Compelling Grant Proposals

How to write them and get them accepted
Before writing a compelling proposal

1. Where is it going?
2. Who is the audience?
3. Does it fit the opportunity or call for proposals
   a. Read the rules
   b. Look at abstracts of proposals accepted by that program last few years
   c. Talk to the program manager if needed.
   d. If possible sit on the selection panel the year before you apply.
What is a proposal?

A proposal is a highly structured rigorous argument (Dalcanton, cosmic variance blog)

What are you trying to convince people of?
(1) This science/project is worth doing
(2) It is feasible, i.e. it can be done
(3) What you propose is the optimal way to do it
(4) You (and your team) are the best people to do it.
Start with a skeleton of ideas

• Strengths
  – Which strengths are stronger than others

• Weaknesses
  – How do you address or shore up the weaknesses

Send this to collaborators and have a discussion.
Do not wait to have a perfect (15 page?) proposal before sending it the day before the proposal is due.
Are you still excited about the idea? Are they?
Write the proposal now (or don’t).
Down-select to the most compelling idea(s).

Starting a point is like picking a room-mate. You are going to *live* with that choice for at least a few years. Make sure most (if not all) aspects are compatible.
Know your audience:

(1) This science/project is worth doing
   This needs to convince people not in your subfield.

(2) It is feasible, i.e. it can be done
   This should be directed at technical experts in your subfield

(3) What you propose is the optimal way to do it
   This should be directed at experts in your subfield

(4) You (and your team) are the best people to do it.
   This is directed at both subfield and outsiders
Assume this about your reviewers

1. They have a lot of work to do in too short a time (the prose should flow well).
2. They are middle aged and wear reading glasses (pay attention to font sizes and figure labels).
3. They don’t know everything, but would not like to be reminded of that (eschew or explain acronyms).
4. They have ADHD (or at least short attention spans) --- make it easy to follow, and repeat major points.
5. They have OCD (or can get hung up on details that you might not consider important) --- give enough details
Go beyond writing good proposals write a great one.

Tell a compelling Story.

Make it easy to follow.

https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=H6_eqxh-Qok

Make it memorable (for the right reasons)
How to get proposals accepted?

• I don’t know how to do that. Except...
  – Write papers
  – Write good papers
  – Know the broader context of your work
  – Be known for your work – go to conferences, talk to people.
  – Collaborate with people who complement your strengths.
  – Take feedback, esp. –ve feedback. You don’t have to accept or agree with all of it but do think about it.
  – Try again after incorporating feedback.
Beyond proposals:

If we cannot get leaders to be good people we need to good people to be leaders.
What is common here?
The power of a good story.

Those who tell the stories rule society

Plato