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My word

Grant-writing amnesia

Anne L. Calof

I can't believe this is happening to me again. I find myself working on a grant when I wasn't really planning on doing that this month, frantically re-writing and analyzing preliminary data in order to make the best case possible, to convince the NIH to give me funds for a new series of experiments. Why is it always like this? Why, every time I write a grant proposal, does the writing project go down to the wire, even past the deadline? Well, I'll tell you why — it's grant writing amnesia.

Here's what happens. In advance of actually writing the grant proposal, everyone in the lab works very hard to gather preliminary data that will demonstrate the feasibility of what the investigator wants to propose. In the US, feasibility is considered an important aspect of a good grant proposal, so this takes a lot of time and effort, both technical and intellectual. Then write, write, write up to the deadline, trying for clarity, brevity, and that elusive component called 'impact'. Finish writing the proposal, spend a day assembling and copying it and, if you operate like I do, miss the deadline for the express delivery service and find yourself driving to the only all-night post office in the vicinity (which in my case is an hour's drive away at the Los Angeles International Airport). That night, you collapse from exhaustion.

The next day is when the amnesia sets in. The sheer relief of not having to write a grant, on top of your normal workload, leads to a state of euphoria in which you rapidly forget the preceding several weeks, instead marveling at how much free time you seem suddenly to have. You begin to think: This

isn't so bad. Science is fun! I wonder why I've been in a bad mood for the past four weeks? And life goes on as normal, until the grant renewal is due. Then the panic sets in and the whole cycle begins again.

Why does grant-writing amnesia occur? My theory is that it's a survival mechanism for investigators who run their labs on extramural grants. I liken it to that old adage about the reason humans continue to reproduce being because women somehow forget the pain of childbirth. I can only conclude that it's a good thing for us as scientists that grant-writing amnesia exists. It's probably the only reason my lab continues to be funded.

Grant-writing amnesia is the reason my lab continues to be funded

There is a negative side to grant-writing amnesia, though — it makes you forget the good things about writing grant proposals. And there are good things. The first one is that the act of writing the proposal gives you the opportunity to set down your ideas on paper and work them through. Often this may be the first time you've ever asked yourself the cold, hard questions: Why am I bothering to study this? Is this a question worth asking? Do I care about the answer? Painful as this can be, it's really worth doing. For one thing, it might lead you in a new direction — out of the science doldrums, so to speak. It's an exercise well worth the effort (in contrast to the filling out and signing of forms, an occupation that seems to take up more of my time each year).

The real fun of grant writing comes after you have actually written a draft of the proposal (and, hopefully, before you've sent it in). If you are lucky enough to have good colleagues, willing to read your proposal and discuss it with you, then one of the most enjoyable parts

of grant writing can be arguing about your science. I mean the really good arguments, too, the ones that make you aware of your real approach to experimentation and analysis, the ones that bring you face-to-face with flaws in your reasoning (or your colleagues').

In part, I enjoy this kind of discussion because I always learn something from it. Experiments that are designed as a result of fighting it out with a really smart colleague are always better than the ones I come up with on my own, so the grant proposal improves with the exercise as well. And then, there's the fact that I just like to argue about science. Much of the pleasure in being a scientist is, for me, the intellectual athletics in which the goal is to do the best possible experiment in the most elegant and definitive way, and arguing about experiments and data is the best training I know for this.

Another seldom-acknowledged advantage of grant writing is that it places you in a sort of elevated state, in which your time is your own for a few short weeks. "No", you can say in a polite but firm voice (or perhaps a frantic and slightly crazed one), "I have a grant to write, and that's more important." Who can argue with that?

The only problem is that this elevated state is accompanied by its own form of amnesia — overcommitment amnesia. Those manuscript reviews and other papers that you have put off writing conveniently disappear beneath the mound of paperwork that was once your desk, you hope, never to re-surface. But such obligations have usually only been postponed, not removed. Which is why the long-suffering editor of this column is receiving this little manuscript about four months late. But then, who's counting?

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