Writing Qualitative Research Proposals

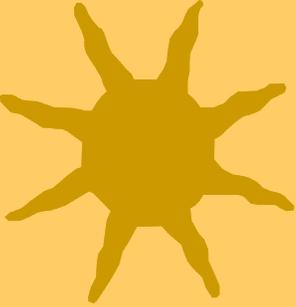Joan L. Bottorff, PhD, RN
Professor and CIHR Investigator
School of Nursing, UBC
Phone: (604) 822-7438
Email: Bottorff@nursing.ubc.ca
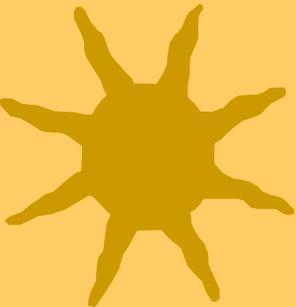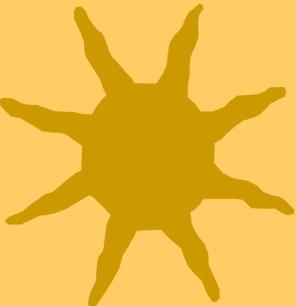
Purpose of a Research Proposal

* Communicates research plan to others (e.g., funding agencies)
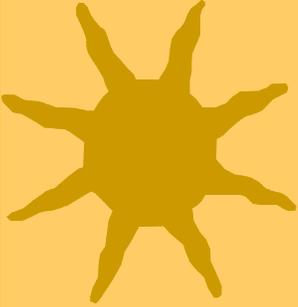* Serves as a detailed plan for action
* Serves as a contract between investigator and funding bodies when proposal approved
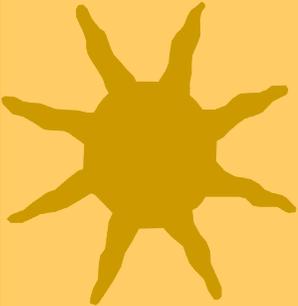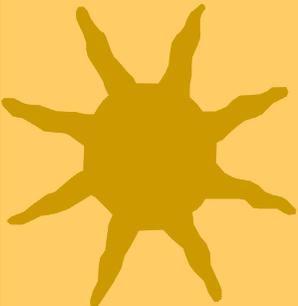
Qualitative Research: Basic Assumptions

* Reality is complex, constructed and ultimately subjective
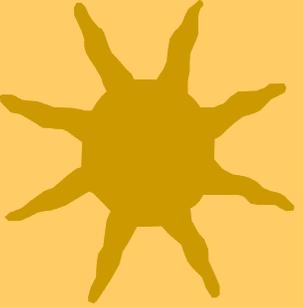* Research is an interpretative processes
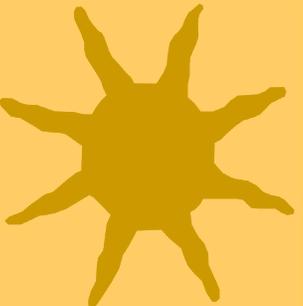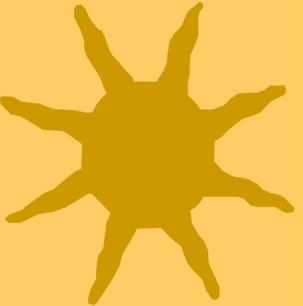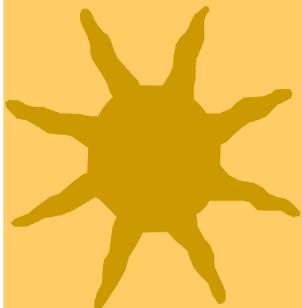* Knowledge is best achieved by conducting research in the natural setting
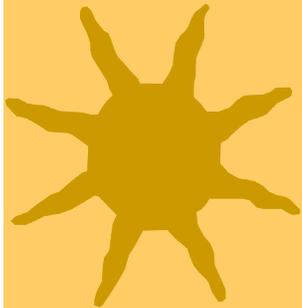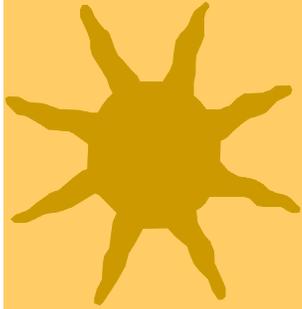
Qualitative research

