Supporting Early Career Researchers to write persuasively: *Rhetorical analysis of Fellowship applications*

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This short article offers some ideas for how Researcher and Academic Developers can make effective use of written examples in the workshops that we run. It focuses on helping participants to prepare funding applications as an example, but, in a broader sense also shows how helping participants to review written examples might help them to identify key learning that they can then apply to their own applications. I argue that potential applicants should be instructed in *how* to read example applications to gain the maximum benefit, and that using rhetorical analysis may be one useful approach.

Introduction

Researcher developers use written texts in support of development interventions in a range of areas including applying for Postdoctoral Fellowships and grants, preparing job applications, and gaining recognition for teaching. In such areas, workshop participants often expect to be given (generally successful) examples of previous applications in order to 'see what an application looks like'. However, my experience as a researcher and educational developer has shown that early career researchers (and, indeed, more experienced academic staff) can often find it difficult to translate the specifics of a particular application – which is likely to be from outside of their discipline area and experience – into something which is useful for them as they produce their own written texts. It is therefore up to developers to make it clearer what the textual examples that we provide can offer, and how participants should read them. However, Lynne Flowerdew, writing in 2016, points out that "this 'behind-the scenes genre' has not received much attention in the ESP [English for specific purposes] literature, either from a research or a pedagogic perspective" (2016, p. 1). In this short piece, I will attempt to offer some ideas about how we might make better use of written examples in our workshops, and will focus on attempts to help participants to prepare funding applications as an example.

