For additional information, please contact Elaine (hello@academic-smartcuts.com) or Dan (dan.allwood@peak-writing.com).

1. **Proposal Launchpad: Idea Generation for Early Career Researchers:** This programme guides participants through the practices that help develop viable research ideas and honestly assess their potential, allowing ECRs to start their grant proposal from a solid foundation.

   FORMAT: 5 sessions, 3 hours each   **HOMEWORK:** Yes
   PARTICIPANTS: 12 / 16

2. **Couch to £500K: Turning an Idea into a Proposal (Standard / Fellowship):** This is an in-depth programme that walks participants through the proposal creation process step by step to build a first draft of a proposal.

   FORMAT: 12 sessions, 3 hours each   **HOMEWORK:** Yes
   PARTICIPANTS: 12 / 16

3. **Mock EPSRC Prioritisation Panel:** This course provides an overview of the panel process followed at EPSRC and puts participants into the shoes of panel members. By experiencing the funding process from a different perspective, participants can better identify how to strengthen their own proposals.

   FORMAT: 2 sessions, 3 hours each   **HOMEWORK:** Yes
   PARTICIPANTS: 12

4. **EPSRC Proposal Audit:** As the final step in the proposal creation process, this audit is designed to give the PI greater confidence that they are submitting a competitive proposal. Proposals are edited to clarify the language as necessary and identify potential problems.

5. **Writing Retreat:** This provides structured time to allow academics and researchers to focus on research writing. Dr Elaine Massung and Professor Dan Allwood are available throughout the day for questions arising or for booked one-to-ones.

6. **Skills for Life: Academic Writing from the Ground Up:** Cohort-based training to help PhD students develop the skills necessary to produce clear and concise academic writing.

   FORMAT: 12 sessions, 2 hours each   **HOMEWORK:** Yes
   PARTICIPANTS: 12 / 16

Helping researchers lay the groundwork for a competitive and compelling proposal through idea generation techniques, preliminary research, and horizon scanning.

BACKGROUND:

A building is only as strong as its foundations. In the same way, a competitive grant proposal is only as strong as its founding idea. This must address a clear problem or opportunity, offer meaningful promise, and be novel. Identifying such ideas can be challenging, which is where a thorough idea generation process is required.

This course was designed after helping cohorts of early career researchers (ECRs) develop grant proposals. We discovered that their idea generation process tends to focus on projects of interest to *them*. Yet, without understanding the landscape they are operating in, ECRs struggle to identify and articulate the need for their project or the potential difference it could make to the research community and wider world. This is a core component of creating a compelling and competitive proposal.

However, the jump from being a post-doctoral assistant carrying out someone else's work to being an independent researcher who is responsible for a complete proposal is seldom taught, yet it requires a shift in mindset and behaviour. By walking participants through the necessary preliminary research and horizon scanning, the Proposal Launchpad allows ECRs to look before they leap by allowing them to develop, refine, and iterate their ideas, giving them the best chance of making a successful landing.

AIMS:

Author John Steinbeck once said, "Ideas are like rabbits. You get a couple and learn how to handle them, and pretty soon you have a dozen."

This programme helps ECRs learn how to approach idea generation, preliminary project research, and horizon scanning to ensure that they have a solid foundation in finding and evaluating their ideas throughout their entire academic career. This helps them move beyond fixating on trendy topics or the latest buzzwords, and instead stand out from the crowd in a positive way. After all, it's difficult to show that you're leading the research agenda or carrying out state-of-the-art research if you're doing what everyone else does.

Each session guides researchers through the practices that will allow them to develop viable research ideas, which in turn will make writing a proposal much more straightforward, with less scrambling to retrofit their idea to the proposal framework.

By the end of the course, participants will:

- Understand the competitive funding landscape they are operating in.
- Recognise the steps they must take to develop a robust research idea.
- Have applied the idea generation process to weigh up and evaluate their ideas.
- Be prepared for the proposal creation process,

PROGRAMME FORMAT:

The programme is run over five 3-hour sessions; each session is delivered remotely and has a ten-minute break. It is taught through a mixture of guidance, discussion, and reflection; there are two or three weeks between each session to ensure participants maintain their momentum. Participants will also be given activities between sessions to develop their ability to generate research ideas.

