

Avoid Placing a Cognitive Tax on Your Narrative

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In the seemingly eternal debate that occurs with each new release or upgrade of Microsoft Windows, there is much discussion about the enormous “cognitive burden” or “cognitive tax” unnecessarily imposed on users of Windows 8. This issue has apparently resonated to the point that a fall release of Windows 9.0 removing this “cognitive burden” may be in the works. Many who write proposals or give grant-writing presentations may have personally experienced this “cognitive tax” in numerous forms, under the software theory, or, as some may say, “software bloat,” that if 500 document formatting options are good, then 10,000 options must be better.

Regardless, those writing the research narrative, i.e., the project description, of a proposal will likewise want to avoid imposing a “cognitive burden” or “cognitive tax” upon the reader, particularly upon reviewers and program officers charged with making funding decisions. What, you may ask, are these “cognitive burdens” or “cognitive taxes” that writers may impose on reviewers and program officers? Well, a good place to start is to “*round up the usual suspects*,” as Captain Louis Renault ordered his investigating officers to do in the movie *Casablanca*.

Keep in mind, a **narrative cognitive burden** on the reader can take many forms, often in combination with each other. For example, an all too common cognitive burden is the toxic combo imposed on the reader by (a) a narrative mired in technical minutia (b) presenting an “unguided” cascade of undifferentiated data or preliminary results to the reader (c) written by a team of authors who produce proposal sections seemingly disconnected from each other (d) formatted under the assumption that the solicitation imposed an unrealistically low page count on the narrative, thereby (e) justifying the use of the smallest allowable font, elimination of all white space and paragraph breaks, and, if visuals are used, (f) reducing them to illegible postage stamp size, thereby presenting the reader with a Rorschach test rather than useful information. The reviewers’ likely interpretation of such a test is “~~Do not fund this proposal!~~”

Keep in mind that your fundamental goal in writing the narrative is to convince the reviewers to fund your project. You must tell reviewers a compelling and persuasive tale by leading them along a narrative path that takes them exactly to the place you want them to go—a positive funding decision. How well you perform your role as the “**reviewers’ guide**” to your proposed research is critical to your funding success. Of course, this presupposes that, as you organize and draft the narrative, you know where you are going and how you plan to get there.

However, if you harbor any uncertainty or lack of clarity about the vision, goals, objectives, and rationale of your proposed research, that uncertainty must be resolved before you can successfully serve as the “**reviewers’ guide**.” A lack of convincing clarity in the research narrative is most often precipitated by a poorly organized proposal. A poorly organized narrative imposes a major “**cognitive burden**” on the reader. A poorly organized proposal takes readers on a confusing and meandering journey that leaves them confused about where they are going and why, about what is important and what is not, about the logic and rationale of

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the journey, and, ultimately, about why they should pay the “*cognitive tax*” *required to take this journey with you rather than just setting your proposal aside.*

The final research narrative, a least a successful one, will have gone through a process of continuous improvement through many draft iterations and reviews. Moreover, it is the wise author that asks others to review the proposal and comment during the final stages of proposal production. One of the key questions to ask those who may review your proposal is whether or not the proposal as a whole or the proposal in any section or paragraph imposes a “*cognitive tax*” or a “*cognitive burden*” on them as a reader and keeps them from clearly understanding why your research is important and why it should be funded. If these colleagues flag parts of your proposal as imposing these taxes on them, you can assume it will also impose such a tax on reviewers and program officers. After all, your goal in the narrative is to “*amp up*” reviewers’ enthusiasm for your research, *not to suffocate it by making them struggle under a heavy cognitive tax burden that leaves them mentally spent and uncertain of the value of your research.*