* Qualitative research is unstructured.
* Qualitative designs are "emergent" rather than fixed.
* The results of qualitative research are unpredictable.
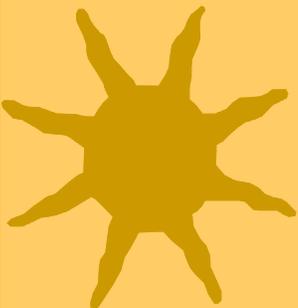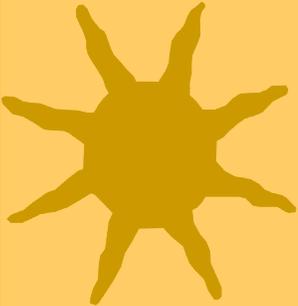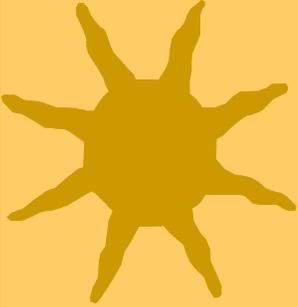
Morse, 1994

Kinds of Qualitative Research

* Grounded theory
* Ethnography (critical ethnography, institutional ethnography, ethnomethodology, ethnoscience, etc.)
* Phenomenology
* Narrative Inquiry
* Others

The Challenges for Qualitative Researchers

★ Developing a solid convincing argument that the study contributes to theory, research, practice, and/or policy (the "so what?" question)

★ Planning a study that is systematic, manageable, and flexible (to reassure skeptics):
  – Justification of the selected qualitative method
  – Explicit details about design and methods, without limiting the project's evolution
  – Attention to criteria for the overall soundness or rigor of the project
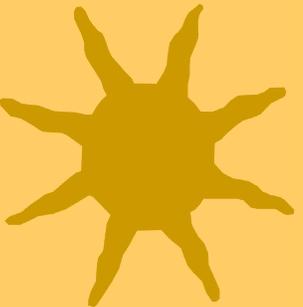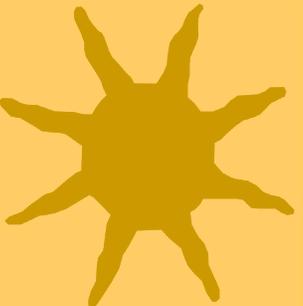
Questions a proposal must answer
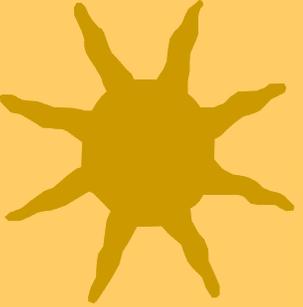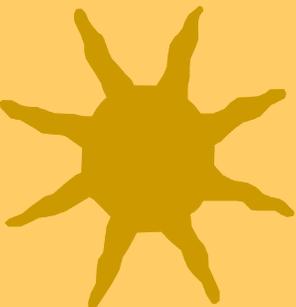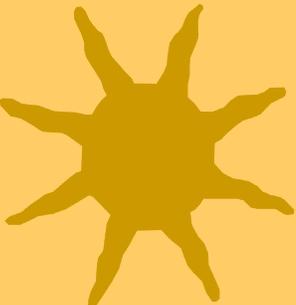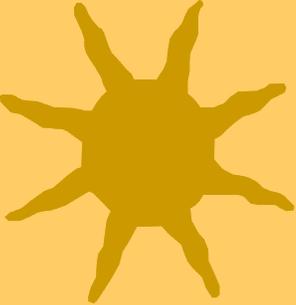
* Why should anyone be interested in my research?

* Is the research design credible, achievable, and carefully explained?

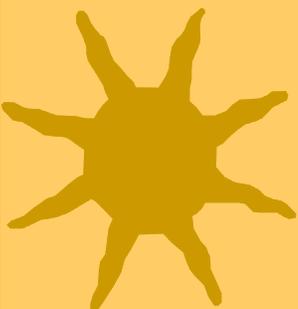* Is the researcher capable of doing the research?

