

Proposal Writing Tips

“Success is the ability to go from one failure to another with no loss of enthusiasm.”

– Sir Winston Churchill

- ✚ Start Early!
- ✚ Build in time so that your administration office or another – non-specialist – can read your proposal for clarity, compliance and consistency.
- ✚ Build in time to “abuse” your colleagues - Ask a colleague or two to read your proposal as an informal “peer review”.
- ✚ Remind collaborators and subs to have their components in early enough to allow for the proposal to be finalized for the internal routing process.
- ✚ First, start (don't finish) with the sponsor's guidelines. Mark them as you study, noting such things as deadline (for mailing or arrival?), number of copies, where to mail, and so on. Look for such requirements as the collection of institutional data which, were it left to last, could not be gathered. The guidelines will also probably specify certain topics or questions that must be addressed.

We must use time as a tool, not as a crutch.

– John F. Kennedy

- ✚ Attend Pre-proposal conferences & webinars – ask someone from administration to attend as well for the “other side of the coin” perspective
- ✚ Call the sponsor’s program officer to discuss your idea for a “good fit”

“Good ideas are not adopted automatically. They must be driven into practice with courageous patience.”

- Hyman Rickover

- ✚ Read the “review criteria” for point values – re-read your draft and sink more time on those areas with the higher point values.
- ✚ Use the headings as defined by the RFP – this will make it much easier for reviewers to find the key parts. Don’t make them search – remember they are reading many many proposals before and after yours – make yours an easy pick. You may even wish to borrow some of the language of the guidelines if it fits naturally into the framework of your proposal. If the sponsor is looking for "transdisciplinary" approaches to the problem, you would do well to use that term rather than say, interdisciplinary or interdepartmental to describe the same activities.
- ✚ Avoid dense blocks of text – use pictures, graphs, and charts to give the eyes a rest.
- ✚ Be realistic in designing the program of work. Overly optimistic notions of what the project can accomplish in one, two, or three years or of its effect on the world will only detract from the proposal's chance of being approved. Probably the comment most frequently made by reviewers is that the research plans should be scaled down to a more specific and more manageable project that will permit the approach to be evaluated and that, if successful, will form a sound basis for further work. In other words, your proposal should distinguish clearly between long-range research goals and the short-range objectives for which funding is being sought. Often it is best to begin this section with a short series of explicit statements listing each objective, in quantitative terms if possible. *(credit: University of Michigan – RSP)*
- ✚ If your first year must be spent developing an analytical method or laying groundwork, spell that out as Phase 1. Then at the end of the year you will be able to report that you have accomplished something and are ready to undertake Phase 2. *(credit: University of Michigan – RSP)*
- ✚ Be explicit about any assumptions or hypotheses the research method rests upon. *(credit: University of Michigan – RSP)*

- ✚ Be clear about the focus of the research. In defining the limits of the project, especially in exploratory or experimental work, it is helpful to pose the specific question the project is intended to answer. *(credit: University of Michigan – RSP)*

- ✚ Be as detailed as possible about the schedule of the proposed work. When will the first step be completed? When can subsequent steps be started? What must be done before something else, and what can be done at the same time? For complex projects a calendar detailing the projected sequence and interrelationship of events often gives the sponsor assurance that the investigator is capable of careful step-by-step planning. *(credit: University of Michigan – RSP)*

- ✚ Be specific about the means of evaluating the data or the conclusions. Try to imagine the question(s) or objection(s) of a hostile critic and show that the research plan anticipates them. *(credit: University of Michigan – RSP)*

- ✚ Be certain that the connection between the research objectives and the research method is evident. If a reviewer fails to see this connection, he will probably not give your proposal any further consideration. It is better here to risk stating the obvious than to risk the charge that you have not thought carefully enough about what your particular methods or approach can be expected to demonstrate. *(credit: University of Michigan – RSP)*

- ✚ Discuss dissemination of results and findings, outreach, broader impacts – reviewers want the most “bang for the buck”

- ✚ Provide a “needs” statement – improve a problem or deficiency; fill gaps.

- ✚ Compare your budget and your justification to insure that for every cost figure a corresponding activity is mentioned and justified.

- ✚ The abstract or proposal summary speaks for the proposal when it is separated from it, provides the reader with his first impression of the request, and by acting as a summary, frequently provides him also with his last. Thus, it is the most important single element in the proposal. Write your summary last! Writing it last will enable you to capture the essence of the proposal and compel them to read further!

“All our progress is an unfolding, like a vegetable bud. You have first an instinct, then an opinion, then a knowledge as the plant has root, bud, and fruit. Trust the instinct to the end, though you can render no reason.”

– Ralph Waldo Emerson

- ✚ Suggest reviewers if the option is available – you certainly know best the right OR wrong experts in your field to review your ideas.
- ✚ Respect reviewers’ comments – it is not a personal rejection. It is a declination and could be based on circumstances out of your control.
- ✚ Confirm the sponsor’s re-submission policy
- ✚ Debrief with the program officers, if appropriate – you may learn something!
- ✚ Revise and Resubmit
- ✚ Look to other sponsors and funders!

- *“Energy and persistence conquer all things.”*
- Benjamin Franklin