Successful Proposal Development

part two: now it's time to write

By now, you've done your homework and you're ready to start writing. You want to create a proposal that makes life as easy as possible for your reviewers. The absolute goal of good proposal writing is to put readers in a position to assess independently the validity of the needs that your proposal addresses—make them conclude your problem is real and begs addressing. Foster in the readers a compelling sense of obligation. Make them want to fund your proposal!

Know Your Reviewers

In order to increase your credibility and the chance that your proposal will be successful, know your reviewers. In some cases, such as if you're sending your proposal to the National Institutes of Health, you can recommend which study section gets your proposals. You can list names of people who have expertise in your area and recommend adding to the study section, and even pick people who you think shouldn't be in the group.

Reviewers are accomplished, dedicated, knowledgeable, conscientious, and fair….but they're also overly committed, overworked, underpaid, tired, inherently skeptical, overly critical, and looking for the easiest way to do a good job. They have their own proposals that they're trying to get funded, so they might be a tough sell.

Stack the deck in your favor. Get to know the people in your field by attending conferences, conventions, corresponding with colleagues, and networking professionally and socially. If you're eligible, volunteer as a reviewer yourself.

Questions that the reviewers will have about your proposal
Is the title interesting?
Is there information on the applicant? (background, preparation, track record)
Is the application complete?
Is the narrative internally consistent?
Are there lots of appendices? (not necessarily a good thing)
Have the directions been followed?
Is the application reviewer-friendly?
Why this proposal? What sets it apart from others?

Components of reviewer-friendly proposals
Well-written: Contains no typos or internal inconsistencies; contains all required information and forms; has a logical, organized structure.
Well-presented: Uses white space well; has headings and side headings (which might be a requirement); uses formatting to set things off; has a table of contents and numbered pages; has indented, easy-to-see paragraphs; uses simple, large font.

Typical narrative section headings

The components of your proposal might differ by the type of organization to which you're submitting.

Foundation	State/federal agencies; private associations
Cover letter	Forms
Narrative	Narrative
Attachments/appendices	Appendices

When deciding which materials to include in your appendix, consider the following:

- Reprints
- Reports
- Statistical data
- Charts/graphs
- Artists' drawings
- CV/résumé
- Letters of support
- Newspaper articles
- Maps
- Tests
- Manuals/brochures
- Agreements/subcontracts
- Cassettes/videotapes

NEVER include any information in an appendix that is critical to an understanding of the proposal's narrative. The narrative must stand alone and appendices may not be read.

Basic Narrative Components

Project proposals	Research proposals
Summary	Abstract
Introduction	Review of literature
Statement of the problem	Problem statement/rationale
Objectives/specific aims	Objectives/specific aims
Plan of action	Methodology
Evaluation	Data analysis
Future funding/personnel	Personnel
Budget	Budget

The title should inform and engender enthusiasm about your proposal. It might influence where it gets assigned to be reviewed. Take care to be sure it couldn't be misunderstood or taken out of context. Be sure you understand restrictions on length; for example, if you're confined to a number of characters, do spaces count?

Summary/abstract

This should be about a paragraph to a page in length. It presents a clear, concise summary of your entire proposal. It should stand alone as a description of your proposal and should be parallel to the sections of your proposal narrative. While it goes at the beginning of the proposal, it is the last thing you write (and will be the first and maybe last thing your reviewers read.)

Introduction/review of literature

Show that you thoroughly understand the subject matter. Explain the subject and the theory behind it. Discuss current thinking on the topic. Check literature searches one last time before you send it out to make sure nothing's been published since you started your research. Boost your credibility by using precise, correct terminology. Don't overload reviewers with extraneous material, but do show them you are thoroughly familiar with the topic. Demonstrate that you can evaluate the problem; synthesize and summarize; evaluate the risks; draw substantial conclusions; and search for and evaluate alternatives.

Problem statement

Your introduction should flow into your problem statement. This is the section where you zero in on the specific aspect of the defined subject matter and provide reasons for your proposal project. Be quantitative and use numbers in this part. Choose an aspect you can handle successfully, and be clear, definitive and focused. You want to demonstrate that there's a gap in the knowledge of this subject that needs to be filled. What additional questions need to be answered? What is the importance of filling this gap? Why is it important? What new methods, procedures and knowledge will result? What is the significance?

Objectives

These are measurable statements of the outcomes you expect from your study. In quantifiable terms, your objectives should detail the things you are willing to be accountable for as you try to meet your goal. You should have 2-4 aims, which are one-sentence, defined steps toward a long-term goal in support of a specific hypothesis.

Methodology/action plan

This is the section of your proposal where you specify exactly how you plan to achieve your objectives. Be very detailed, showing exact steps. Use charts and timelines. Don't use passive voice. Don't be vague or uncertain; have confidence in your self and say definitive statements about what will happen, not conditional statements about what you hope will happen. Give a backup plan stating what you'll do if something goes wrong, so that your reviewers can't fault you for overlooking something. Outline the whole plan, then go back and fill in details in successive steps. Use matrices or charts for organizational clarity. Hint: be thinking of your evaluation section as your write your methodology.

Evaluation

In this section, you'll account for the job you have done by focusing on the process or the projected outcome. A research proposal will have data analysis as well as parametric and non-parametric statistics. A project proposal should have either a content evaluation, which looks at the process you undertook, or a summative evaluation, which examines the end result. Lack of an evaluation, a poor evaluation or failure to think seriously about the evaluation will doom an otherwise good proposal.

Budgets

There should be a one-to-one correspondence between all activities outlined in your proposal narrative/methodology and your budget.

Some basic budget terms:

Direct costs: Costs that are specifically identified and attributed to specific projects or program. Examples include faculty salaries and fringe benefits, travel equipment, or supplies.

Facilities and administrative costs: General support expenses, related to a university function (e.g., research, instruction, public service) that cannot be specifically identified with a particular project.

Cost sharing: Portion of the sponsored project not borne by the sponsor, including cash or third-party, in-kind contributions.

Cash match: At times, you may be required to match the donation of a sponsor. You might do it by not charging the facilities and administrative costs.

Third-party match: Support provided by another organization or entity.

In-kind match: Not money, but "blood, sweat and tears." This could be a portion of an employee's time, use of equipment or facilities—some tangible supply or free services.

Final packaging:

Never permanently bind your proposal! It will be taken apart and xeroxed by the reviewers. Use a staple or clip instead.
Adhere to page limits.
PROOFREAD! Then, proofread again.
Be sure to send the right number of copies.
Check deadlines: does the proposal have to be received or merely postmarked by the due date?
Mail it from an official U.S. Post Office.
Be sure that the postmark or stamp date is legible
If you're running too close to the deadline, see if electronic submission is possible. ■