The course is ideal for post-docs who are beginning to write proposals or seek their first academic post. Recently appointed academics who are required to write a grant proposal as part of their probation will also find it beneficial as it will lead to a more efficient proposal writing process.

The Proposal Launchpad is an excellent primer for the Couch to £500K programme. Participants will be well placed to go through the full programme and develop their draft proposal.

A cohort-based training programme that provides a step-by-step approach to developing a competitive funding proposal.

BACKGROUND:

Three things are necessary to build the foundation of a competitive grant proposal:

- **An idea:** Applicants must understand the needs and challenges of the research landscape they are operating in to develop a sound idea they can turn into a project.
- **Background knowledge:** Understanding the funding system and what is being asked of them allows researchers to control the proposal writing process to the best of their ability.
- **Time:** A robust, competitive proposal cannot be written overnight. Time is needed to allow ideas to mature and for an applicant's writing to be refined: the first draft is never final.

While participants of the full course are required to come prepared with their own ideas, this in-depth programme provides the required background and time for participants to re-visit, iterate, and refine their work while developing both a draft proposal and the skills needed to tackle future funding opportunities.

AIMS & OBJECTIVES:

The Couch to £500K programme uses a combination of guidance, feedback, reflection, and practice to help researchers take a step-by-step approach to develop a UKRI grant proposal based on the requirements of the Engineering and Physical Sciences Research Council (EPSRC). Using the power of spaced repetition,[1] analogy,[2] and the Zeigarnik effect,[3] we seek to make the proposal creation process more concrete and memorable while also encouraging participants to establish lasting, positive habits.

We believe that a training programme should outlast the course itself, so that participants can exercise their new skills outside of the classroom and put what they learn into practice for the rest of their career. In particular, developing clear and concise proposals—and understanding what funders are looking for—are skills all researchers will use throughout their time in academia. Investing time, money, and energy into ensuring they understand how to go beyond box-ticking and formulaic approaches will influence how participants think about and approach all future projects.

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[1] Spaced repetition does what it says on the tin: by repeating content in different ways over a period of time, learners are able to better review and digest the given information.

[2] Analogies and stories are important components in scientific communication because they allow listeners to connect abstract concepts with more familiar examples.

[3] The Zeigarnik effect is a psychological phenomenon that describes a tendency for people to remember incomplete tasks more easily. This is harnessed throughout the programme to help participants overcome procrastination by encouraging them to create short drafts of each proposal section. As these are incomplete, participants are more likely to continue working on them beyond the time given for the assignment.

By the end of the first stage (Sessions 1-2), all participants will have a greater awareness of the process a proposal goes through before/after submission and the core aspects they need to focus on regardless of funder.

Participants attending the second stage (Session 3-12) have an opportunity to develop their grant-writing skills and get feedback on their proposal. The outcomes for these participants include:

- Understanding how to frame a proposal idea.
- Being familiar with the core components of developing a competitive grant proposal regardless of the funding body.
- Recognising what they can and cannot control in the proposal creation process.
- Developing writing skills that can be used in different domains (e.g. job applications, promotion material).
- Creating a draft research proposal.
- Developing a plan for ensuring their proposal is finalised and submitted following the completion of the programme.

PROGRAMME FORMAT:

The Couch to £500K programme is taught remotely and consists of two stages.

- The first stage (Sessions 1-2) provides an introductory overview of the proposal creation process and is suitable for PhD students, post-docs, early career researchers, and other interested attendees (up to 95 can attend on the remote platform).
- The second stage (Sessions 3-12) is designed for a small group of attendees to focus on the development of their proposal through a mix of instruction, peer-to-peer feedback, group discussion, and reflection.

Each session lasts three hours, with a ten-minute comfort break. Second-stage participants are expected to commit to attending the full programme and carrying out the homework activities between each session.

Instruction and guidance are provided throughout the programme, and second-stage participants are also expected to engage in group discussions and provide feedback on their colleagues' work. In turn, participants will receive feedback from the instructors on their homework to help them develop their proposal and produce clear, concise writing.

