

Style Suggestions for Writing Proposals

Good proposal writing is important but there is not necessarily a one-to-one relationship between good proposal writing and getting a grant. Assume the reader (grant reviewer, funder, board member, staff person, volunteer...) knows less than you do and you must describe the project accordingly. Determine the shape of what is to come and pursue that shape:

1. **FOLLOW THE FUNDERS INSTRUCTIONS EXPLICITLY.**
2. Put the date on your proposal.
3. Number all the pages including the attachments.
4. Spell out words in acronyms the first time they are used in the document, in the section, and on the page. Place the acronym in parenthesis: United States Postal Service (USPS).
5. Set a standard format and vocabulary and stay with it. This is especially critical if more than one person is contributing to the proposal.
6. Use headlines to divide the material: use subheads to emphasize logical divisions. Make the material manageable for the reader.
7. Vary the appearance of the printed page. Use double (or 1.5) spacing and bulleted lists of items.
8. Staggered right margin and use of white space will enhance readability and create visual acceptability.
9. Choose a font and stay with it. Stay away from fancy typefaces. Serif typefaces (Times Roman, Cambria) are easier to read than sans-serif (Arial, Calibri) fonts.
10. Using a small font instead of rigorous editing is not a good idea. Use 11pt or 12pt for body copy and 12pt to 14pt for headings.
11. **FOLLOW THE FUNDERS INSTRUCTIONS EXPLICITLY.**
12. Don't use colored paper, glossy covers or fancy binders; odd size is odd ball and may go into the garbage.
13. If instructions require electronic submission submit PDFs.
14. Make a decision to personalize (first person) or institutionalize (third person) the proposal. Do your research: Does the funder use first person or third in annual reports, application guidelines or other publications? Follow the funders lead.

15. Quantity and quality of text: The proposal contents must be adequate to make a good decision but not so verbose that it becomes cumbersome to read. All facts necessary to make a decision must be present. Never omit important facts.
16. Make positive statements. A positive statement is more concise. Use **will** rather than may, could, should or would when referring to the funder's requirements. Refrain from writing what you suggest or intend, say what you will do.
17. Try to eliminate the word **not** from your writing. Even negative facts and subjects can be presented in a positive manner.
18. People learn by repetition, create appropriate redundancies.
19. Never use a large or technical word when a shorter more familiar word will do.
20. Spell check isn't always right.
21. **FOLLOW THE FUNDERS INSTRUCTIONS EXPLICITLY.**

***Proposal writing does not require a special or magical language.
The writing should be concise, clear and fluent and
the same language the funding source uses.***

Purchase a good technical writing manual – Use it!

Suggestions:

U.S. Government Printing Office Style Manual

Handbook of Technical Writing - Gerald J. Alred, Charles T. Brusaw, Walter E. Oliu (Nov 22, 2011)

Technical Writing for Dummies

Chicago Style Manual

Make sure the person doing your proof reading uses the same manual. If you are uncomfortable with your writing, take a course at your local university or community college.

Tips on writing

Words

- Choose the right words
- Keep expressions simple
- Don't use more words than needed – even if you know more words.
- Do not overstate.

- Be precise.
- Be concrete and specific.
- Remain unbiased.
- Remember who your readers are.
- Avoid overused clichés, jargon; buzz words, vogue words or gobbledeygook – unless it is the funding source’s gobbledeygook!

Sentences

Groups of words forming an idea, set up with a subject (noun), an action (verb) and a closing (punctuation.)

Clear

- All key words are present.
- Avoid ambiguous phrasing.
- Don’t overstuff the sentence.

Concise

- Be brief but informative, not vague and wordy.
- Avoid fluff, state the facts.
- Use “that” and “which” sparingly.
- Refrain from saying what you “suggest” or “recommend doing.”
- Clear out cluttered words.
- Get to the point – avoid needless openers.
- Do not use your opinion as support.

Fluent

- Sentences should be polished and easy to read – edit, edit, EDIT and **EDIT**.
- Put related ideas together to avoid choppy sentences.
- Vary sentence length.
- Use short sentences for special emphasis.
- A sentence should contain no unnecessary words.

Paragraphs

An arrangement of sentences all containing the same central idea. A paragraph should be long enough to tell the reader what he needs to know. Avoid opening paragraphs with the words “there” and “it.” Many short paragraphs in a series make a choppy paper. Ideas are lost in lengthy paragraphs.

Single sentence paragraphs can be effective.

Paragraphs contain one central idea. Do not drift away from the theme. To achieve coherence in a paragraph, arrange ideas in a logical sequence. Types of order:

1. Chronological – beginning to end;
2. Spatial – left to right, top to bottom, front to back; or
3. Importance – order specific to the reader and what the reader needs to know

Voice

Sentences contain a noun (the subject) and a verb (the action.) Voice is one of four ways in which verbs are presented in a sentence. Voice indicates the relationship of the subject to the verb.

Active Voice	VS	Passive Voice
When the verb is in active voice the subject acts.		When the verb is in passive voice the subject is acted upon.
The subject is the doer of the action.		The subject is the receiver of the action.
Puts emphasis upon the one performing the action.		Emphasizes the receiver rather than the doer.
Is used to write instructions.		Is used to explain a process or a procedure.

In proposal writing active voice is appropriate when writing needs. Active voice is direct, concise or assigns responsibility.

EXAMPLE: The case worker will visit the client at her residence and begin the application process.

Passive voice should be used in describing any process, series of actions or changes leading to results.

EXAMPLE: The client will be visited at his residence to begin the application process. Edit your writing to determine which voice permits your desired emphasis in the fewest words possible.

***“The tortoise and the hare... the tortoise and the hare!
Why can’t they just say the turtle and the rabbit?”***

Kermit the Frog, Sesame Street