

HOW TO EAT A WHALE — THINGS NEVER TOLD ABOUT GRANT WRITING IN GRADUATE SCHOOL

Barbara Pieper

Melinda Mae

Have you heard of tiny Melinda Mae,
Who ate a monstrous whale?
She thought she could,
She said she would,
So she started right at the tail.

And everyone said, "You're much too small,"
But that didn't bother Melinda at all.
She took little bites and she chewed very slow,
Just like a good girl should . . .

. . . And in eighty-nine years she ate that whale
Because she said she would!

by Shel Silverstein

Melinda Mae eating her whale well depicts the novice faculty member incorporating grant writing and research into the faculty role. The faculty role is often described as an integration of teaching, research, publication, and community service. But if one is teaching in an undergraduate program, the research role integration may seem like eating two whales instead of one! An important aspect of the research process is the submission of the research proposal for funding. In hopes that it will not take 89 years to conquer the research whale, I will present some laws for the beginning researcher regarding the submission of a proposal for funding. I selected the word "laws" with much care. According to Dubin (1969), a law is a generalization from observable facts that are representative of outward conditions. A law is not based on chance coincidence. After talking with experienced research colleagues who expressed many of the same learnings, it seemed that the word "law" was appropriate for labeling these factors.

Barbara Pieper, Ph.D., R.N., is Assistant Professor of Nursing,
Wayne State University, Detroit, Michigan.

LAW 1. SMALL GRANTS ARE AVAILABLE.

Small grants allow the research neophyte an opportunity to develop research skills. A small grant is considered to be one of less than \$20,000. Money is available and small projects allow the research beginner an opportunity to build the "track record" so often needed for large grant funding approval. The Canadian Nurses Association has a reference list regarding granting sources, *Nursing Research in Canada: Guide to Information Sources*. Private agencies which fund research should also be explored — for example: disease oriented agencies such as Heart Association or Diabetes Association, nursing professional organizations and community or industrial organizations. The funding from the agency may or may not allow for faculty salary — meaning much of the research process will have to be completed on the researcher's own time in the latter case.

LAW 2. TIME ORGANIZATION IS CRITICAL.

Time organization is critical for anyone applying for research funding but doubly so for the novice. The grant should be written far enough in advance of the submission date to provide time for colleague critique. Faculty not involved with the project may clarify specific aims, note variables not described in the methodology, and find errors in the selected statistical procedures — just to name a few. It is difficult to believe that the masterpiece proposal one has toiled over for so many hours could have inconsistencies, but it is better that a colleague find these in the proposal rather than the granting agency.

Deadline submission dates should be noted carefully. Agencies are usually quite firm on the grant deadline, but changes can occur. A grant planned and written early may be decisive for the submission when an agency decides to move its grant submission date.

Work and family schedules may change, thus interfering with grant writing. Nursing faculty seem to have a knack for scheduling extra faculty meetings during the time one has designated for grant writing. Set priorities — miss a faculty meeting! If the grant is being written by a faculty group, research meetings should be planned around the individual with the least flexible schedule, one is then most assured all participants will attend. Research meetings should be organized and concise so group members do not feel valuable time is wasted. Besides work schedules, family functioning — i.e., ill children, visitors from out of town, etc. — may alter one's regimented time schedule. In totality, it is best to remember the old saying "blood loss is twice the amount estimated by the health professional" or writing time takes twice the time planned by the neophyte.

LAW 3. ADMINISTRATION WANTS TO KNOW.

The dean and department chairperson should be notified as soon as possible of the research plan, submission date of the proposal, and percentage of one's work time the project requires. Since they are most involved with determining work schedules, the dean and department chairperson appreciate knowledge of one's research commitment so as to facilitate planning of future teaching assignments. Notifying administrative individuals early alerts them in a courteous manner as to when to expect the proposal for signatures (see law 5).

LAW 4. SECRETARIES ARE GODS.

Secretaries in a research department have god-like qualities. Since they type numerous grant proposals, a good secretary can identify inconsistencies in the grant, offer suggestions for budget development, as well as type the grant in proper format. Informing the secretaries of when the proposal will need to be typed will allow them to arrange work schedules so as to plan sufficient time and personnel to devote to each proposal. Secretaries can also assist one with completion of various university forms which must accompany the grant. Needless to say, secretaries should be dealt with in a very considerate manner.