Second-stage participants will also have three one-to-one sessions with one of the programme's instructors:

1. A 30-minute introductory meeting to discuss the participant's individual concerns and needs.
2. A one-hour session coinciding with sessions 5–7 to discuss progress, feedback received from homework activities, and aims over the remainder of the programme.
3. A one-hour concluding meeting to discuss the participant's learning, how it has become embedded in their approach to funding, and how they intend to progress beyond the programme.

A private course website is provided to host course materials, and recordings are provided for those who miss sessions. These recordings are of the instructors only; for privacy, participants and group discussions are not recorded.

SECOND STAGE SELECTION:

The size of the second-stage group is kept small to foster the interactions that are important for embedding learning. Those who wish to attend the second stage of the Couch to £500K programme should meet the following criteria:

- Participants must have an idea to work with and an understanding of which funder and funding scheme they plan to apply to. They should not be starting completely from scratch, nor should they change their idea each session.
- They should be intending to submit a grant proposal within 24 months of the programme's completion. In practice, they should be able to submit much sooner, but we recognise that events such as maternity leave, part-time working, or illness may affect the submission schedule.
- Participants must be willing to engage with the material and do the homework.

The selection process for second-stage participants is the responsibility of the institution. For example, self-nominations or recommendations by the Head of Department or Head of School can be used to select participants. Alternatively, the instructors can provide an application form and guidance about how to run a panel if the programme is oversubscribed.

OPTIONS:

The Couch to £500K programme is available in two formats: Standard and Fellowship.

- The Standard Programme focuses on grants that go through the standard funding process at EPSRC (e.g. New Investigator Awards, responsive mode).
- The Fellowship Programme includes fellowship-specific components, e.g. vision, leadership, advocacy, as well as recommendations for presentation and interview preparation. In addition to producing a draft proposal for peer feedback, participants also have the opportunity to participate in a mock interview.

Either Couch to £500K programme can be combined with a writing retreat format, e.g. the session runs in the morning and participants are then given a facilitated focused writing session in the afternoon to draft or edit their proposal (three hours). While this requires a full day away from their work, it helps ringfence the participants' time and demonstrate investment in their research career.

PLEASE NOTE:
While much of the general guidance provided during either Couch to £500K programme is applicable to other research councils or funders, EPSRC guidelines and structure is used as an example throughout the programme. Participants planning to apply elsewhere are expected to do the necessary research and reading to understand the specifics of their chosen funder. It is stressed throughout the programme that all participants must be willing to carry out funder research as a funding agency's documents, policies, and guidelines can (and most likely will!) change at any time.

Proposal writing skills development through a mock EPSRC prioritisation panel process.

BACKGROUND:

Applying for funding from the Engineering and Physical Sciences Research Council (EPSRC) is an incredibly competitive process. There are many obstacles and potential pitfalls facing applicants each step of the way, and the peer review process is often seen as a black box: proposals go in one end and—sometimes—funding will come out the other side. But often not.

However, understanding the ins and outs of the process allows applicants to identify where they can potentially improve or enhance their own proposals. In particular, it is necessary to encourage early career researchers (ECRs) to overcome the "curse of knowledge", the idea that because they know something, everyone else must know it too. If this curse isn't broken, it can result in proposals that fail to clearly communicate to their intended audience: reviewers and panel members.

AIMS:

This two-day course is designed to guide ECRs through the final stage of the standard peer review process and provide the experience of serving as panel member on a mock prioritisation panel. By learning through doing, participants have the opportunity to see how a panel moderates the reviewers' comments to produce a rank-ordered list.

This activity provides them with the necessary psychological distance to see how proposals and their constituent parts work. As the grants under discussion are not in areas where applicants have direct expertise, they are able to practice putting themselves in the shoes of someone new to the research. For example, a previous course participant highlighted, "The really well-written proposals are possible for someone with a scientific background to follow and skip over the details but still stay on track."

This type of reflection helps participants focus on what will benefit their own grant proposal in the future as well as see what aspects of a proposal can potentially impact its ranking, e.g. the importance of a well-written PI response or a clear summary.

Finally, the course helps build resilience in dealing with unsuccessful proposals. As part of the debriefing process, participants recognise that the outcome of the panel is outside of their control: a "failed" proposal does not mean that they are a bad researcher or had a bad idea.

