The Charlie West Case

Charlie West completed his doctorate in biology two years ago and is in his last year as a post doctoral fellow in Professor Wilson's laboratory. The last few months have been both good and bad. West and his wife were thrilled by the birth of their first child six months ago, and research has been going well. There are just a few relatively straightforward controls to be run before he and Wilson can submit a manuscript they have been preparing. In addition, West had five job interviews and was then offered a position at Heartland State University, which he has accepted.

However, his success has also caused some problems. With all the preparation and traveling for interviews plus the new responsibilities of parenting, West hasn't had the time or energy to do very much work in the lab lately. There's another factor as well. West promised Wilson that he'd take care of those controls as soon as he finished interviewing but he hasn't done them yet because he's been writing a grant. During West's second visit to Heartland, the biology department chair made it clear that West is expected to bring in external funding for the research he plans to begin at HSU in a little over a year. The chair told West, "The sooner you get a grant, the better your chances for tenure."

For his post doc, West decided to switch fields in order to learn some new techniques, but for his job he plans to return to research very close to what he did for his Ph.D. In fact, his job seminar was all based on his grad research, not the work he has done as a post doc. West has an idea for a project that everyone he has consulted agrees has great potential. He is very excited about his planned research, and is highly confident that it will be successful both with the funding agency and in the lab. The only problem seems to be getting the grant written.

Unfortunately, since this is West's first grant application, writing it is proving to be far more time-consuming than he expected. He started a couple of months ago and has written the Research Design and Methods as well as the Preliminary Studies sections. All the special forms, facilities statements, biographies, supporting letters, and the budget are now done, but that still leaves the "Background and Significance" section of the text.

It seems that every time he gets set to work on the grant proposal, something goes wrong.

Last week he discovered that he had forgotten the animal use forms and had to rush about getting his protocol finalized and approved. A few days ago his baby daughter was up all night with an earache. Then, just this morning, Wilson was pressing him for experimental results. “Look, Charlie,” he said, “I know you’ve been busy, but those experiments can’t wait any longer. It’s been eight or ten weeks since you finished interviewing and the paper still isn’t ready to submit. If we don’t get moving we’re going to get scooped by Joe Atkins’ lab. Neither of us can afford to lose an important publication like this, especially you at this stage of your career. I want to see you at the bench tomorrow. Besides, I’m supporting you on my grant to do research in my lab, not to try to pull in money for HSU.”

The NIH grant application deadline for which West has been aiming, one that could give him funding just after he arrives at HSU, is now only three days away, and it’s already 10 pm. As he goes through his files, frantically pulling out relevant articles while feeling fairly sure that there is no way he can get the writing done in time, he comes across a grant proposal on a similar topic that he had helped a professor review while he was a graduate student. The professor had also pointed out that it was a model proposal — scientifically sound and extremely well-written. As he looks at the photocopy he kept, West realizes that the Background section of this older grant would fill in 90% of the information he needs. He could easily write the other 10% in three days.

Reasoning that grant proposals are funded based on the original proposal and not the background, West decides to type in the background material from the old grant, add new results and references that have been published in the last two years, and be done with it. This way everyone should be happy.

Should West use the material this way? Why or why not?