the lead
applicant has the onus of inviting partners (Co-applicants)
to join in the application. The online form cannot be
submitted unless the co-applicant indicates their consent
to participate in the application. Collaborators can be
listed on the form without going through the process of
invitation.

9. Allocate enough time:
Writing a DELTAS Africa-type multi-million dollar winning
application is very hard work! Such major collaborative
proposals for multi-year projects can run to more than 100
pages for the full applications, so it takes months to get
one of these together and lots of coordination between
the lead PI, partners and collaborators. Experienced grant
writers recommend devoting plenty of time to the task.
Scheduling should include time for rewrites, proofreads
and secondary reads by colleagues, mentors etc. Working
right up to the deadline can undo weeks to months of hard
work and the AESA team has experience of incidences
where applicants accidentally submitted an earlier
draft instead of the final version! Grant writing doesn’t
necessarily end with a proposal’s submission. Applicants
might receive requests for rewrites or more information
which all requires devoting additional time.

10. Dealing with rejection:
Every time you apply for a grant you can expect to
win or to be rejected. If you get rejected use this as
a chance to learn how to find other opportunities,
write better proposals and navigate the global funding
system. Taking time to learn from the setbacks and
successes of others can help to increase the chances
of securing funds in a future application. Rejections
can also come with feedback, and if they don’t,
applicants can request it. Negative feedback can be
one of the best learning experiences, even when it is
painful to read. Remember however that reviewers’
opinions can vary, and all proposals undergo multiple
independent expert reviews, followed by panel
discussions and additional oversight by programme
staff and committees. There will be future opportunities
for people who are willing to take the time to develop
ideas and push past rejections and negative feedback.
If you suffer rejection, don’t be tempted, on the spur
of the moment, to write an insulting email to a funder;
chances are you will come back to them in future,
and like the African elephant, they might have long
memories.