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## NIHR Fellowship Writing Workshop

### Programme

#### Morning: Things you need to know.

- [The Key Sentence Technique](#)
- [Aims and Objectives](#)
- [Key Sentences for NIHR Fellowship](#)
- [Do you have a fundable project](#)
- [What is a Sub-project?](#)
- [Writing Guidelines](#)
- [What a Grant Application has to Achieve](#)
- [The Magic Formula](#)

#### Afternoon: Things you need to do.

- [Recipe for a Case-for Support](#)
- [The Detailed Research Plan](#)
- [Preparing Ingredients](#)
  - [The Success Proposition](#)
  - [Problem Sentence Exercise](#)
- [The Importance Proposition](#)

16:00 Close

### Introduction

This workshop is designed to start you working on an extremely efficient 'recipe' for an application for a research project grant, such as a research council standard grant. The morning session is to discuss the things you need to know. The afternoon session is to get you working on the things you need to do to start writing.

If you have a project in mind at the start of the day and you can answer [these questions about it](#), you should have a rough draft of the skeleton of the case for support, in the form of [10 key sentences](#), by the end of the day.

If you don't have a suitable project in mind at the start of the day you can practise the skills of writing the 10 key sentences with a dummy project, or maybe you will be able to formulate something to work with in the morning.

There are two things you need to do to prepare for the workshop.

- First, it is essential for the exercises in the afternoon that you are prepared to write about a research project. Ideally this will be a project for which you intend to write a grant application but you can use

a piece of research that you have already done. You can work with a previous grant application - even if it was awarded it will still provide you with suitable material for the workshop, but if it was rejected, even better.

- The workshop is aimed at mainstream UK project funders like the research councils (AHRC, BBSRC, EPSRC, ESRC, MRC, NERC), the Leverhulme Trust and the Wellcome Trust. It will help if you can identify your target funder before the workshop.
- It's not essential but it will help if you bring a laptop or tablet on which you can type.

My delivery style is interactive, so feel free to ask questions throughout the day. This handout contains all the visual material to be used during the day with clickable links to the main sections in the programme (above) and to the full contents slide-by-slide (below).

Andrew Derrington

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### Do you have a fundable project?

1. Say what your project aims to achieve (the goal) in terms intelligible outside your research discipline.
2. How will your project achieve its goal?

3. Give an example of your success with this research approach.
4. Can you split your goal into three sub-goals?
5. For each sub-goal:-
  - State the sub-goal (ideally as something we need to know).
  - Describe how the research will achieve the sub-goal.
  - Say what makes it important to achieve the sub-goal in the context of the project.
6. What makes the project suitable for the funder (and scheme) you are targeting?
7. Impact
  - Who will benefit most from this research?
  - How will they benefit?
  - What will you do to ensure that they benefit?

**If you start writing a grant application without answering these questions, you might never finish.**

## Strategy

### Your strategy must accommodate the likelihood of rejection

- Most well-written grant applications get rejected.
- Rejection can be a devastating experience

...

- If you need a grant, you should plan to write 5 or 6 based on the same set of ideas
- Never get down to your last rejection.
- If you get 6 rejections, it's time to develop a new set of ideas.

...

- You need to be able to multiplex grant applications
  - Different Outcomes?
  - Different Datasets?
  - Different Objectives, Same Aims?
- You need to be able to write well and quickly.

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### Should I use a successful application as an example to copy?

- About 75% of funded applications are very badly written
- Apply the following test

...

- Can you find single-sentence answers to the following questions in 10 minutes:-
  1. What is the overall aim of the project?
  2. What makes the aim important?
  3. What are the overall research methods?
  4. For each aim or research question (there should be 3 or 4):-
    1. What is the aim or question?
    2. How will the research will answer this question or meet this aim.

3. What makes it important to answer this question or meet this aim in the context of your project.

. . .

- If you can't, it's a bad example to follow.

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## Writing Guidelines

- No Synonyms
  - Pick the best term and use it repeatedly.

. . .

- No Homonyms

. . .

- Always Tell then Explain
- [Key statement](#) at the start of every section
- Re-use [tag phrases](#) across key statements & in headlines

. . .

- Punchline at top of para (~6 paras per page)
- Start with the 'Topic Sentence' . . .
- Strong Verbs (no adverbs, no [nominalisations](#))

. . .

- Sentences as Short as Possible
  - How short is "as Short as Possible"
  - [Health Check](#)

. . .

