

**Tip sheet – ISBD EMCC Workshop: How to write grants and get them:
Perspectives from writers, reviewers, and funders in the field of bipolar disorder**

Panel 1: Grant Writers

Panellists:

- Sarah Sperry (Assistant Professor, University of Michigan)
- Erika Forbes (Professor, University of Pittsburgh)
- Ayal Schaffer (Associate Professor, University of Toronto)

Theme 1: Embrace simplicity

- a) Try to be self-aware about how you are trying to come across in your application, and whether you are verging on *over-writing* to come across as intelligent, complicated, brilliant, etc.
 - i. This may manifest as using too much jargon, over-complicated methods, etc.
- b) Carefully read (and dissect) each sentence in your application to make sure you are using as few words as possible and putting things as simply as possible.

Theme 2: Help your reviewers

- a) Your reviewers are time-poor, tired, and very likely reading your application at nonideal times. Make their job as easy as possible. Spoon-feed your application to them to minimise their need to *think* about it (and therefore to avoid them thinking of *problems* with it).
- b) Be consistent with terminology and concepts so your reviewers can follow your arguments/plans.
- c) Make your application easier on the eyes. Strategically use “white space”. Break up the text with tables and figures – this makes your application approachable and easier to engage with.
 - i. White space also gives reviewers room to write notes, which can help them remember things they liked about your application.

Theme 2: Get feedback from non-experts

- a) It's likely that your grant application will be reviewed by someone outside your specific research area. Ask non-experts (e.g., undergraduates, family) to read your application to see whether they can get the overall picture – if not, you may need to revise it to make your grant clearer.

Theme 3: Think about (and write about) who you want to be as a scientist

- a) Sections in grant applications about “training” are very important and deserve consideration.
 - i. These sections are an opportunity to show your potential trajectory toward independence. In sections on training aims, you need to convince your reviewers about what you need (e.g., training on a technique, mentorship by a senior investigator) to become the type of person worth funding in the future.

Theme 4: Use the words of the funding call or funder's priorities in your application

- a) Reviewers are marking your grant against specific criteria, so make their task easier by using specific words and phrases from the application guidelines in your application.
 - i. Make this effortless for your reviewers by using bold and underlined text.
 - ii. Spend time getting familiar with the vision, mission, and specific priorities of the funder.
 - iii. Align the aims of your grant to the priorities of the funding call, or the broader priorities of the funding body – this may help get your application flagged as a priority.

Theme 5: Try to enjoy the process

- a) You will spend a lot of your time writing grants.
 - i. Try to frame the process as exciting. Think about what the field needs, what you want to do, and what you can uniquely contribute.
 - ii. Remember that you're trying to improve people's lives and reduce suffering.
 - iii. Try to enjoy the chance to be immersed in the intellectual components of working on a grant and grappling with it. (This is especially important as your career goes on and you find you have less time to grapple with intellectual problems in your day-to-day work.)

Theme 6: Persist!

- a) There are many factors at play in grant reviews.
 - i. Who is reviewing it? How calibrated is the committee? What time of day are they reading it? Is this the first or the 8th grant they're reading?
 - ii. These factors are hard to control and oftentimes unfair. So perseverance is critical.
- b) Even very successful researchers are unlikely to get grants on their first try. Successful grants are usually the product of repeated resubmissions.
- c) If a grant continues to be unsuccessful, seek advice from a senior colleague you trust, to ensure that the grant has merit and is worth continuing to resubmit.

Theme 7: Travel with a friend

- a) Identify colleagues or other EMCRs who are applying for grants at the same time and/or at the same level as you.
 - i. Make time to write together and read each other's work.
 - ii. Set deadlines together and talk about strategies.
 - iii. Celebrate the wins and commiserate the losses – moral support is really important.

Theme 8: Involve end-users in the process

- a) Many agencies now prioritise genuine involvement with end-users in grant applications (e.g., people with lived experience, physicians, parents).

- b) Plan their involvement from the start (e.g., at the first or second meeting of the research team).
- c) Pay end-users for their involvement, for their work on the application and during the grant itself (e.g., as a consultant).

Theme 9: Nail the hypothesis

- a) Remember that some reviewers read the hypothesis before anything else.
- b) Ask others to read your hypothesis.
 - i. Is it clear? Is it testable? Is it sufficiently different from an “objective”?
- c) Ensure everything written before the hypothesis feeds into the hypothesis, and that everything after flows from it.