By the end of the course, participants will be able to:

- Understand how the prioritisation panel process works at EPSRC for standard mode grants.
- Experience the funding process from a different perspective.
- Recognise how they can improve the competitiveness of their own proposals and PI responses.

PROGRAMME FORMAT:

The course is run over two 3-hour sessions and requires participants to carry out work between each session (approx. one hour per proposal). The course is capped at 12 participants; it is recommended that the sessions be scheduled 10-14 days apart to mimic the tight timescales real panel members contend with. Each session is delivered remotely and has a ten-minute break.

- **Session 1:** This session provides an overview of the peer review process, an in-depth exploration of how the prioritization panel works, and time for questions. This takes the place of the normal convenor phone call to panel members.
- **Session 2:** Participants carry out a mock prioritisation panel with Professor Dan Allwood serving as the panel chair and Dr Elaine Massung as the panel convenor. Beyond the panel itself, there is time for participants to debrief and reflect on the panel experience, ask questions, and discuss the characteristics of producing a strong PI response.

MATERIALS:

Due to confidentiality, the instructors **CANNOT** provide real proposals for participants to work with. It is necessary for the university or department to provide at least four previously submitted proposals that include the reviewers' comments and PI responses. These will be edited and anonymised by the instructors, with all names changed for privacy. The reviews and PI responses are also altered to reflect common errors.

Proposals should be of one type (e.g. standard mode, new investigator award, or fellowship) and preferably one theme for list consistency, although different research areas within that theme are fine. A large number of different proposals would be needed to give participants the experience of ranking multiple lists. If at all possible, proposals should be more than two years old so participants are less likely to be aware of the outcome of the proposal.

RISKS:

The following aspects must be taken into consideration when running this course:

- It may be difficult to get the required number of proposals as academics often do not want to share failed proposals.
- Ideally, the proposals should be along a spectrum ranging from high to low ranking, but it is likely that they will be on the higher end of the scale, especially if they have previously been to a prioritisation panel.
- Participants may drop out of the session, especially if they are unaware that pre-work is required. Approximately one hour of work is needed for each proposal assessed by a participant.
- Participants should not discuss the process with each other or compare pre-scores.

Detailed feedback and recommendations for final-stage drafts of EPSRC proposals.

There are many aspects of the funding process that are beyond the control of the applicant: the assessment criteria chosen by the funder, the word or page limits observed, the reviewers selected. The ultimate outcome—will a proposal get funded?—is likewise outside of the PI's ability to influence. What is within their control? The steps they take before they hit submit. These aspects include:

- Identifying a compelling, novel idea that is a good fit to the funder's remit and strategy.
- Understanding the ins and outs of the process used by a particular funder or funding scheme.
- Following all of the instructions and guidelines provided by the funder.
- Recognising the audience(s) of the proposal and their expectations.
- Writing a proposal that clearly and concisely communicates the need for this particular idea and difference the research will make.

Dr Elaine Massung and Professor Dan Allwood provide training courses to support applicants as they navigate these aspects of the proposal creation process and develop their proposal. Proposal audits are designed as the final step to help researchers ensure they have done everything within their power to produce a robust proposal, and they are intended to take place after applicants have incorporated feedback from subject-area experts:

- The proposals are edited to improve or clarify the language.
- Based on her experience as a portfolio manager at the Engineering and Physical Sciences (EPSRC), Elaine identifies what could potentially be strengthened to help ensure the proposal is seen by the ideal panel or reviewers. She will also flag up areas that may potentially cause a problem when the proposal is processed.
- As a regular reviewer for EPSRC and successfully funded PI, Dan uses his expertise to ensure the structure and content of the proposal is cohesive and consistent, with the goal of preventing "plot holes"—areas that reviewers can potentially question or pick apart.

Although they cannot provide scientific or technical feedback about the project, Dan and Elaine serve as fresh eyes and a final check before a proposal is handed over to the reviewer.

PLEASE NOTE:
While proposal audits seek to strengthen and enhance the competitiveness of proposals submitted to EPSRC, it is never possible to guarantee funding or a positive review. The PI is responsible for the content they choose to include in the proposal.

