

Grant Proposals: Best Writing Practices

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Good writing is a crucial skill, no matter what type of proposal you're submitting. Clearly communicating your project or research idea is the only way to win a grant, which is why so many organizations hire professional grant writers. However, doing so can be prohibitively expensive for smaller organizations, and there is the added concern that the hired writer will not understand the subject matter well enough to articulate and compose a winning proposal. The best writing practices listing below will help you hone your writing ability and wow the reviewers, without the cost of a grant writer.

Concision

Most RFPs have firm page limits, and keeping within those limits is paramount to winning the grant. Keep an eye out for sentences that stretch beyond three lines, or words that take up a quarter of a line. Constantly ask yourself whether what you have written can be said with fewer or shorter words without straying from your intended meaning.

Clarity

This is the partner of concision. Simple language can convey your meaning without losing reviewers in a haze of jargon or tangled sentences. Your best safeguard for clarity is to have an educated lay person read your proposal. He or she can point out sections that may be confusing or difficult to follow.

Organization

Even the best writers can lose track of their point while writing a lengthy document. The last thing you want is for reviewers to flip between pages looking for connections and themes. Creating an outline for each section of your written proposal can help keep you on the right track during the writing process.

Conventions

Formal sentences do not always sound natural. You must decide whether an academic style or a slightly casual tone is appropriate, based on your donor. A naïve reader can tell you whether your language reflects the style you want, either casual or formal. Be sure to follow the conventions of your field. If you are seeking federal funding, it's a safe bet that formal writing is what the reviewers will want to see.

Transitions

One of the most difficult aspects of proposal writing is getting the different sections to transition smoothly. This is where your organizational outline can make a difference. If you can see how the pieces of the puzzle fit together, you can create transitions easily.

Variation

As you read through your proposal, keep an eye on the first word of the sentences. Do you constantly start with "The" or "There"? If so, take a second look at the sentences and try to mix up which initial words you

use. Repetition can lull reviewers, causing them to lose interest in your project or research.

Purpose

Each section of your proposal serves a different purpose, and should be written accordingly. For instance, your abstract distills your proposal down to a single page. As such, it will not contain the same explanatory sentences featured in your project narrative or methodology. Your budget section may be further condensed and contain bulleted lists. Keeping the different purposes in mind can help you assess how to write the sections of your proposal.

Passion

Readers know when an author is not invested in the work. Redundancy and heavy use of adjectives are telltale signs of a writer who does not care for the subject matter. Consider why you want to win the grant, then use these reasons as motivation while you write. You must convince the reviewers that the need for this project or research is real and immediate.

Audience

No matter which section you are writing, keep in mind that the reviewers are your ultimate audience. They are the people you must persuade to fund your idea. Keep the evaluation criteria in the back of your head as you write, but also do your best to make their job easy. No reviewer wants to flip back and forth between pages to understand what you are trying to say.

Action

Whenever possible, write with an active voice. The passive voice bores and can sometimes confuse readers, and some reviewers may find it pretentious. When you use action verbs, you create movement within the proposal and convey your enthusiasm for the project or research. The active voice keeps reviewers interested in what you have to say, which increases your chances for success.

Proofreading

Find the person in your office or department who is a stickler for grammar and ask him or her to [review your proposal](#). He or she can address grammar, spelling, and many other small issues that might otherwise go unnoticed. Do not leave this step until the last minute. If the edits suggested alter your page count, you may have to write or cut content to comply with the RFP.

Timeliness

The most important aspect of writing your proposal is allowing enough time to finish well ahead of the deadline. If anything changes regarding your project or research, you will have a buffer of time to make the necessary adjustments to your proposal. On the other hand, rushing through your proposal can make the reviewers feel as though you are not well-organized, which can lead to lower chances of success.

Communicating your idea to reviewers that may have different levels of understanding of your field can only be done with excellent writing. I always recommend that you have three sets of eyes read your finished proposal – your colleagues, the lay person, and most importantly, the editor. The latter provides you with concision and clarity, which are key to effective communication. You, on the other hand, are responsible for conveying your persuasive argument with superior writing skills.

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Over the past 18 years, she has written grants, conducted capital campaigns, developed strategic plans for grant procurement, and assisted individuals and institutions to write winning proposals for various donors.



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