Marshall & Rossman, 1989
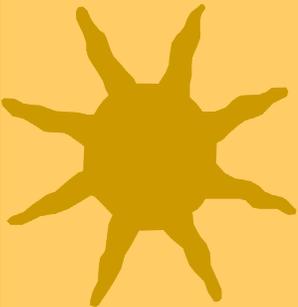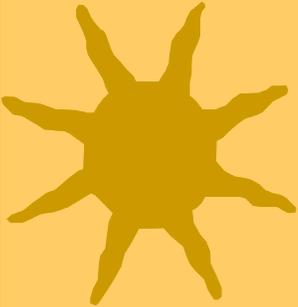
To answer these questions:

* Be practical (practical problems can not easily be brushed off)

* Be persuasive ("sell" your proposal)

* Make broad links (hint at wider context)

* Aim for crystal clarity (avoid jargon, assume nothing, explain everything)

Silverman, 2000

Sections of Typical Qualitative Proposal

* Introduction
  – Introduce topic and significance
  – Statement of purpose, research questions/objectives
* Review of Literature
  – Related literature and theoretical traditions
* Design and Methods
  – Overall approach and rationale
  – Sampling, data gathering methods, data analysis
  – Trustworthiness (Soundness of the research)
  – Ethical considerations
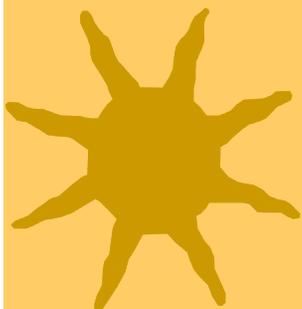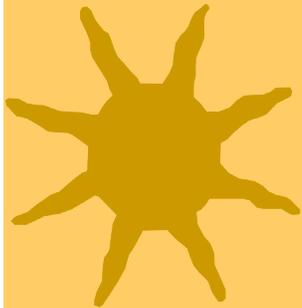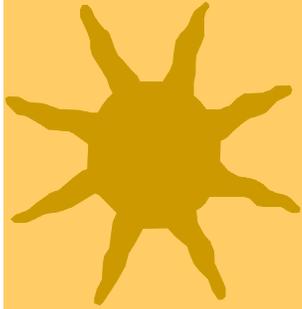* Dissemination Plan
* Timeline
* Budget
* Appendices

Introducing the Study – 1ˢᵗ para
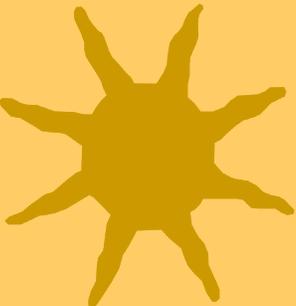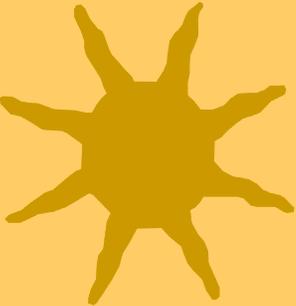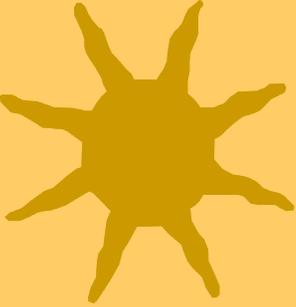
★ Goal: capture interest in the study

- – Focus on importance of study (Why bother with the question?)
- – Clear and concise (details will follow later)
- – Synopsis of the primary target of the study
- – Persuasive logic backed up with factual evidence

The Problem/Research Question

★ The problem can be broad, but must be specific enough to convince others that it is worth focusing on.

★ Research questions clearly delineated (sometimes with sub-questions)

