

Submitting a Grant Proposal to ReCIPE

Key Tips for Researchers

General principles – Beyond ReCIPE

- **New research question / gap in the literature**
 - It all starts with an idea. Then you need to dig very deep in the literature to make sure that it is novel.
 - I have once worked for a year of my life on an idea that was not novel enough. It was never published
- **The purpose of the grant is to carry out great research. Challenge your idea and plan: Is it really relevant and rigorous?**
 - It is much more productive (and fun) to work on a great idea than a bad one, and it takes the same amount of time
 - The reason you are in research is that you want to improve the world. Always keep this in mind.
 - You may face institutional fundraising pressure but make sure you are passionate about your topic – the result will be much better if you deeply care about a question

General principles – Beyond ReCIPE

- **Start with explaining in simple terms the basic idea**
 - What is the research question?
 - Why does it matter?
 - What is the research strategy to answer the question?
 - Often after reading a proposal one does not know the basic answers to these fundamental questions. Too often proposals remain vague, saying that they want to study topics X, Y, Z but lacking precise information
 - You need to be able to explain this in one paragraph and any non-specialist needs to be able to follow.
 - Often we are so much absorbed by our research that we start with talking about details, forgetting that the reader may start from zero knowledge on the topic
 - Hence start from more general to more specific

General principles – Beyond ReCIPE

- **Be structured**

- Intro: What is the research question and why does it matter (motivation)?
- Existing literature – what are the key papers on this
- Existing literature – how does it connect with my past and current research agenda and output
- What methods will be used to answer the question?
- What data will be used?
- What is the workplan and timeline?

- **On AI**

- Don't trust it blindly
- Make sure that you have a deep understanding of all the methods you use
- AI is very bad at “critical thinking” and provides “average answers”. You want your research to be cutting-edge and path-breaking, so don't attempt to let generative AI do the job for you. (The Beatles would not have thrived if their music was the “average” of existing music)

Research question

- **ReCIPE projects need to have a clear focus!**
 - There exist research programs like the ERC that found a whole research agenda of various subprojects over several years with large budgets (several millions EUR)
 - ReCIPE has much lower amounts per project.
 - Strong proposals often have one or a small number of research questions that are well-developed.
 - Communication matters in research: for findings, but also to make your research to funders.
 - Proposals that have many ideas but do not develop them in detail are much less likely to get funded, even if some ideas may be very good.

Positioning in the Literature

- ReCIPE is an academic research programme — your proposal must be grounded in the existing literature
- Clearly explain where your research sits and what gap it addresses
- As in an academic paper, acknowledge any closely related work and explain explicitly how your contribution differs — reviewers will know the literature
- **Be specific about what your research adds:**
 - A new context or country
 - A new mechanism or theoretical channel
 - A new methodological approach
 - An extension of the evidence pool for an important question
- Don't assume your contribution is self-evident — state it explicitly so evaluators can recognise and appreciate it

Positioning in the Literature

- The ReCIPE “path-finding papers”, published in *Economic Policy*, are a helpful resource to identify knowledge gaps.
 - <https://academic.oup.com/economicpolicy/issue/40/123>
 - <https://academic.oup.com/economicpolicy/issue/40/124>

Methodology

- **The primary goal of ReCIPE is to generate empirical evidence as a basis for policies:**
 - ReCIPE mostly funds research that generates statistical evidence
 - **Causality** is often important for policy relevance
 - But: there are interesting questions that cannot be studied with causal inference designs (e.g., new data). It is helpful to be explicit about this in the proposal!
 - Complemented with **interdisciplinary/qualitative** approaches
 - It is helpful to explain the complementarity of qualitative evidence with the evidence from quantitative work

Methodology

- **Be precise about the empirical analysis you plan to conduct**
 - For quantitative work, including a formal estimating equation (even a simple OLS or DiD specification) is a good idea
 - An equation helps to communicate: the outcome variable, how treatment or exposure is defined, what fixed effects and controls are included, and the level of clustering for inference
- **Support your identification assumptions**
 - Many causal designs depend on assumptions (e.g. balance, parallel trends) that can be partially supported with data — if you have preliminary evidence, consider including it
 - Even without direct evidence, provide conceptual arguments for why the assumption is plausible in your setting
 - Describe what you would do if a key identification assumption is not supported in the data (alternative designs)

Data Strategy

- **Anticipate data challenges upfront**
 - Reviewers often know when certain data is difficult to obtain — do not present data acquisition as straightforward if it is not
 - If primary data is not publicly available, provide a clear and credible explanation of how you will secure access
 - Data access agreements already in place, or letters from data holders, significantly strengthen your proposal
- **Present fallback alternatives**
 - What alternative data sources could you use if the primary source cannot be secured?
 - Showing flexibility and contingency planning increases the feasibility of your proposal

Measuring Conflict

- ReCIPE's focus is on armed political violence — be precise about how you define and measure conflict in your context
- If direct measurement of armed violence is not feasible, you must build an explicit argument connecting your measure to more intensive forms of violence
 - For example, if you rely on local disputes measured in surveys, explain how these relate to armed conflict
- Reviewers will probe this link — a convincing bridge is essential
- Think carefully at the proposal stage about external validity of your conflict measure
- Carrying out the research will give you more insight, but you need to show awareness of these issues from the outset

External Validity

- **External validity** is often treated as an afterthought — but for a policy-oriented grant like ReCIPE, it is essential
- Explain the scope conditions under which findings from your setting are likely to hold elsewhere
- If the motivation is to extend the evidence pool to a new context (even without obvious priors about whether effects differ), state this explicitly — evaluators need to recognise it as a contribution
 - If your motivation is 'Question X has been studied in country A but not country B', explain what you think is different about country B and why that matters
- Proposals for countries outside ReCIPE's geographic focus are rarely funded
 - They will only be considered if they make a major contribution and demonstrate clear and compelling external validity for ReCIPE's focus countries

Feasibility, Funding & Stakeholder Engagement

- **Be precise about the marginal value of ReCIPE funding**
 - If you have multiple sources of funding, explain exactly what ReCIPE funding enables that you could not do otherwise
 - If your proposal's feasibility depends on securing funding from several sources, be transparent about this dependency and your contingency plans
- **Take stakeholder engagement seriously**
 - Don't treat engagement as a box-ticking exercise — reviewers value genuine, credible strategies
 - Share concrete evidence of existing relationships: meetings already held, MOUs in place, letters of support — these signal that the project is grounded and implementable

Budgets

- **Value for money is an important criterion**
 - Funding for foreign aid is under pressure, projects should demonstrate that they provide value for money.
 - There is no need to claim the maximum amount of funding
 - Expenses should be justified, in particular the need for RA support

Final thoughts

- **Research grants like ReCIPE are very competitive**
 - Success rates are between 10 and 20%
 - Many good proposals cannot be funded... but proposals are rarely “lost”. The principles of good grant proposals are not specific to ReCIPE!
 - ReCIPE aims to fund a diverse set of topics and researchers

- **We’re looking forward to seeing your proposals!**