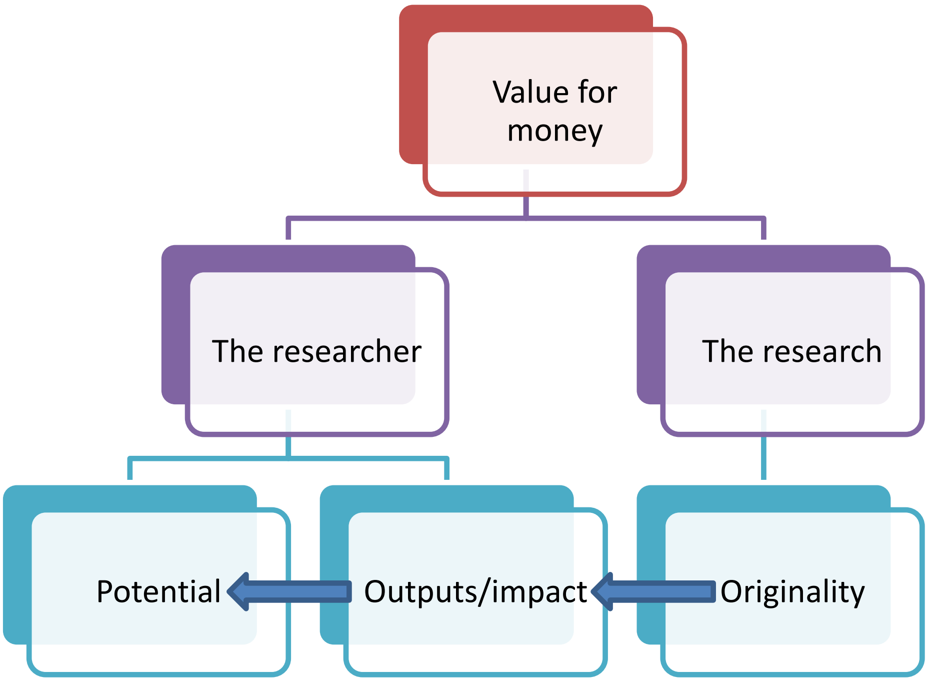
Exposing rhetorical moves

There is a body of existing literature which has analysed academic writing (including research proposals, article introductions and grant applications) from a linguistic perspective and has identified certain rhetorical 'moves' ("functional unit[s], used for some identifiable rhetorical purpose" (Connor and Mauranen, 1999, p. 51) which tend to take place. Prospective applicants are generally told that a good proposal will not get a bad idea funded, but that a bad proposal can prevent a good idea from being successful – in this way attention is drawn to the importance of the quality of the argument in gaining funding. It is true that "one cannot be given a list of persuasive and communicative techniques" and this is one of the challenges of supporting researchers in writing these persuasive pieces, but, nevertheless, Connor and Mauranen, contend that "there are certain constraints and expectations in grant proposals that function as a framing schema for new proposals" (1999, p. 49). The challenge is helping researchers to see this schema and how it might be applied in their own work (see Box 1 below).

Rhetorical move	How this might look in practice…
Explain why your research is important / situate it in the academic context	"this work will offer a new conceptual framework for x, y and z" "The [topic of the research] is a key challenge of our time."
Explain which particular gap or niche it fills with reference to existing research (i.e. where is the *originality* of the contribution?) "The *gap* is turned into the research space" (Swales and Najjar, 1987: 179)	"There is an evident need for a subtle understanding, akin to that which has already been established for x, of [the topic of the research] if a fuller comprehension of this issue is to be formed" "While a great deal of attention has been paid to on x, surprisingly little attention has focussed on [the topic of the proposal]"
Give concrete details of the work to be done (but be realistic about what can be achieved)	"I also intend to organise two workshops [on specified topics on particular dates]"
Be specific about what the outputs will be	"The primary output for this project will be a monograph entitled 'topic of the research' to be submitted to [a specific publisher]"
Show how you plan to maximise outputs and/or offer a range of outputs	"This project will result in two book-length outcomes… I will also submit articles relating to the project… to key peer-reviewed journals in the field"
Show that you have the necessary skills/experience/expertise to carry out the research	"I have published several articles…" "My research to date [is] the only comprehensive analysis of [the topic]… This research has produced articles…I am currently preparing an article on…" "I have demonstrable potential for high quality research: I have been invited to submit an article… and act as a peer reviewer for an international journal … I passed my viva with no corrections… and was strongly encouraged to publish my thesis as a monograph by my external examiner"

Box 1: Key rhetorical moves in post-doc fellowship applications and examples of how they might be enacted

The key elements outlined above may be summarised as a focus on 'value for money' (i.e. return on the investment provided by the funder) via both the research and the researcher. The value of the research is often considered to be its originality (in some form as outlined later), while the value of the researcher lies in their ability to capitalise on the knowledge outputs and impact from the project, as well as the progression/development impacts for their own career:



As the diagram suggests, the originality of the work contributes to its potential for impact (though it is the researcher's job to identify how and where that impact is likely to be realised), and the quality of the outputs and impact from the research also contribute to the researcher's further potential to carve out an academic career.

Value for money: 'selling' the researcher

Connor and Mauranen go so far as to suggest that the purpose of a proposal or job application is "to 'sell' a product", and while we may baulk at the language here, the idea that researchers need to demonstrate that they and their work will offer funders good value for their money is a useful one in that it encourages participants to focus on the need for persuasion (1999, p. 48). The idea that they might have to demonstrate 'value for money' is generally new, and so they are encouraged to consider the following ways to demonstrate it:

- Not repeating work that has already been done by the applicant or someone else. This involves demonstrating an awareness of existing data, methods, literature, etc. in the field.
- Clear plans for achieving maximum impact and outputs, which would include having thought ahead about public engagement, potential conferences to attend, and potential journal articles, for instance.
- Good (realistic) planning that shows an awareness of academic timescales (such as how long it might take for an article to be submitted to a journal to finally be published).
- Being ready to hit the ground running once the Fellowship begins. Key contacts should have already been made, initial discussions may have been held with potential public engagement or knowledge exchange partners and plans for specific conference papers and journal articles should be in place.

- Showing that the researcher has the skills and experience to deliver (on time). Applicants who have delivered other projects on time (like the PhD, for instance), who have managed small amounts of funding in the past, who have already been published and who have undertaken relevant training and development are all more likely to deliver.