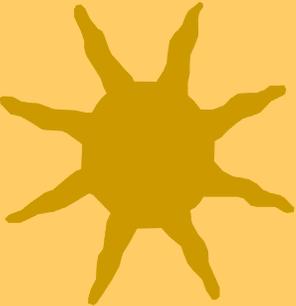★ Scope of the research question(s) needs to be manageable within the time frame and context of the study.
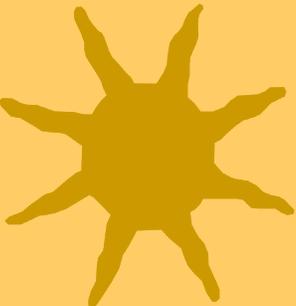
Purpose of the Qualitative Study
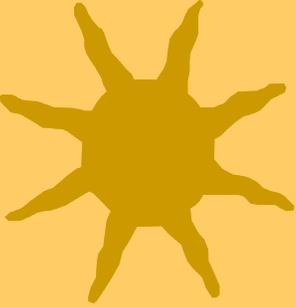
* Discovery?
* Description?
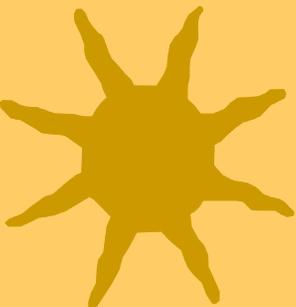* Conceptualization (theory building)?
* Sensitization?
* Emancipatory?
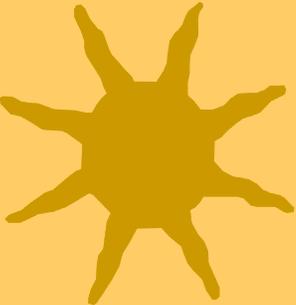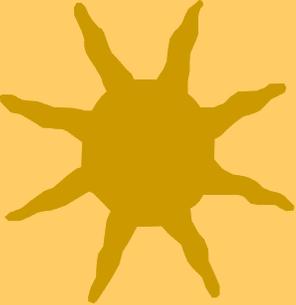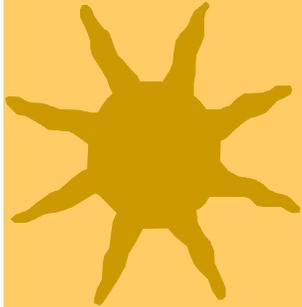* Other?

Literature Review

- Selective and persuasive – building a case for what is known or believed, what's missing, and how the study fits in.
- Literature is used to demonstrate openness to complexity of phenomenon, rather than funneling toward an a priori conceptualization.
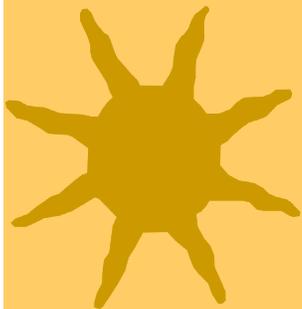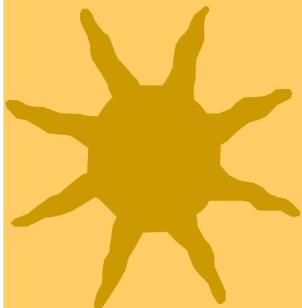
Methods – challenges here

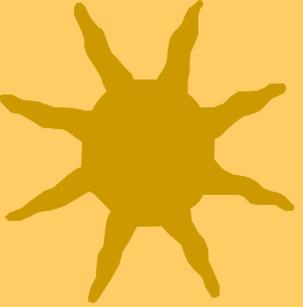- Quantitative designs are often more familiar to reviewers
- Qualitative researchers have a different language

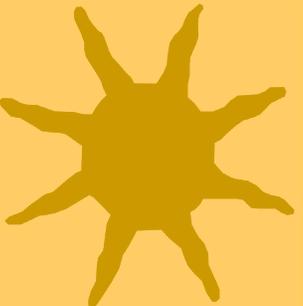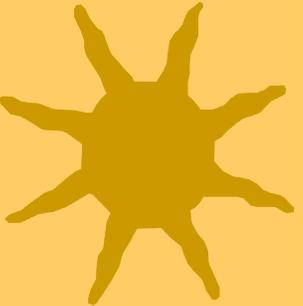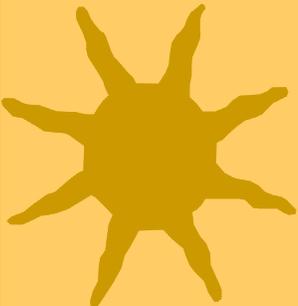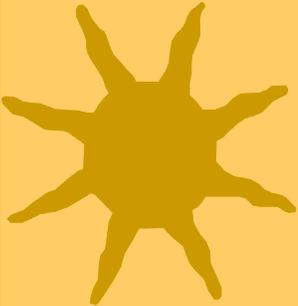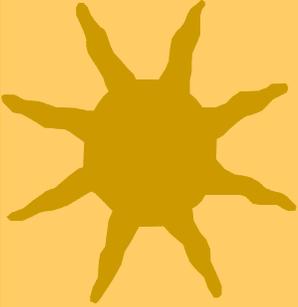# *Methods section*

★ Orientation to the Method:

– Description of the particular method that will be used and its creators/interpreters

– Rationale for qualitative research generally and for the specific method to be used.

