Grant Proposal Writing Tips

Writing a successful grant proposal rests on the art of carefully adhering to grant guidelines, while also telling a compelling story of purpose and impact. A proposal that follows the guidelines perfectly, but leaves the reviewer bored or unsure of the proposal’s “reason for being,” will not get funded. A compelling story will be undermined when the reviewer is distracted by guideline violations, typos, or formatting oddities. Hence, both are critical. The goal is to walk the reviewer along with a structured story that seamlessly comes together leading to the conclusion: “I want to fund this proposal!”

Adhere to Grant Guidelines: A veteran of the grant review process has said, “Proposals are not read, they are scored.” Thus, the first step in making your proposal more attractive to the reviewer is to make his or her job easier. Reviewers typically use evaluation and scoring sheets that assign points to specific proposal sections based on defined review criteria; their job is made much simpler when those sections are clearly identifiable and the criteria are specifically addressed. Read the guidelines carefully and follow the formatting instructions. Reviewers expect research plans and all other sections to be organized and labelled as instructed.

- Use titles, headings, and subheadings that follow the review criteria and highlight the required sections specified in the Request for Proposals (RFP) guidelines.
  - Some RFPs specify both required sections and recommended sections; it is always best to include both the required AND recommended sections in your proposal narrative.
- Be consistent in your use of headings, fonts, and formats.
- Use active verbs and define all acronyms and abbreviations to ensure that your proposal flows well.
- Avoid discipline-specific jargon (especially without explanation), contractions, and slang.
- Be diligent in minimizing redundancy (which can be very irritating to reviewers); specifically review your proposal for redundancies and eliminate them, unless you are purposefully and strategically repeating something for an intended effect.
- Edit thoroughly and be sure to have a second (or third) set of eyes proof your proposal.

Tell a Compelling Story: Reviewers need to be drawn into your proposal quickly and be able to easily identify its intended purpose and anticipated impact. Know the story you want to tell and tell it.

- Be sure to answer key questions up front: What are your goals? What key problems will be addressed? Why do they matter?
- Distinguish your approach. Clearly convey why your ideas, methods, and anticipated impacts are unique, significantly extend previous work in this area, or both.
- Frame the significance of your research in a way that matches closely with the priorities highlighted in the funding announcement.
- Avoid a literature review that reads like a list of studies. Instead, present an integrated literature review with connections drawn between the studies, then link the literature review back to the research objectives to help support or position those objectives.

Myth: If you have a strong narrative, it will overcome violations of grant guidelines.
Fact: A grant maker noted, “Less than 10% of the proposals...fit our guidelines—and the ones that don’t fit are rejected.”
Be sure that your research plan is spelled out in enough detail to be clear and convincing in conveying what you plan to do. The reviewer must see that you have thought deeply and specifically about your approach.

Use visual elements to enhance the story you are telling. Graphics and white space offer visual relief from chunks of text, but may not be sufficient to replace narrative elements.

- Bulleted lists, tables, charts, or diagrams can help to highlight, explain, and underscore important ideas and key points.
- Bolded and italicized font can set headings and important information apart; however, avoid overuse of these effects.
- Be sure that your tables and figures are formatted in an easy-to-read manner. Use formats that avoid wrapping text that make the reader struggle to read, line up, or interpret the text and avoid breaking tables across pages. Place tables strategically within the narrative whenever possible.

Myth: If I write persuasively, I won’t be taken seriously.
Fact: Writing persuasively guarantees your text will be read. If you’ve included fact and evidence to support your argument, there is no fluff...

Additional Best Practices: Consider other ways to ensure that you submit your best proposal.

- End the way you began: Bring the reviewer full circle when you conclude by briefly revisiting and again highlighting the intended purpose and anticipated impact of your work.
- Pay special attention to the flow of your narrative. Given typical narrative length (15-45 pages) and the diversity of required sections, maintaining flow, a common theme, and connections between sections can be challenging. From a reviewer’s standpoint, a proposal that is easy to follow, understand, and summarize enhances their experience and simplifies scoring the work.
- Conduct your own peer review and, if possible, enlist colleagues with relevant expertise, who are experienced grant writers and reviewers, to provide feedback.
- Where possible, rely on and leverage your own past written work. Your prior articles, submissions, or other relevant work may help jump-start your new proposal or provide a head-start on literature reviews.
- As you work to achieve the goals outlined here, if you cannot comfortably meet the deadline, consider delaying your submission until the next receipt date.

Myth: There is no clear path to writing a successful grant.
Fact: The path may not be obvious, but it is there. Let us help you navigate it – plan ahead, find a good match, follow guidelines, and carry out your project successfully.

Always remember that the Office of Research Advancement is available to help. As soon as you consider writing a proposal, please reach out to our team. We are available to provide assistance in a variety of areas, from planning and preparation to budgeting and editing, to help you be successful in your efforts!