

A Skeleton Key to Unlocking the RSCA Awards

The Research and Grants Committee, which evaluates the RSCA proposals each spring, is applying a simple formula that determines who gets, and who does not get the awards. Consider what follows a kind of reverse-engineering of the process in order to understand *how* these proposals tend to be judged, and *why* the people (and departments) that tend to get them are successful.

First, the basics:

1. The set of standards that the committee members use when evaluating proposals has eight overall categories, which are given different weights in the process (the first four are worth 80% when combined (20% + 15% +30% + 15%), while the last four are worth 5% apiece).
2. Each proposal is eligible for a total of 25 points. Category 1 (**Identify the Problem**) is worth 5 points; category 2 (**Aim and Expected Outcome**) is worth 3.75 points; category 3 (**Research Method or Creative Process**) is worth 7.5 points; category 4 (**Potential Significance**) is worth 3.75 points, while the last four categories (**Timeline, Budget/Reassigned Time, Plans for Dissemination, and Availability of Resources**) are worth 1.25 points each. *Too many proposals from the Humanities are leaving points on the table needlessly, either by not including all of the requested elements for each section, or by doing what journalists call “burying the lede”:* making the proposal readers dig and hunt for the main information they are looking for in each section.

And now, the more targeted advice:

- 1) The first section of the proposal (**Identify the Problem**) is far and away the most important—not in terms of points (it is worth 5), but because it is the one that makes the first impression on the proposal reader, *and* it is the one where the widest gap exists between the assumptions and methods of much research in the Humanities and the assumptions and methods of much research done in the departments (Sciences, etc.) that tend to be most successful in getting these awards.
 - a) Look at the assumption inherent in the name of the category itself: *Identify the Problem*. Much of the research and publishing Humanities scholars have done over the years *could* be made to fit into this particular garment, but the fit would not always have been a comfortable one. But this is the rhetorical challenge that must be addressed at the very beginning of these proposals.
 - b) When preparing one of these proposals, ask yourself this question: *what specific problem or issue is your proposed project seeking to solve, address, or investigate?* (In many, if not all cases, “issue” and “address or investigate” might be better fits for your work.) Then—and this is extremely important—make your answer to that question the very first sentence for this section of the proposal. [Frontload your writing](#), in other words (evaluators are reading dozens of these—make yours one of the easy ones).
 - c) Pay attention, as well, to the request for references that will put your project into the context of work being done (or neglected) in the field. The evaluators want to know that you are already well down the road of your research for the project.

- d) Write as clearly as possible, dispensing with *all* (seriously—*all*) theoretical and/or discipline-specific jargon or shorthand of the kind we use amongst ourselves at conferences and in articles, using instead the language you would employ while describing your work to your most intelligent, and generally well-educated (but non-specialist) friend or relative.
 - e) Also, make this section as short-and-to-the-point as you can stand to make it, perhaps 3-4 focused paragraphs (and then make it shorter and even more pointed—try to resist indulging what may seem to be the pressing urge to wander into nuances and “necessary” bypaths that your readers will likely not understand anyway).
 - f) Final takeaway here: make the writing in this section front-loaded (the inverted-pyramid style), clear for the non-specialist, and as succinct as possible while still getting the essential points across. Attention spans wander, and most of your evaluators will be from the Sciences, the Social Sciences, Business, Health and Human Services, and other disciplines that do not have any background in the assumptions, jargon, shorthand-references, etc., that we tend to take for granted on our side of campus. Too many proposals from the Humanities are shot down for this very reason.
- 2) The second section (worth 3.75 points) of the proposal (**Aim or Expected Outcome**) needs to be short and to the point. What do you expect to produce or accomplish in a single semester? Make your aim clear and painstakingly specific, while tailoring it to the constraints of 15-16 weeks.
- a) For example: *To write and submit for publication a [insert page or word count here] scholarly article to a peer-reviewed academic journal [name the journal—even if that is speculative at this point]. This article will [insert description of argument/purpose of article/contribution to field article will make].*
- 3) The third section (worth 7.5 points) of the proposal (**Research Method or Creative Process**) might be a bit of a stumbling block for many Humanities proposals, but it does not have to be. Specificity and clarity are key here.
- a) For example: *My project combines [x] and [y] though the perspective of [z]. It does so because [z] explains/provides necessary insight into [x] and [y] in ways [a], [b], and [c]. This project draws on my experience as an [author/researcher] of [a] and [b] and involves [archival work/library research/other]. This project also builds on work that I have previously engaged in/presented/published [insert place/time/circumstance/venue].*
- 4) The fourth section (worth 3.75 points) of the proposal (**Potential Significance**) is one that many applicants stumble over, primarily because they fail to address all three requested elements, generally only addressing the first one. Make sure your proposal gives a simple and succinct description of the significance of your project *to the field*, while also addressing *student involvement or educational impact* and saying *something* about how this work advances the University, College, *and/or* Department mission. Failing to address all three of these things is just leaving points on the table needlessly. (And differences of a point or two are crucial in getting or not getting these awards.)

- a) For example: *This project's analysis of [x] will [advance, engage with, question, challenge] my field's understanding of [y] by raising the necessary question of [z]. It will involve students [specify, though not by name, grad or undergrad students] in [x] way through [the performance of research, engagement in class activity, etc.]. This project will also advance my teaching in the [x] department, and further the engagement of the college and the university with [issue y for population z].*
- 5) The fifth section (worth 1.25 points) of the proposal (**Timeline**) begins the four-section part of these proposals where all-too-many Humanities proposals basically give away points. Follow the rubric/instructions to the letter here. Give specific dates by which specific tasks will be completed by specific people—even if those dates are speculative as you are writing your proposal.
- a) For example: *During September I will be doing [x] which will be completed by [date]; then, during October I will move on to [y] which will be completed by [date]; then in November I will finish up with [z] which will enable me to submit a manuscript to [name of journal] by [date].*
- 6) The sixth section (worth 1.25 points) of the proposal (**Budget/Reassigned Time**) should be short, sweet, and specific. What are you requesting, and in order to accomplish exactly what work?
- a) For example: *I am requesting [3 units of release time/x amount of \$ in a mini-grant (the latter must be specifically line-itemed to account for each \$ expense)] in order to [write and revise article/perform x, y, and z research tasks/travel to such-and-such archive to access important data only available there, etc.].*
- 7) The seventh section (worth 1.25 points) of the proposal (**Plans for Dissemination**) should be an absolute breeze. Simply outline *in detail* which conferences and journals you are targeting your work to, and when. Again, do this even if this section is largely speculative at this point.
- a) For example: *I plan to submit this article to [journal x], and then possibly [journals y and z]. I will be submitting the work-in-progress to [conference y] which is being held in [time and place].*
- 8) The eighth and final section (worth 1.25 points) of the proposal (**Availability of Resources**) should also be nearly a giveaway in terms of the points. Simply be specific about what resources you will be using for the project, and tell the committee that you already have access to all of them except the necessary time [for the 3 units of release time] or funds [for the mini-grant].
- a) For example: *I will be using the library collections at CSUN and at UCLA. I have all other necessary scholarly resources available to me at [institution or location x], and simply need the time to research and write [or the travel funds to access available material in a different location].*

If you follow this formula as closely as possible, this will not guarantee that you will win a RSCA award (the variable interests and temperaments of the evaluators cannot be fully accounted or controlled for), but you will give yourself the absolute best chance (in terms of what might be called Grantsmanship) to gain as many points in each category as possible. Remember, the goal is to get as close to 25 points as possible in order to get that release time or that mini-grant. *Don't leave points lying on the table when you don't have to.*

Good luck.