Qualitative Studies are Valuable for Research…

* that delves in-depth into complexities and processes
* on little-known phenomena or innovative systems
* on informal and unstructured processes in organizations
* that seeks to explore where and why policy and local knowledge and practice are at odds
* on real, as opposed to stated, organizational goals
* research that can not be done experimentally for practical or ethical reasons
* for which relevant variables have not been identified

Marshall & Rossman, 1999

Sample
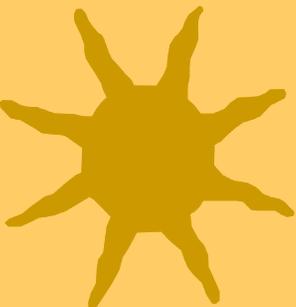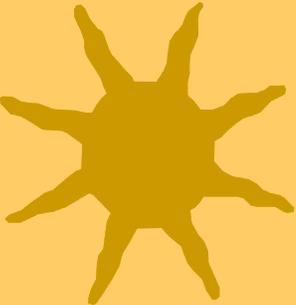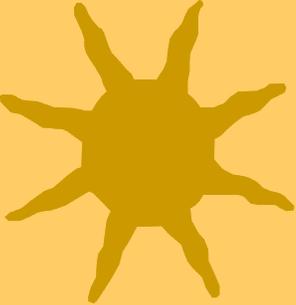
* Purposive or theoretical sampling
  – The purpose of the sampling
  – Characteristics of potential types of persons, events or processes to be sampled
  – How decisions about sampling will be made.
* Sample size
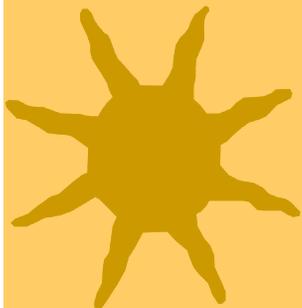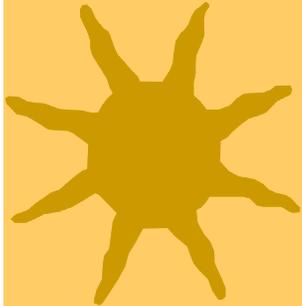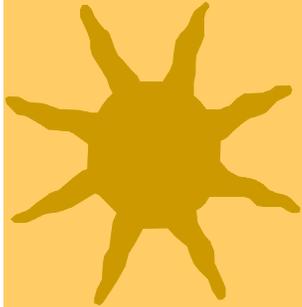 – Estimates provided based on previous experience, pilot work, etc.
* Access and recruitment

Data Collection and Analysis

* Types: Individual interviews, participant observation, focus groups, personal and public documents, internet-based data, videos, etc. (all vary with different traditions)

* Analysis methods vary depending on qualitative approach

* Add DETAILS and MORE DETAILS about how data will be gathered and processed *(procedures should be made public, not magical)*
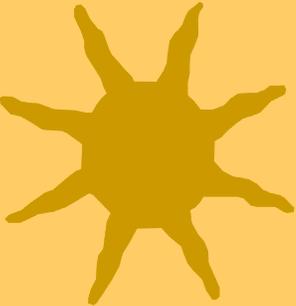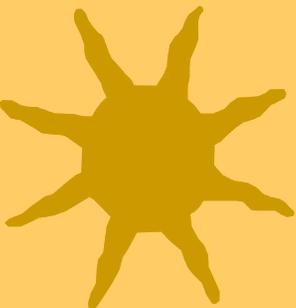
Data Management & Analysis
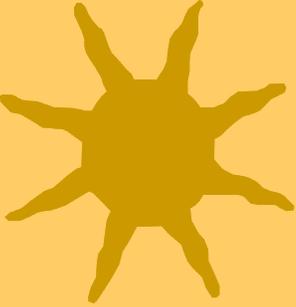
★ How will data be keep organized and retrievable?

★ How will data be "broken up" to see something new?

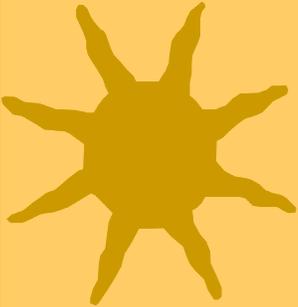★ How will the researchers engage in reflexivity (e.g., be self-analytical)?