- Avoid value claims (state evidence instead)

. . .

- Bullet lists good, lists in sentences bad.

. . .

- NIUTEIISPOU

. . .

- – No initialisations unless the expansion is in the same paragraph (or unnecessary)

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## Nominalisations

- A nominalisation is a noun phrase constructed from a verb,

. . .

- which can be used with a general purpose verb to create a flabby, pompous, long-winded way of saying something simple.

...

- We will investigate X
  - We will carry out an investigation into X
- We will analyse
  - We will undertake an analysis of

## Case for Support as Sales Pitch

- Introduction
  - Global Sales Pitch (Importance Proposition)
    - \* Tell them the overall aim & convince them you can deliver it.
    - \* Tell them what makes the aim important.
  - Tell them everything that is to come

...

- Detailed Sales Pitch (Success Proposition)

...

- Background/Literature review
  - Explains how 3 research outcomes are really important ([KS Sub-goal-1-3](#)).
    - \* You can call these the “AIMS”
    - \* You can also call them “RESEARCH QUESTIONS”

...

- Description of Project/Methods/Research Plan
  - Describes the research activities in each of 3 [sub-projects](#) and makes it clear that they will produce the 3 important outcomes ([KS sub-project-1-3](#)).
    - \* You can call these the “OBJECTIVES” or “WORK PACKAGES”

...

- Matching the background to the description of the project creates a detailed sales pitch

...

- When there isn't a separate case for support, make the sales pitch with the form.

Works best with a [magic formula](#)

## Aims & Objectives

...

- Nobody is sure what Aims & Objectives mean, so you can hijack them to reiterate the sales pitch.

...

- Background/Literature review
  - Explains how 3 research outcomes are really important.

- Make achieving the outcomes the AIMS
- You could also couch them in terms of hypotheses or research questions.

- Description of Project/Methods/Research Plan

- Describes the research activities in each of 3 [sub-projects](#) and makes it clear that they will produce the 3 important outcomes.
- Make the subprojects the OBJECTIVES.
- You could also call them Work Packages.

...

- The AIMS and OBJECTIVES deliver the sales pitch.
  - [Use Tag Phrases so Aims match Objectives](#)
  - Order them so they match the structure and the wording of the case for support.
  - Always try and give both, even if you are only asked for one.

## Sub-projects

### What is a sub-project?

- You break your project into components (subprojects) to make it easier to explain.
  - The sub-projects can be sequential
  - Or parallel
  - Or even different analyses of the same data
  - The only requirement is they produce different, important outcomes.

...

- Each sub-project produces an important outcome
  - The outcomes map onto the aims or research questions.
    - \* Which you use to structure the background section of the case for support.
  - That way the explainer will give your sales pitch.
  - Because they will have read the background before the description of the project.

...

- The perfect number of sub-projects is 3, but 4 is OK.

...

- Don't create dependencies on uncertain outcomes (hostages)

...

- We can call the Subprojects Objectives

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## What a Grant Application has to Achieve

### Why you need a magic Formula

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## **A good case for support is designed for the decision process**

1. What do funders want to know?
2. How do funders make decisions
  - What are the implications?
  - The Case for Support as Sales Pitch
  - The Magic Formula

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## **Grant Funders have 4 Questions about the Project**

1. IS THE PROJECT IMPORTANT (to Them)?
  - Direct Outcomes (discoveries)
  - Indirect Outcomes (training, career development, mobility...)
2. WILL THE PROJECT BE SUCCESSFUL?
  - Will it produce the direct outcomes?
    - Will they be put to use?
  - Will it produce the indirect outcomes?
3. ARE THE APPLICANTS COMPETENT?
  - Can they carry out the project?
  - Can their institution support it?
4. WOULD A GRANT BE VALUE for MONEY?
  - Are the resources requested Necessary, Sufficient, and Proportionate (for the project)

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## **Answers to Funders' Questions**

- IMPORTANCE (evidence)
  - Evidence about direct outcomes in literature review
  - Evidence about indirect outcomes in details of project, institutions, & investigators
- SUCCESS (project details)
  - Research activities in relation to outcomes?
  - Impact and dissemination plans..
- COMPETENCE (evidence)
  - Evidence that the team has the necessary skills in publications (quality and authorship).
  - Evidence that PI and institution can deliver the project in track record & facilities.
- VALUE for MONEY (project details)



- Mention how grant resources will be used in the project.
- Mention institutional resources needed for the project.

