



Helping you to be successful

Grant Proposals: The Mechanics of Writing

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Jumpstart your proposal

Organize your work team. Decide who will be responsible for the final product, editorially speaking. This person (usually the lead writer) will ensure consistency and quality of the proposal. Other members of the team might include the team leader, support writer, editor, budget developer, and support staff.

Spit it out. As you begin writing, don't try to produce perfect sentences. Get your ideas on paper, stream-of-consciousness style. Then—in an iterative process—write and edit, write and edit, write and edit, organizing your thoughts, fleshing out paragraphs and sections, and polishing your prose.

Start strong. End strong, too, but first impressions form quickly and fade slowly. Research has shown that humans need very little time to form judgments—30 seconds or less. It's also difficult to change a negative first impression. So spend some time and care crafting your abstract, introduction, and initial sentences of crucial sections (e.g., problem and need statement). Of course, your entire proposal should be strong; however, if the first half is strong, then it will help carry the second half.

The hook, the lead, the grease. An intriguing beginning captures the reader's attention and makes her want to keep reading. Whether it's the first sentence, the first paragraph, or first two paragraphs, the hook should pose a question in the reader's mind that begs for an answer. For example:

At ABC School, we don't worry about teaching students to read. We don't worry about whether they learn arithmetic. We obsess about it.

The reader knows that staff members at ABC School are passionate about teaching, and now she wants to know 1) what form their "obsession" takes, and 2) what it has to do with the funding request.

Good hooks can take the form of a dramatic question, a dramatic statement, a shocking statistic, a riddle, a quotation, or a scenario, to name a few devices. If you're stuck, try letting a friend "interview" you about the proposal and your program; a pivotal bit of information may pop out of your mouth, and (voilà!) you've written your lead.

Begin with the end. If you have trouble writing the lead, or the beginning section of your proposal, write an ending. Pretend you're summarizing your program and why you want funding for it. This will give you focus, and you may end up using the results as your lead.

Let it flow

Be up front. Tell them what you're going to tell them, and then tell them. (And if you have room, tell them what you told them.) You don't have space in a proposal to build your arguments in a linear fashion toward an exciting climax. You first need to give readers the big picture. Then paint the details into the picture, and (if you have the opportunity) remind them to step back and admire the big picture.

Connect the dots. Classic paragraph construction consists of a topic sentence followed by several supporting sentences and a concluding sentence. The concluding sentence sometimes does double duty, summarizing the paragraph and acting as a transition to the next paragraph or section. Connecting sentences are very important. Nothing is more jarring than being thrown from one thought to another without warning; it makes the reader work too hard.

Vary your sentence structure. Throw in a shorter or longer sentence every once in a while so you don't lull your readers to sleep. Wake them up with an occasional change in rhythm.

Three-peat. Three is a magic number, aesthetically and psychologically speaking. Stating something three times creates a pleasing rhythm, whether the repetition occurs in writing, music, or landscape design. The preceding sentence is an example; it would not be as pleasing—or understandable—if it mentioned only writing and music. The addition of a third element rounds out the rhythm and completes the thought that the three-peat phenomenon applies to various disciplines. Once in a while, you might list four elements, but if you've got only two elements to list, try to think of a third.

Just say it. If you have a 20-page limit, but can state your case in 18, leave well enough alone. English is a concise language; on a multi-lingual instruction sheet, it takes up less space than French, Spanish, German, Dutch And of all the world languages, English probably has the richest vocabulary. This means you can usually find just the right word to make your point effectively, eloquently, and quickly. Get in the habit of using Word's thesaurus tool to find synonyms that aren't necessarily the fanciest words, but the *right* words.

Stimulate, engage, convince

The role of creative writing. Grant writing involves mostly expository writing (i.e., presenting information, explaining concepts) and persuasive writing. But creative writing also has a place; it helps describe the human impact of programs and practices. Techniques from the literary world—such as imagery, narrative, and characterization—should be used judiciously to spice up your proposal in such places as the abstract, summary, or vision statement. Think of it as persuasive writing taken up a notch.

Active vs. passive voice. Passive voice is just that—motionless, unable to move the reader. It involves some form of the verb “to be,” and rather than performing the action, the subject is acted upon. In contrast, active voice is more direct; the subject performs the action. For example:

Passive voice	Active voice
All races were considered equal by him.	He considered all races equal.
Children will be served in an after-school program.	An after-school program will serve children.

Passive voice is seen as more objective, and is often used for scientific writing. But active voice is better suited to persuasive writing. It's perfectly ok to say that “we” will serve children, that “our evaluator” will collect data. Don't be afraid to commit.

To be convincing, act convinced. Don't say, “We hope to accomplish” or “We plan to accomplish.” Say, “We will accomplish.”