★ Convinces the reader that the researcher is sufficiently knowledgeable about qualitative analysis and has necessary skills.
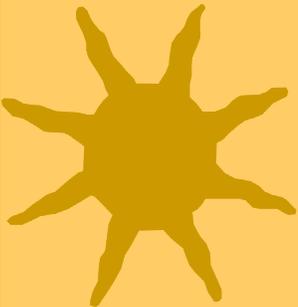
Trustworthiness (Soundness of the research)

- Reflected throughout the proposal.
- And address this specifically, using relevant criteria for the qualitative approach used.
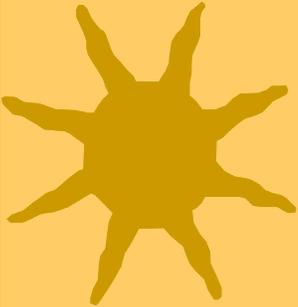- Examples of strategies used:
  - Triangulation
  - Prolonged contact with informants, including continuous validation of data
  - Continuous checking for representativeness of data and fit between coding categories and data
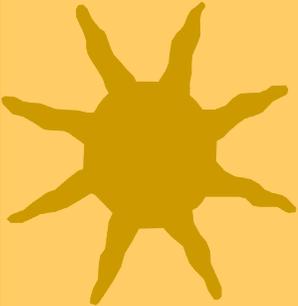 - Use of expert consultants
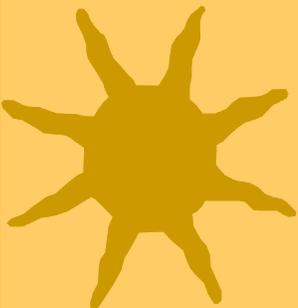
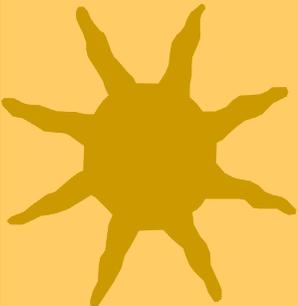# *Examples of Strategies for Limiting Bias in Interpretations*

* Include plan to search for negative cases
* Describe how analysis will include a purposeful examination of alternative explanations
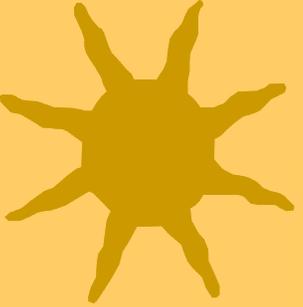* Using members of the research team to critically question the analysis
* Planning to conduct an audit of data collection and analytic strategies

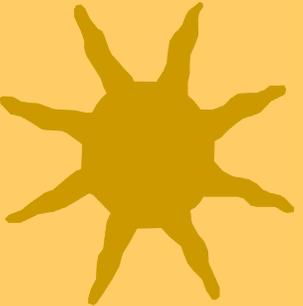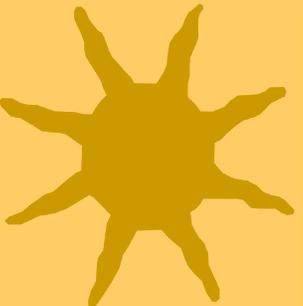# *Other components*

* Ethical considerations
  – Consent forms
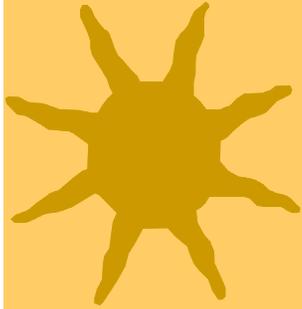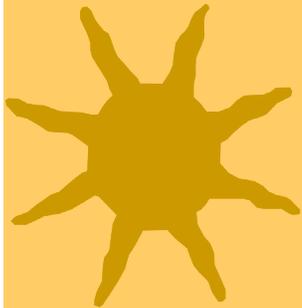 – Dealing with sensitive issues
* Dissemination
* Timeline
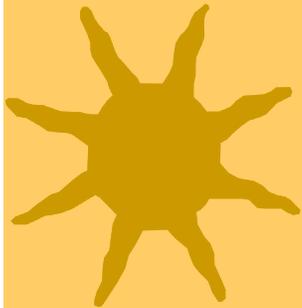* Budget

Last Bits of Advice…

- ★ Seek assistance and pre-review from others with experience in grant writing (plan time for rewriting)
- ★ Highlight match between your proposal and purpose of competition
- ★ Follow the rules of the competition**
- ★ Write for a multi-disciplinary audience