GOALS, OBJECTIVES AND SPECIFIC AIMS

Funding agencies or sponsors may use different terms, but these three are the most common that you will see in proposal guidelines. Goals are broad and conceptual; objectives and specific aims are more explicit. Typically, the term “objectives” is used in all research areas whereas “specific aims” normally appear in proposals focused on health/medical research (e.g., NIH). You will need to write your goals in such a way as to properly frame your objectives or specific aims (big picture vs. small picture).

Examples:

**Non-medical**: Your goal may be to improve the reliability of large-scale electricity generation from renewable resources. Your objective is to identify a specific process to rapidly correct power loss in solar power plants.

**Medical**: Your goal may be to improve treatment for alcoholism, but your specific aim would be to determine if Treatment A is better than Treatment B in helping patients overcome their addictions to alcohol.

**Non-medical**: Your goal is to learn to play the piano. Your objective is to play “Ode to Joy” by Beethoven correctly at a recital in the spring.

**Medical**: Your goal is to lose weight in order to improve your health. Your specific aim is to lose 20 pounds in three months.

Objectives or specific aims are the crux of your proposal. Nothing is more important than the articulation of what, how, and why you will be testing, measuring, or analyzing data in your project. One way to know if your written arguments are persuasive is to get feedback from colleagues, peers, or mentors and adjust your proposal accordingly.

Objectives and specific aims must be absolutely clear. Later, in the body of your proposal, you will need to illustrate specifically how success will be measured. The single greatest stumbling block to garnering external funding is a submitter’s assumption that they have been clear. It is not enough for you to know (or think you know) what is entailed in your research project, you must be plain-spoken, logical, and complete. Otherwise, the funding agency will pass over your proposal and quickly move on to the next applicant!