LAW 5. SIGNATURES TAKE TIME.

Grant proposals leaving the university require various signatures. These often include the signatures of the dean and department chairperson as well as a signature from the university's grant department. Obtaining signatures relates closely to time organization (Law 2) and notifying administration (Law 3). It is rather difficult to obtain the dean's signature for a grant proposal due tomorrow when she/he is out of town for the week and has no knowledge of the proposal.

Signatures from the university grant department are best facilitated by remembering Law 4, "secretaries are gods." A research secretary usually has much contact with university grant officials and can often introduce the neophyte researcher to the correct university persons for signatures and arrange that the person be available when a signature is needed.

LAW 6. MAILING TAKES MANY FORMS.

In mailing a grant proposal, the researcher must consider if the granting agency has a date whereby the proposal must be received at the agency or a date the proposal must be postmarked. If the proposal is completed far enough in advance (usually one week) regular mail

may be used. The post office can also inform one of other mailing procedures such as registered mail or special delivery. Use of regular mail is a financial saving over one day guaranteed mail delivery which begins at approximately \$10.00 per letter. Although \$10.00 may not seem like much money, a research proposal is not an ordinary letter and the weight of multiple copies often increases the price. Even one day guaranteed service is not problem free for a snowstorm may impede delivery time even a few hours and thus the agency may refuse to accept the proposal.

LAW 7. GRANT REVIEW BOARDS TAKE MANY FORMS.

Reviewers for national grants are usually individuals who have research expertise, a content speciality, and a publication record. Private foundation review boards may be of the same caliber as national review boards or have a mixture of individuals, i.e., some individuals with clinical expertise but little research experience, or vice versa. For a beginning researcher it is important to note that a private foundation review board may be less stringent in the review process and approve a proposal with a strong clinical significance if the researcher obtains assistance with methodology. Reviewers look more favorably on a proposal that follows the agency's writing guidelines. Granting agencies are most helpful in answering questions about their guidelines as well as offering suggestions for proposal development.

LAW 8. THERE IS NO SUCH THING AS A "SMALL" GRANT.

Writing a small grant is often as time consuming as applying for a large grant. Time is needed for writing, typing, and signatures. Grants of less than say \$2,000 often appear spent before the grant money arrives. The novice researcher should be proud of accomplishments, no matter how small, even though it is a humbling experience when one compares oneself to a faculty colleague who has a \$125,000 grant. Again, small grants provide the beginner with experience needed to apply later for larger funds.

LAW 9. RESERVE FILE SPACE FOR REJECTED PROPOSALS.

Unfortunately not all proposals one submits are accepted; initially one wonders if any proposals are accepted. Comments from reviewers are often available. It is probably best not to read these comments until one has had an opportunity to calm down emotionally. The comments are often helpful in writing future research proposals. No proposal should be discarded as it may contain ideas of importance for future use. An understanding person is a critical factor in helping to cope with the "rejection blues."

Yes, like Melinda Mae eating her whale, grant writing as part of the research process is feasible for the neophyte. Besides a "she could; she would" attitude, a sense of humor and a willingness to ask experienced researchers for assistance are highly recommended. Most important is a feeling of accomplishment. No matter how small the proposed project, one should be proud of the conceptualization process, planning, and writing effort that went into the proposal. Deciding to sit down at the research table is an important commitment. Little bites or big bites — how the research whale is eaten depends on the individual researcher. Any form of mastication will help one meet professional goals as well as assist in the development of nursing's research base.

REFERENCES

- Dubin, R. *Theory building*. New York: The Free Press, 1969.
Silverstein, S. *Where the sidewalk ends*. New York: Harper & Row Publishers, 1974.

RÉSUMÉ

L'art de manger une baleine ou le secret des demandes de bourses d'études supérieures

La soumission de demandes de bourses est un aspect important de la recherche. Pour le chercheur débutant, la démarche en vue de l'obtention de sources de financement peut être l'occasion de rencontres intéressantes. Dans l'espoir de faciliter cette démarche, le présent article nous propose des "règles" dont le chercheur qui en est à ses premières armes, devra tenir compte lors de la préparation de ses projets de recherche.