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### **Which question do you start with?**

- IMPORTANCE?
  - Pick an important question
    - \* Start the literature review
    - \* .....

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## That's how you write a zombie grant...



If the description of the research is less than 50% of the case for support it is probably a 'zombie'.

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### Always start with the competence question

- Design a project that you can deliver
  - Do you have appropriate quality publications
  - Do they demonstrate all relevant Skills?
- Don't make the project much bigger than your past funded projects.
  - Big projects go to those who have too many little projects
  - Think about a cost ladder

- \* £10K/£30K/£100K /£300K/ £1M /£3M/ £10M
- Don't try to jump to the top of the ladder

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## The Decision

...

- Who decides?

...

- Committee of successful researchers
  - Very busy people
  - Very successful
    - \* Have their own grants
    - \* And research groups
    - \* And jobs
  - Not knowledgeable about your particular research area.
- May have 'user' representation
- Supported by secretariat

## The Decision: what information do they have?

- Applications
  - Usually a set of 50-100 per meeting.
  - Arrive 3-6 weeks before meeting.
  - Everybody delays reading them as long as possible.

...

- Expert referees' reports
  - Written reports with evaluation and score.
  - Usually 2-5 per application
  - Usually arrive before the meeting but often after the applications
  - Often conflicting

...

- Designated members' reports
  - Oral report by 2 or 3 members who have read the application.
  - Usually lasts < 5 minutes

## The Decision: what is the process?

- Designated members report on the proposal
  - Usually less than 5 minutes
  - Who, what, why, how, outcomes, strengths, weaknesses, summary of referees, how important and exciting, suggested score
  - One person may have to do this for 10 or more grants in a day.
  - Probably based on 30-60 minutes preparation.

...

- Discussion by all members of the committee.
  - Even though some of them may be reading it for the first time during the discussion.
    - \* They will probably have read the summary beforehand.

...

- All members in the discussion can influence the score.
  - No matter how little they know.
  - And how little time they have spent reading your proposal.

## Implications of the decision process?

- Referees will analyse your grant in detail but:-
  - Most of the committee won't read it.
  - The ones who do read it won't know the field.
  - There will be about 100 other applications.
  - This imposes requirements on the case for support.

...

- It must make the four propositions and it must be:-
  - Easy to analyse at a deep level (Referee).
  - Know what's in it by skimming it (Committee Member).
  - Learn the subject by reading it (Committee Member).
  - Memorable and Distinctive (Designated Member).

...

- These properties need a [magic formula](#)

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## The Magic Formula

- [The Key Sentence Technique](#)
- [Key Statements](#)
- [Layout](#)
- [Tag Phrases](#)

- Repetition

## The Key Sentence Technique

- Create a skeleton of about ten '*key sentences*' that state the main points of the Case for Support.
  - the overall research goal,
  - what makes the goal important,
  - the sub-goals
  - etc
- Use the key sentences as an organising framework for writing the Case for Support,
  - Each key sentence is the first sentence of a subsection of the Case for Support
    - \* Rest of the subsection develops the point
  - Use the key sentences as the Summary and
  - as the Introduction.
- Reader gets the same picture, no matter what they read
  - Summary only
  - First few lines of case for support
  - Every word.

## The Skeleton

10 statements define a (grant application) case for support

- **Problem** States the problem the specific approach & an example of success with that approach
- **Importance** Says what makes the problem important
- **Aim-1, Aim-2 & Aim-3** Say what we need to know (AIMS) & why.
- **Project Intro** Introduces the project
- **Objective-1, Objective-2 & Objective-3** Say how the Objectives (OBJECTIVES) will produce what we need to know.
  - Linking **Aims** to **Objectives** makes the success proposition.
- **Project Outro** Says what will happen when research is done (Impact?)

...

- Use the key statements as the summary.

...

- Re-use the key statements to introduce the case for support

...

- Use a key statement to begin each subsection
- Then follow it with the detail
  - that convinces the referee

## Magic Formula

## Use Layout to Communicate with Skimmers and Speed-Readers

- Message on first line of paragraph (ASSERT then JUSTIFY)
  - First sentence of para ASSERTS (topic sentence)

- Remainder of para JUSTIFIES
  - \* This is where you cite literature
  - \* This is how you avoid citing too much literature.

. . .

- White space above each paragraph

. . .

