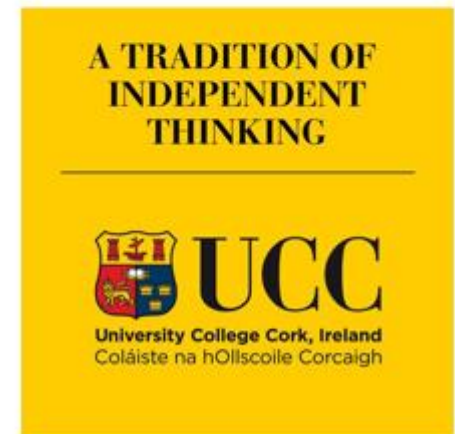# Understanding Proposal Writing

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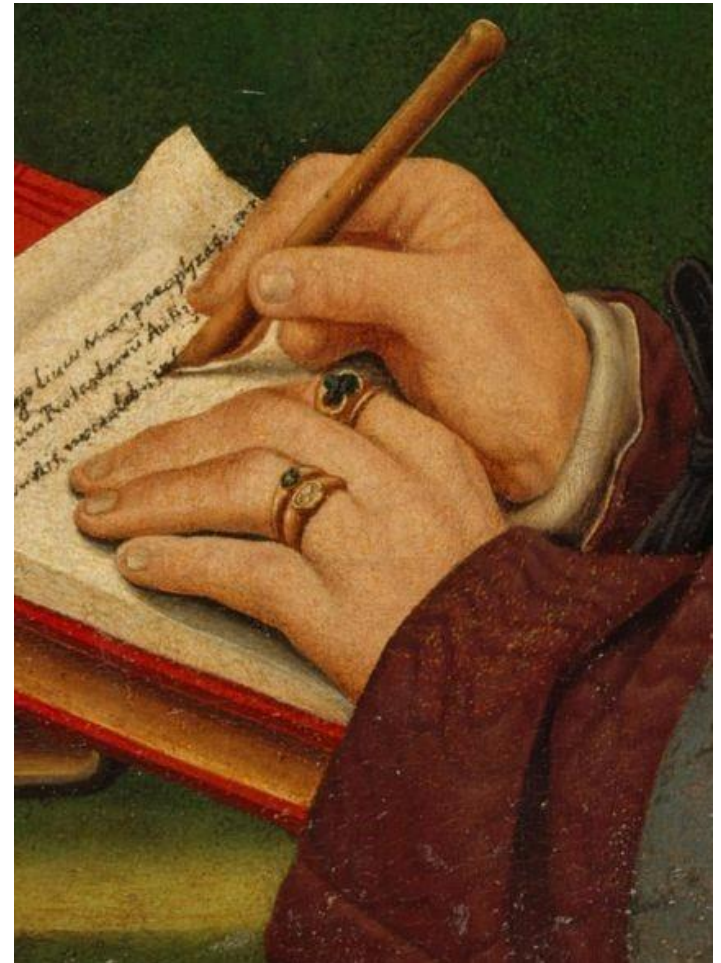
The Bottom Line

- If you are preparing a proposal, use the resources offered by the Research Office and other research support staff in UCC – they are excellent!

- Most of what I will discuss today relates to early career researchers . . . though it should also have some wider application to anyone preparing a research proposal.

A TRADITION OF
INDEPENDENT
THINKING

UCC

University College Cork, Ireland
Coláiste na hOllscoile Corcaigh

Who? What? How? Why?

- There are two different circumstances in which people seek funding:
  - ◦ (1) for a new project, as yet undefined;
  - ◦ (2) for an existing project.

- The relative focus you need to give to the four questions above varies according to whether your project is new or already established.