Writing Retreat

Taking students, post-docs, and academics away from their daily responsibilities to focus on writing projects in a supportive and productive environment.

BACKGROUND:

The importance of avoiding distractions and concentrating on focused work is in the spotlight. Books such as Cal Newport's *Deep Work* and Greg McKeown's *Essentialism* use the latest research to highlight both the symptoms of our current lifestyle—e.g. fragmented attention, lower productivity—and their solution: ringfencing our schedule to tackle one thing at a time. Mono-tasking, not multi-tasking, is shown to be the secret of success.

Yet the modern university environment sees a million and one things constantly bidding for the attention of PhD students, post-docs, and academics. Allowing researchers to step away from their usual to-do list can provide the necessary headspace to carry out planning activities, develop new drafts, or re-write and refine existing documents.

AIMS:

By providing a dedicated, distraction-free environment, participants are given the opportunity to shake up their normal routine and divert their energy into the activities that are likely to yield the greatest results for their career: writing (and re-writing!) papers and grant proposals.

The retreats run by Professor Dan Allwood and Dr Elaine Massung incorporate the following benefits:

- **Accountability:** Participants are expected to come prepared with a specific task to work on, which they will share with other members of the group. Check-in points allow them to report on their progress.
- **Support:** Dan and Elaine are on hand to provide help and advice when needed. They cultivate a positive, encouraging environment to help each participant on their specific writing journey.
- **Networking:** Participants have the chance to meet other researchers for potential collaboration opportunities.
- **Productivity:** Each writing retreat ends by guiding participants through the creation of a plan that helps them identify the next steps they will take on their given task or project.

PROGRAMME FORMAT:

Writing retreats can be carried out (1) online on a half-day or full-day basis, or (2) hosted at a venue for multiple days.

1. Dan and Elaine facilitate the session, answer questions, and provide booked one-to-one sessions to discuss the participants' writing projects. For example, a participant can submit a piece of writing in advance for review* then receive feedback and suggestions during the retreat itself.

2. Off-site retreats are loosely scheduled to ensure participants have the opportunity to focus on their writing while also taking advantage of networking opportunities and Dan and Elaine's support. They offer short, non-mandatory instructional sessions throughout the retreat about different aspects of academic writing, and bookable one-to-one sessions are available to provide feedback.

Retreats can be general, i.e. participants each arrive with their own task, or topic based, e.g. all participants focus on developing their grant proposal, writing a paper for a specific conference, or concentrating on their PhD thesis. Dan and Elaine will tailor their facilitation and support accordingly.

* It is estimated that each 20-minute one-to-one session will require at least one hour of preparation time. While it is not possible to offer in-depth editing on longer documents within the quoted price, we will edit approx. 500–1000 words to demonstrate how the text can be improved. In addition, participants will be given general feedback about how to enhance their current document and the aspects they need to consider for future writing projects.

SKILLS FOR LIFE:
Academic Writing from the Ground Up

Cohort-based training to help PhD students develop the skills necessary to produce clear and concise academic writing.

BACKGROUND:

Communicating with others is at the very heart of academia. Whether drafting a dissertation, submitting a paper for publication, or building a network of collaborative colleagues via email, it is vital that PhD students learn how to communicate using clear and concise language regardless of what academia (and life) throws at them.

We're going to start with the bad news: it's not possible to improve someone's writing overnight using "one weird trick" or a collection of time-saving hacks. There is simply no quick fix to enhancing written communication.

However, there is good news as well: writing is a skill. Like any skill, it can be improved with guidance, feedback, reflection, and practice. The **Academic Writing from the Ground Up** programme is designed to help PhD students take a step-by-step approach to developing their written communication skills through a combination of group discussions, peer-to-peer learning, and A LOT of practice.

AIMS:

Developing clear, understandable writing is a lifelong skill. Investing time, money, and energy into ensuring PhD students have a solid grasp of written communication allows them to not only successfully complete their degree, but it also sets them up for any career path they choose to pursue.

We believe that a training programme should outlast the course itself, i.e. students are able to exercise their new skills outside of the classroom and put what they learn into practice in all aspects of their day-to-day life.