- Readers' eye movements land on blank lines.
  - Speed-readers will read first line of every paragraph.
  - Browsers will only read first lines.
  - Detail readers will know what to expect in each para

### Magic Formula

## Teach Terminology with Tag Phrases

### Aim-1, Aim-2 & Aim-3 Key Sentences

- 'We need to know' + tag phrase because...
- We need to know the relationship between the performance of single neurons and the performance of the whole visual system in order to establish the likely contribution of single neurons to perception.

. . .

### Objective-1, Objective-2 & Objective-3 Key Sentences

- 'We will do this Objective in order to discover' + tag phrase
- We will record single neurons during perceptual tasks and calculate sensitivity functions for neural responses and for task performance in order to characterise the relationship between the performance of single neurons and the performance of the whole visual system.

. . .

- Tag phrases provide meaning - link between aims and objectives
- Use them in headings (make them short enough)
- Key sentences and tag phrases start off messy and long-winded, like these.

. . .

- You have to edit them to make them effective.

### Magic Formula

## Tag Phrases in Use

### The perceptual capabilities of single neurons in cortical area V1

We need to know the perceptual capabilities of single neurons in cortical area V1 in order to establish the potential contribution of V1 to perception. The potential contribution can be assessed using a range of perceptual tasks, such as visual pattern discrimination, object discrimination, and motion-detection. For any

such task, we can infer the contribution of cortical area V1 to that task from the relationship between the perceptual capabilities of single neurons and the perceptual capabilities of the individual.

This is the start of a sub-section of the background. There will be a couple of pages of text (at least 3 subsections, each with its own heading) between it and the start of the corresponding sub-section of the description of the project, which follows here.

### **Measuring the perceptual capabilities of single neurons in cortical area V1**

We will measure how neural response varies with stimulus strength during perceptual tasks in order to measure the perceptual capabilities of single neurons in cortical area V1. Stimuli from a set that covers a range of strengths will be presented repeatedly in random sequences under computer control. The computer will record responses during the presentations, and during equivalent periods when no stimulus is presented, for off-line spike sorting and analysis.....

[Magic Formula](#)

### **Tag Phrases in Red**

### **The perceptual capabilities of single neurons in cortical area V1**

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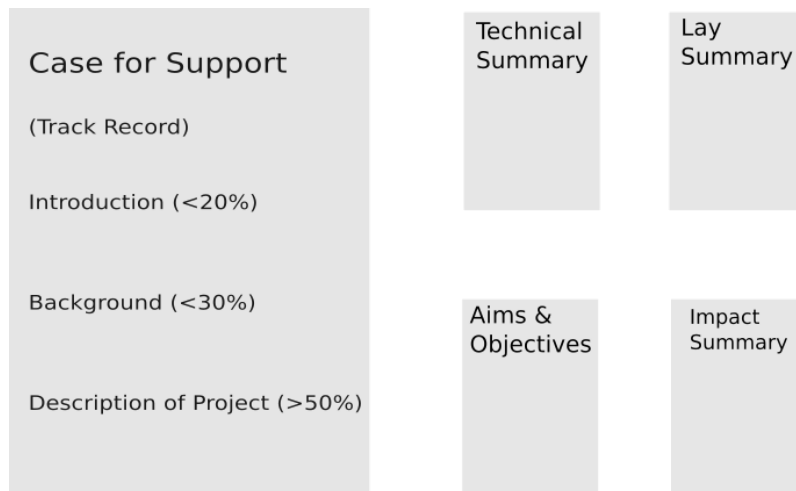
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### **Measuring the perceptual capabilities of single neurons in cortical area V1**

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[Magic Formula](#)

## Re-cycle Text From Case for Support



- Repeat key sentences and tag phrases
  - to provide common structure, and
  - to link
- Maintain structure and order

### Magic Formula

## Resources

What's been funded?