Theme 10: Be open to ideas

- a) Ideas for grants often come from reading. Be ready to record ideas as they come up – otherwise you might lose them!
 - i. Reading about and talking with people working in areas outside your topic (including totally different fields) can help inspire novel ideas that worked elsewhere and might be applicable to your area .
- b) People with lived experience of BD (and other conditions) can be an excellent source of ideas for investigation.
 - i. Listen to the experiences and frustrations of people with these conditions.
 - ii. These conversations may inspire ideas that are ground and connected to the problems people face.

Panel 2: Grant Funders

Panellists:

- Hilary Blumberg (Professor, Yale University)
- Cara Altimus (Managing Director, BD²)
- Vani Jain (Executive Director, Daymark Foundation)

Theme 1: People are different – not everyone enjoys grant writing

- a) For many, grant writing is a labour of love. Don't feel guilty if you don't like writing them.

Theme 2: Learn about funders

- a) Funding agencies have very different priorities and styles (e.g., formal vs informal).
- i. Don't assume that strategies that work for one funder will work for all funders – spend time learning about how different funders work and what they want.
- b) Many grant applications fail because they simply do not meet the funding call.
- i. Get familiar with the funder's priorities and try to align your application accordingly.
 - ii. If your application can't align with their priorities, consider not applying.
- c) Priorities can change quickly. Don't assume that because a grant has been available for a year or two, it will be available next year too. You might miss out, and sometimes "last-minute" applications are successful.

Theme 3: Talk to funders

- a) Representatives from funders attend conferences (e.g., ISBD), and funding calls are often guided by conversations with researchers – tell funders about your research!
- b) Conversations with representatives from funding agencies are unlikely to get you a quick win, but discussions over the long-term can help shape priorities and socialise research agendas.

Theme 4: Write what you're passionate about

- a) Grants are often funded for several years. Make sure you are submitting projects that you want to work on for years, and that you can convince your reviewers you'll be motivated to work on.
- b) There's something 'special' about an application written by someone who is really passionate and interested in the subject. Try to align your grant with your interests and passions.

Theme 5: Don't forget feasibility

- a) Failure to mention power calculations and sample size can ruin a grant's chances. Include them (where relevant).
- b) Convince your reviewers that the project is feasible (be specific!) and that you and your team can achieve the project's aims.

Theme 6: Chart your trajectory

- a) A track record in the relevant area is often (but not always) important.
 - i. Where you have relevant first author publications, emphasise these.
 - ii. If you are new to an area and don't have a strong track record, emphasise how you are going to develop it (e.g., via training, mentorship).

Theme 7: The team matters

- a) For EMCR-driven applications, emphasising support from senior collaborators and opportunities for training is essential.

Focus on specific funders

BD²

- Focus on advancing scientific understanding of BD and advancing clinical practice – hypothesis driven, mechanistic research (interested in all possible mechanisms).
- Current (third) cycle of Discovery Grant program is \$4.5M grant, which includes requirement of an ECR team member.
- More information: <https://www.bipolardiscoveries.org/funding/rfa-opportunities/>

Daymark Foundation

- Focus on BD is early intervention and BD at a global level (emphasis on quality of life, self-management, and psychosocial supports).
- Foundation does not have peer reviewers or infrastructure to fund scientific grant applications; Typical funding approach is on “beyond” activity and solving problems for researchers
 - E.g., flexible support to CREST.BD to continue work between various stages of research life cycle to avoid loss of momentum).
 - E.g., bringing researchers, clinicians, and people with lived experience together to set agenda for early-intervention in BD.
- More information: <https://www.daymarkfoundation.ca/our-work>

Brain and Behavior Research Foundation (BBRF)

- Mission is geared toward serious mental illness.
- The low number of applications about BD might dissuade ECRs from submitting applications about BD – however BBRF is motivated to receive applications in BD.
- Interested in innovative and risky ideas that can help an ECR jumpstart their career.
- Young Investigator Grant
 - Short application
 - \$35,000 USD p.a. for two years
 - Some eligibility considerations
- More information: <https://bbrfoundation.org/grants-prizes/bbrf-young-investigator-grants>

American Foundation for Suicide Prevention (AFSP)

- Mission is geared toward suicide prevention across a variety of mental illnesses.
- Pilot grants (up to \$50,000) and postdoctoral grant (up to \$140,000).
- Interested in innovative and risky ideas that can help an ECR jumpstart their career.
- More information: <https://afsp.org/research-grant-information/>