

Proposal Writing

These steps should only be used as general considerations. The specific content of many proposals will be outlined in RFP's (request for proposals), RFQ's (request for quotes, or PS's (proposal solicitations). Always consider these as the overriding guidelines. In fact, many of these documents are very literal and specific in the content they ask for. Proposals can often be written by simply following the "recipe" given in the RFP.

One of the main obstacles to successful proposal writing is what do I do when the RFP doesn't tell me what content to include in the proposal, or what if the proposal is being submitted without an invitation? The answers to these questions are the keys to whether your ideas are funded or not!

Begin by considering these questions:

1. What is the problem, need, service, flaw, etc. addressed?
(PROBLEM)
2. What are the proposed outcomes that will address these problems?
(OBJECTIVES)
3. Why is it important to accomplish these objectives? What impact will it have?
(SIGNIFICANCE)
4. How will each objective be accomplished? What activities will take place and when?
(METHODS and PROCEDURES)
5. Who will carry out each activity?
(PERSONNEL) their duties, experience/expertise
6. What equipment and facilities are required to carry out each activity?
(EQUIPMENT/FACILITIES)
7. What costs will be involved in the activities, personnel, equipment, and facilities?
(BUDGET)
8. How will your ideas be measured, whether or not the objectives were accomplished?
(EVALUATION) often regarded as synonymous with accountability!
9. What will you do when you have finished, what's next?
(DISSEMINATION)

Each of the nine sections flows from the one before it. The presentation of an organized, logical proposal is the most effective means of communicating to a reviewer the details of the proposed work and the organizational skills of the investigator.

Putting Your Idea to Work!

No matter how good your ideas or noble your intentions, you must translate them into a specific, sensible set of activities in order to get funding. Potential sponsors must know what you actually plan to do in order to determine whether investing in your project represents an effective use of their resources. Whether you want to set up a training program, evaluate a program, or conduct basic research, the task of moving from an idea to a practical work plan is the same. You must define the problem or need you wish to address, formulate goals and objectives for your response to that problem, and then decide what specific actions have been undertaken to fulfill those goals and objectives.

A good way to do this is to develop a concise outline containing each of the elements listed above and below. As you do so, keep working on each section until you have established a strong, logical connection between the activities you propose to undertake and the resolution of the problem you have defined. Developing the outline should allow you not only to organize your thoughts into a coherent plan of action, but also to muster the arguments you will need to persuade a potential sponsor of the value of your proposed activities. As you work on each section, try to look at the project from the perspective of a potential donor. Why would someone support this activity? Who might benefit from it, or what might be accomplished as a result of this project?

Remember, the RFP requirements take precedence, but most of them (the good ones at least) will certainly include the following:

Title

The title is often the last thing you do-believe it or not. Choose a simple title that explains (to the extent possible) what you plan to do. There is no need for cute or catchy titles or fancy acronyms. If potential sponsors find your title silly, it may prejudice them against the project. Remember, science sells!

Title Page

Usually includes a project title, the name of the applicant or PI (Principal Investigator), the name and address of initiating agency or agencies to which the proposal is being submitted, inclusive project dates, supporting funds requested, and signatures of personnel authorizing submission of the proposal.

Abstract

A brief statement of the project objectives, procedures, and methods of evaluation and dissemination. The abstract should not exceed two hundred and fifty words in length.

Statement of the Problem

This section is a background and rationale for the project. It should establish the need and importance of the project and provide an adequate perspective in which to evaluate the impending objectives, procedures, and methods of evaluation and dissemination. You should also include a review of the related literature (often brief). This will provide the

reader with a sense that you have done your homework and that the need for this “project” is real and has a research basis of rationale.

Objectives

Identification of anticipated outcomes of the project in clearly specified terms. In most cases, an objective should be provided to meet each major need identified in the previous section.

Methods/Procedures

This section describes, in explicit detail, how the researcher proposes to meet his stated objectives. An overall design may be described, but it is essential that specific procedures be identified. I often tell writers to detail the plan so you could hand it over to a stranger and they could easily “follow your directions”. This is called reader based prose!

Evaluation

Procedures to be utilized by the initiating agency and funding source to assess project objectives. These are best stated as outcome objectives. This section may specify the kinds of data to be collected and the methods by which it will be analyzed disseminated and utilized. No need to be too detailed here-don't bore them with a statistics lecture.

Dissemination

Funding agencies are anxious that their grants produce maximum impact. This section specifies how the project findings will be disseminated to the potential users thereby maximizing the impact of the investment. This is the bang for buck factor.

Facilities

Not appropriate in some proposals but essential in others. This section specifies facilities required and how such will be provided. Special equipment necessary for the project may be identified in this section.

Personnel

Number and categories of project personnel are identified. Vitae or resumes for key personnel should be provided along with criteria for the selection of support personnel. The aim: to establish the competence of personnel involved in implementing the project. (Keep in mind that most agencies have a strict page limit for vitae.)

Budget

Here, project costs are spelled out. Usually, the budget is divided into various categories such as personnel, equipment and materials, communications, travel, and indirect costs. In many cases, initiating agencies are asked to share part of the cost of the project. Thus, amounts required from the funding source and amounts contributed by the initiating agency should be spelled out. Some agencies will require a budget justification. This section does exactly as it implies. Justify each expenditure (usually no more than a page).

References and Summary

Don't forget to give credit to the authors you cited previously in your review of literature and use the closing section to summarize. Often this can be accomplished by restating a brief summary of the statement of problem and what your proposal can do address it!

Review and Reread

Never send a proposal out that hasn't been read by a reviewer-twice!