- Perhaps the hardest thing to refine is your answer to the first question; your record (and that of any collaborators) matters hugely and needs to be communicated clearly but I think your focus should lie elsewhere.
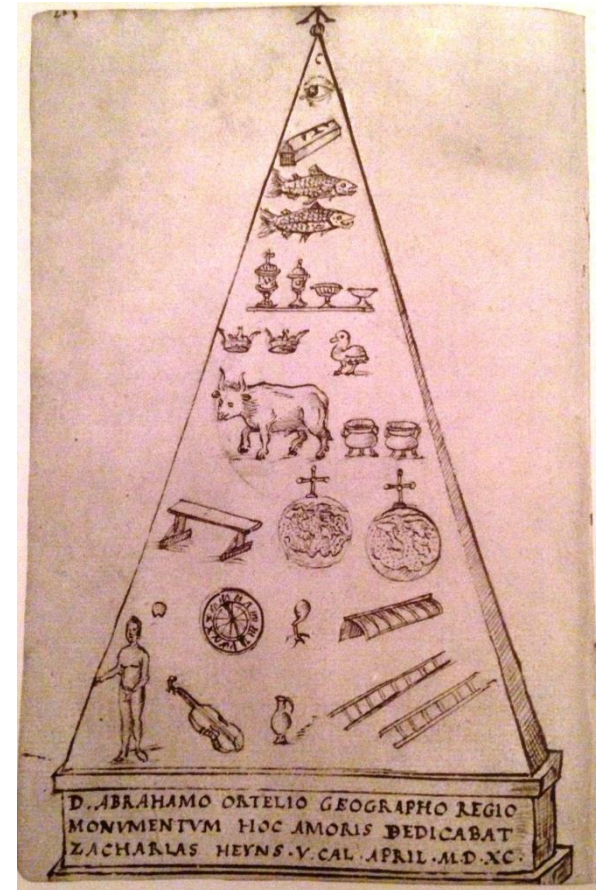
Tailor Each Application

- Shaping your project to a funding call is hugely important – don't submit generic applications or letters of support.

- This doesn't prevent you from planning in advance of the funding call being issued, but it does mean you need to be creative and flexible.

- Think of writing a grant application as part of the research process, not as separate to it.

Dazzle but don't Puzzle

- The 'burden of knowledge' is a huge problem when writing for non-specialists who will judge your application.

- If you are simulateously writing for specialists and non-specialists then the task is even harder (this depends on the funding body).

- Striking a balance between clarity and the use of technical vocabulary requires careful judgment of who is likely to read your application.

Rebus contributed by Zachary Heyns, f.104^v, 28 March 1590

From 'What?' to 'So what?'...

- All research (hopefully) breaks new ground but the real trick is to communicate why something is important.

- My impression is that funding bodies are more likely to support things that involve sophisticated methodology sections rather than complex theoretical subtleties (perhaps because they are often unsure how to judge the latter).

- Be specific and detailed about the inner workings of your project – why haven't others done what you are proposing to do?

Vesalius, *The Structure of the Human Body* (1543)

Methodology *versus* Theory

▸ One might helpfully distinguish three things here:
  ◦ what you do;
  ◦ what the rationale behind your work is;
  ◦ what makes your work new.

▸ Methodology is primarily the first of these, but it is also relates to the other two.

▸ You will need to address all three areas, but you also need to decide which one shows your work in the best light, and which you have most to say about.

The research process

Research idea · Literature review · Theoretical formulation of the research problem · Empirical research questions (operationalization) · Research design (planning) · Data collection · Data analysis · Answering the empirical research questions · Theoretical interpretation of the results · Comparison with earlier research · Conclusions

Reflective praxis

▸ What do you actually *do*?

▸ What skills have you had to learn?

▸ Do you work in isolation or with others?

▸ Is your work informed by theory or contributing to theory?

Developing what you do

- Most people think of their work in terms of their data or argument, but thinking about how to develop your methodology is a good way to make progress

- Being interdisciplinary is not enough if that just means that you read work by various types of scholars – do you apply or even refine their methods?

- If your working methods are fairly traditional, can you still add extra strings to your bow at this stage?

Peer esteem

Peer esteem can be conveyed through more than just references . . .

▸ Is your project collaborative?
▸ Can you create an advisory board?

What is a man on his own?
You can't play chess like that.
So if I can't find someone to play with
I must pack away my pieces.

Jan de Bray (1627–1697), entry in the album of Jacob Heyblocq (1623–1690), made in Haarlem in 1661.

Conclusions

- Rethink your central research questions and your aims/objectives on a regular basis.

- Try constantly to reframe the relevance of your research beyond the specific academic sphere you inhabit.

- Grant applications are not a lottery, though there is obviously an element of chance involved. Train to write them, prepare, take advice, and don't give up.

- Be careful what you wish for! Don't promise to do something that you don't want to do!!