By starting from the ground up, this programme focuses on foundational writing skills to help participants create text that communicates exactly what they intend. Rather than follow a formula or engage in box-ticking exercises, it guides them through how to think about and approach written communication so they can analyse and respond to any type of writing task.

By the end of the programme, participants will be able to:

- Identify the characteristics of good (and not-so-good) writing.
- Adapt their writing to different audiences.
- Understand how to write with a purpose and ensure their intention is clear to their audience.
- Plan and structure their argument and evidence.
- Understand the importance of rewriting/editing and how to approach these tasks.

The common strand running throughout each session is helping participants gain confidence in recognising and producing good writing regardless of format. By doing so, they learn how to write well and correct their own mistakes, thereby allowing supervisors to focus on the content rather than the style of their writing.

PROGRAMME FORMAT:

The **Academic Writing from the Ground Up** programme is delivered via 12 two-hour remote sessions (a 10-minute comfort break is provided during each session). Participants are expected to commit to attending the full programme and carrying out the practice writing activities between each session. We limit the group to 12 participants to foster the interactions that are important for embedding learning and suggest the host institution runs an application process to join this group.

Guidance and writing instruction are provided throughout, but participants are also expected to engage in small group discussions and provide feedback on their colleagues' work. Participants also receive feedback from the course leaders on written exercises to give additional reflection and learning opportunities.

Participants will also have three one-to-one sessions with one of the programme instructors:

1. A 30-minute introductory meeting to discuss the participant's individual needs.
2. A one-hour session coinciding with sessions 6–8 to discuss progress, feedback received from written exercises, and aims over the remainder of the programme.
3. A one-hour concluding meeting to discuss the participant's learning, how this has become embedded in their practice, and their writing and development aims for beyond the programme.

A private course website is provided to host course materials, and recordings are provided for those who miss sessions. These recordings are of the instructors only; for privacy, students and group discussions are not recorded.

All sessions are delivered jointly by Dr Elaine Massung and Professor Dan Allwood, who bring many years of experience of guiding PhD students and researchers in academic writing.

> **PLEASE NOTE:**
> Although understanding English grammar is a vital part of written communication, this is not something this particular programme provides. While we believe all PhD students will benefit from these sessions, we recommend students who need additional English language support also seek assistance from a university's writing centre or specialists in ESL tutoring.

As a PhD student at the University of Bristol, **Elaine Massung** straddled the departments of archaeology and computer science to investigate how to use today's technology to tell the story of the past. This research highlighted the importance of overcoming the "curse of knowledge" to construct a clear narrative and meet the audience's needs.

She built on this lesson in later jobs, serving as a post-doc investigating behaviour change through gamification, a copy editor for an academic journal, and as the Robotics portfolio manager and Engineering panel convenor at EPSRC. Her experience has been used to develop the company Academic Smartcuts to help students and researchers improve their written communication and navigate the funding process.

Elaine's free time is spent writing about travel, nature, history, and tea on the MissElaineous blog, running the anti-litter initiative Off the Ground, and adding to her Duolingo streak.

Before becoming a writing trainer, **Dan Allwood** was a Professor and academic at the University of Sheffield, and has delivered writing training to undergraduates, PhD students, RAs, and early-career academics. He has been an investigator on 13 EPSRC awards, eight as PI, as well as BBSRC, EU and industrially-funded projects. He has published over 100 papers, including many in high-impact factor journals (e.g. Science, Nature-family journals, ACS Nano, Small, Adv. Energy Mater., Adv. Func. Mater., Nano Lett.), has supervised 19 PhD students to completion (11 as Primary Supervisor), and has served as External Examiner for 22 PhD candidates (19 in the UK, plus US, Austria, and Germany).

Dan lives in Sheffield, UK, and enjoys doing too many different things: running in the nearby Peak District, baking bread, reading (but what to do with all the books?), making noises on the guitar and cello, and cooking for friends and family. Chocolate making is improving too.

CONTACT:
Please don't hesitate to get in touch to discuss any of the training opportunities listed in this document or the other offerings provided by Academic Smartcuts and Peak Writing:

Elaine: 0779 625 3009 / hello@academic-smartcuts.com
Dan: 0750 449 2220 / dan.allwood@peak-writing.com