- Research Council Project Summaries
  - <http://gtr.rcuk.ac.uk>
- ERC Summaries
- Leverhulme Awards 2016

Advice on writing:- [www.parkerderrington.com/blog](http://www.parkerderrington.com/blog)

- How to construct a project
- The key sentences
- Catalogue

### Magic Formula

### Back to Start

## The Recipe

- Make sure you have a fundable project
- Prepare your Ingredients
  - Success Proposition



- Project Intro & Outtro
- Importance Proposition
- Build the Structure
- Write a Grant in 10 Steps

## Detailed Research Plan

1. **Problem** (& how you will solve it) relate to research question.
2. **Importance** quantify and explain the problem.
3. Review of Existing Evidence - sells problem & breaks it down into 3 AIMS
  - **Aim-1:** Explains & Sells Aim-1
  - **Aim-2:** Explains & Sells Aim-2
  - **Aim-3:** Explains & Sells Aim-3 3.Research Question: -> 3 Aims -> 3 Objectives.
4. Project Plan- 3 OBJECTIVES THAT DELIVER THE AIMS.
  - **Project Intro:** Introduces the project.
  - **Objective-1:** How sub-project 1 will deliver Aim-1
  - **Objective-2:** How sub-project 2 will deliver Aim-2
  - **Objective-3:** How sub-project 3 will deliver Aim-3
    - Project delivers Aims
  - **Project Outtro:** Says how the research is going to have impact.
5. Research Management Arrangements

## The Key Sentences

1. **Problem** States overall goal of project (AIM, Research Question, Hypothesis)
2. **Importance** Says what makes the overall goal important
3. **Aim-1:** Explains & Sells Aim-1
4. **Aim-2:** Explains & Sells Aim-2
5. **Aim-3:** Explains & Sells Aim-3
6. **Project Intro:** Introduces the project.
7. **Objective-1:** How Objective 1 will deliver Aim-1
8. **Objective-2:** How Objective 2 will deliver Aim-2
9. **Objective-3:** How Objective 3 will deliver Aim-3
10. **Project Outtro:** Says how the research is going to have impact.

## The Key Statements

### Aim and Objective Sentences

- **Objective:** Sentences “This will tell us” (One per Objective)
  - Says how an Objective will achieve a Aim.
  - “We will do whatever the research consists of and this will achieve the Aim”
  - Structures the Research Plan/Methodology. Introduces a subsection.
  - States an OBJECTIVE or Work Package (and the Aim it will deliver).

- 

...

- **Aim** Sentences: “We need to know” (One per Objective)
  - Say what a Aim consists of (& why it’s important)
  - “We need to achieve a Aim for whatever reason”
  - Structures the Background: Introduces a subsection
  - Aim can be expressed in terms of Aim, Research Question, or Hypothesis
    - \* You must use these as different ways of expressing THE SAME THING (ESRC)

- 

...

- Rookie mistakes
  - Aim<sub>Aim</sub> Aim<sub>Objective</sub>
  - Failing to mention research activities in **Objective** Sentences
  - Describing the research activities instead of outcomes in **Aim** Sentences

### Example

## Project Intro & Project Outro Sentences

### Project Intro

- **Project Intro** sentence summarises the project in whatever way is appropriate
  - If they only read 1 sentence about your project, what do you want them to know?

### Project Outro Sentence

- Introduces your discussion of what will happen after the research is complete
- It should say something about how you will ensure that your solution to the problem delivers benefit to patients.

## Problem & Importance

### The Elevator Pitch (Makes the Importance Proposition)

1. **Problem** Sentence should have 3 parts:-

1. The problem to be addressed, in ‘big picture’ terms.
2. How it will be addressed (your research approach).
3. An example of your achievements using that approach, to show you are competent.

...

2. **Importance** sentence says what it is that makes the outcome important. For example...

1. Quantify the real-world problem it will help to solve.
2. Say what it will allow us to do that we can’t do now.

3. Prepare to say which named priorities of your funder it contributes to, and how?

## Write a Grant in 10 Steps

1. You can start as soon as you have thought of a viable project.
2. Check that the project is suitable for your chosen funder and funding scheme.
3. Divide the project into sub-projects and assemble the information you need to describe them and justify them.
4. At this stage you should be able to initiate the costing process & institutional approvals in parallel with the writing.
5. Draft your Key sentences in this order:-
  - i. *Objective* sentences.
  - ii. *Aim* sentences.
  - iii. *Project Intro* and *Project Outro* Sentences
  - iv. *Importance* sentence.
  - v. *Problem* sentence

If you will need a summary for a lay audience you should begin working to prepare and test it at this stage.
6. Use the key sentences as the skeleton and write the subsections of the case for support.
7. Add any funder-specific information or sections to the case for support.
8. Draft any required information on the project timetable and project management.
9. Assemble the budget and write the Justification of Resources
10. Finalise any attachments and summaries you need to submit.