Create a subliminal advantage

Be consistent. If you capitalize a term in one paragraph, and lowercase it a page later, readers might not notice what's wrong—but they will know *something* is. Even on a subconscious level, inconsistencies confuse readers, slow them down, and create doubt. They wonder, Why is it called “the program” here and “the project” there? Their attention becomes fragmented as they ponder this on a subconscious level. A reviewer sees inconsistencies in the appearance of headings, and the seed of doubt has been sown; she starts looking for discrepancies in logic as well as type size. You want your readers to believe you. Therefore, you must be trustworthy—consistent in punctuation, terminology, and appearance of the text.

In a writing team, one person needs to be in charge of the final product to ensure consistency. Even with a style sheet, a multi-person effort can get off track and create a crazy-quilt effect. Allocate time in your race to the deadline for the final editor to give the entire text a thorough review and bring all terms, phrases, constructs, and styles into a consistent whole.

Create white space. Dense text can discourage your reader. If you don't want your proposal to go to the bottom of the pile (for whenever the reviewer has the energy to wade through it), break up the page into visual chunks. Use headings, put some extra space between paragraphs, break up long paragraphs into two smaller ones. Use bullets. Place tables to break up text. White space gives the reader a way to attack the page, to organize her thoughts, to see at a glance what the text is all about.

Use headings—and keep them short. Headings are a useful organizational tool; they aid comprehension. Long headings, however, are a stumbling block. Edit them down to reflect the essence of the text that follows. If you don't have a lot of room, the heading can be part of the paragraph; simply underline it, follow with a period, and move on. Generally speaking, your headings should parallel the major sections identified in the request for proposal.

The fine print

Use a dictionary—without cracking a book. Online dictionaries such as Merriam-Webster (<http://www.merriam-webster.com/>) and Dictionary.com (<http://dictionary.reference.com/>) give you no excuse to “look it up later.” Dictionaries will help you solve the problem of whether it's “online” or “on-line.” The English language is constantly evolving (news flash: “transition” is now a noun *and* a verb), so you need to check the dictionary.

Style manual. A style manual (or guide) provides rules on capitalization, punctuation, numbers, spelling, hyphenated modifiers, references, etc., etc. APA and Chicago are two widely used style manuals. If the request for proposal directs you to use a style manual, DO IT.

Create a style sheet. This is nothing more than a piece of paper taped over your desk on which you write your own editorial decisions, such as whether to capitalize and hyphenate “T-shirt,” or whether you're calling your intervention a “program” or a “project.” Will you have a “project director” or a “project coordinator”?

To hyphenate or not to hyphenate? A dictionary or style manual will help you decide, but the trend is away from hyphenation and toward simplicity. Hyphens are generally used only if misunderstanding might arise. (For example: a big seed-pod vs. a big-seed pod.) Do not hyphenate a compound including an adverb that ends in -ly.

To cap or not to cap? You should consult a reference book on matters of capitalization. Except for proper names, however, avoid capitalizing everything in sight.

Acronyms—your friend, your foe. Define an acronym once, in parentheses right after the term, and then use the acronym thereafter. You may need to redefine it if a section might be read independently, or it's been a (very) long time since you used the acronym. Don't overuse acronyms; readers can't keep track of too many, and your proposal begins to look like alphabet soup. If necessary, use a mix of acronyms and "nicknames" (i.e., shortened versions of the proper names).

Final serial comma. Decide whether to use a final comma in a series. For example: Students, teachers, and administrators participated. The comma after "teachers" (the final serial comma) is optional, but be consistent about using or not using it. (Warning: Not using it can cause confusion, which is rare but deadly.)

Noun strings. A series of nouns—more than three in a row—is a noun string. For example: Evaluation results will be furnished to the Readiness Program Central Education Office manager. Noun strings entangle readers, who struggle mightily (and mentally) to free themselves. Help them out. Clip the string apart with prepositions: Evaluation results will be furnished to the manager of the Readiness Program at the Central Education Office.

Final notes

Use Word's Style List. Word's handy tool will save you time and frustration. Use it to define the look of your text and headings, and when you change the size or font of headings or text. This is preferable to highlighting the text and changing font and type size "by hand." Using the Style List is faster and ensures consistency of the appearance of your text. NEVER paste anything from the Web into your document—you will regret it!

Write, print, edit. Write, print, edit. Over and over. Get used to this cycle and repeating it. You'll need fresh eyes—either your own or volunteers'—to comb the proposal for faulty logic, overlooked budget details, and undefined terms. Don't sweat the small stuff; you just don't want to miss the big iceberg that can sink your proposal.

Track it. Create a system of tracking the current version of your document (e.g., Proposal_v01, Proposal_v02, Proposal_v03). Each person who works on the proposal saves it to the next higher version number before sending it on to the next person.

XX. Adopt the convention of using XX in your text for material that you plan to return to later. For instance, "Jones Elementary School had XX students reading below grade level in the 2007-08 school year" or "XXJOHN—we need a sentence here to explain what we mean by 'at risk.'" Periodically, search for the XXs in your document and fill these in with the needed information. Remember to perform a final search for XX of all documents before submitting or uploading the proposal.

Use spell check. Simple as it sounds, people still forget to use this tool. Get in the habit of doing it last.