While Connor and Mauranen identify a 'benefits' move, which "comprises intended or projected outcomes of the study, presented in terms of their usefulness and value to the world outside" (1999, p. 57), 'value for money' in my sense is slightly different and starts to encompass the difficult task of 'selling' the researcher as being someone who ought to be invested in due to his or her grasp of academic work, the disciplinary field and excellent project management skills. The research may have benefit to the wider world in some sense, but the researcher has to show that s/he is able to maximise that benefit, and therefore get the most out of the investment made by the funder.

The funder's interest in whether the researcher is the right person for the investment can be intensified if the fellowship has a particular career development purpose (as is the case for early career fellowships). In this case, the funder is also interested in whether the funding will effectively support the movement of the applicant into an academic post – in whether the applicant is an academic of the future. In demonstrating such potential, workshop participants might be asked to consider:

- Why are you the right person to do this project? (What particular skills, knowledge, achievements, experience, networks have you already developed?)
- How will you use the time/money to enhance or further your career? (What publications, conference presentations, networking opportunities, training and development opportunities will you take advantage of?)

Again, examples of successful bids might give participants a concrete example of how others have persuaded funders to invest in them.

Value for money: selling the research

In terms of 'selling' the project, the notion of originality is central to academic work and generally forms one of the early moves in a successful application (Connor and Mauranen suggest that it (i.e., identifying a 'gap') tends to be the second move after the existing research territory is sketched out (1999, p. 54). Within a workshop, participants may be asked to identify the originality of their own research prior to seeing examples of how others have presented it. I have tended to support this process of identifying originality by offering the following examples of where originality might lie, and asking participants to discuss where one (or more of them) might apply to their own work:

- Answering a new question with existing data
- Answering an existing question with new data
- Developing a new methodology
- Analysing newly discovered data/texts
- Looking at groups/countries/people who have not been studied (in a particular way) before
- Refining existing questions
- Taking approaches/questions from one discipline and applying them to another
- Timely questions

Participants are generally then asked to look at the sample applications to identify where and how the author has identified originality in his/her project proposal in an effort to identify how this move can play out in writing.

The forms of academic writing mentioned above (research grants, job applications and claims for teaching recognition) are all forms of persuasive writing, and, as such, have certain generic and stylistic commonalities. Indeed, “because of their communicative purpose [to persuade proposal reviewers and grant agency officials to fund the proposed research], grant proposals have a great deal in common with…job applications” (Connor and Mauranen, 1999, p. 48). This may seem like an obvious point, but many researchers seem to fail to really grasp the fundamental purpose of proposals (and, indeed, job applications, especially when it comes to constructing a CV), and even where they do understand it, they are not always clear about the form that their argument should take. In particular, where researchers might be more comfortable in arguing for the worth and relevance of their research, they are generally less familiar (and often less comfortable) with arguing for themselves as a researcher, job candidate or experienced teacher (i.e. “performing the act of self-promotion” as Tseng (2011, p. 2262) puts it). Nevertheless, this is one thing that a successful academic must be able to do in order to function in a pretty competitive market.

Conclusion

Clearly, highlighting (even the existence of) the rhetorical moves commonly deployed in grant applications is one of the potential benefits of providing workshop participants with sample applications. Instructions to ‘read and reflect on’ such examples are, however, generally not specific enough to ensure that participants are able to learn from the successes (and failures) of others – rather they have to be told *how* to read the applications that are provided. I therefore suggest that potential Fellowship applicants be given clearer guidance on how to make real use of the successful examples that they are often shown by drawing their attention to the commonly deployed moves. The approach suggested, which highlights common rhetorical moves and also demonstrates how those moves may be enacted, helps participants to understand the persuasive nature of grant and fellowship applications (as well as, potentially, job applications and claims for teaching recognition) and focuses attention on creating a good quality *argument* for support.

References

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