## The Success Proposition

**The Success proposition:- Aim sentences combine with \*Objective\*\* Sentences to convince the reader that the project will tell us what we need to know.**

- **Aim-1** We need Aim~1 (because whatever).
- **Aim-2** We need Aim~2 (because whatever).
- **Aim-3** We need Aim~3 (because whatever).
- ...
- 
- **Objective-1** We will do (summary of Objective-1) and it will achieve Aim-1-.
- **Objective-2** We will do (summary of Objective-2) and it will achieve Aim-2-.
- **Objective-3** We will do (summary of Objective-3) and it will achieve Aim-3-.
- ...

## Fatal Errors

- **Objective** We will achieve Aim - you need to say how
- **Aim** We need to do (Objective) No Aim
- **Aim** Because of whatever we need Aim (Use the same sentence structure if possible)
- **Objective Aim** (Express the Aim in different words).

## The Elevator Pitch

### Makes the Importance Proposition

1. **Problem** Sentence should have 3 parts:-

1. The problem.
2. How you will address it (your research approach).
3. An example of your achievements using that approach, to show you are competent.

. . .

2. **Importance** Sentence says what it is that makes the problem important. For example...

- Quantify the number of people affected and the severity

### Problem Sentence Exercise

#### Why is the first sentence important?

. . .

- It has to be good enough to make the reader read on
- They will have 99 other applications.
  - They know most of them are headed for the shredder.
- They also have a TV.
- What will make them want to read your application?

. . .

- Problem?
- Success?
- Competence?

### The Perfect Problem Sentence

1. The problem.
2. How you will address it (your research approach).
3. An example of your achievements using that approach, to show you are competent.

. . .

1. Problem
2. Success
3. Competence

### The Exercise

1. Interview your neighbour (3 mins)
2. Swap roles and interview again (3 mins)

3. Write a sentence for your neighbour's project (2 mins)
4. Write a Sentence for your own Project (2 mins)
5. Optimise and discuss.

. . . .

### **Remember**

1. The problem.
2. How you will address it (your research approach).
3. An example of your achievements using that approach, to show you are competent.

## Presenter



Andrew Derrington has in-depth experience of the research funding process. He obtained his first research grant, a Beit Memorial Fellowship for Medical Research, while he was writing his PhD. His research was continuously funded by fellowships, project and programme grants for the next 30 years. He served on research grant committees for The Science and Engineering Research Council, the Medical Research Council and the Wellcome Trust. His book, *The Research Funding Toolkit*, which he co-wrote with Jacqueline Aldridge, research and enterprise associate in the School of Psychology at the University of Kent, is the definitive guide to grant writing for early career academics and research professionals. It is based on Andrew's analysis of how grants committees make funding decisions.

Andrew has worked in eight Universities including two in the world top ten.

He has also worked as a journalist. Over several years he wrote two successful columns in the Financial Times. *The Nature of Things* covered science - from astrophysics to zoology. *Psych Yourself Up* was a guide to the different psychotherapies available in the UK.

Andrew set up [Parker Derrington Ltd](#) in 2013. He now works as a consultant, writing research grant applications and providing strategic advice and training to individuals and organizations.

## Testimonials

*I had a fantastically useful time attending your recent workshop at Leicester University. Writing the 10 key sentences was a very useful exercise and I have, since, worked on them to discover they are a fab tool for any kind of writing really.*

Dr Ranjana Das, University of Leicester

*Andrew blends easy authority and extensive experience with humour and approachability. The result is a workshop full of practical, memorable advice on how to compete more successfully for research funding.*

Professor Peter Clegg, Institute of Ageing and Chronic Disease, University of Liverpool

*I attended one of Andrew's workshops when I was a senior lecturer. The hands on advice about how to structure my applications in a really appealing fashion enabled me to win a grant of nearly £600K the next year. I still implement the advice that I received in that workshop, and pass it down to junior colleagues. I find that Andrew's advice has a high success rate!*

Prof Theresa Gannon, University of Kent

*I still use the tips you gave me for my successful Wellcome SRF application. Your advice on "12 key sentences" is spot-on and helps people focus on the aspects of the proposal that are critical to success instead of getting bogged down in reams of text.*

Prof Mark Baxter, Mount Sinai School of Medicine

*Andrew's grant-writing workshops teach you how to convince the world that it needs your research. They are the most useful training events I have ever attended. His advice about how to sell the big idea without compromising on the science was critical to the success of our £9.3 million ESRC application.*

Prof Julian Pine, University of Liverpool