

Avoid the Generic Introduction

A common mistake in proposals is starting with an uninspiring and nondistinctive introduction.

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Put yourself in the place of a reviewer. You've been asked to review proposals for a DOE biofuels program, and you have nine proposals to review before you participate in a panel. You open the first proposal, and it starts, "Biofuels are critical to the national goal of achieving energy independence..." The introduction to the proposal continues on for several paragraphs explaining the importance of biofuels and discussing why biofuels need to be developed. Of course, you've been asked to review these proposals because you're an expert in biofuels, so none of this information is news to you.

You finish reading that proposal and open the second one. It starts, "Biofuels are an important component of the US's future energy policy..." It goes on to explain why biofuels are important and why research on biofuels is needed. You open the third proposal, and guess what? It starts with another discussion of why biofuels are important – some of these discussions even stretch to a page or more. You wade through these proposals, and then you get to the sixth proposal, and it starts out, "A critical problem in making biofuels practical is making step x in the synthesis process more efficient. Our proposed project will address this problem by using the following innovative approach..." and it goes on to outline an interesting and innovative approach to the problem.

Which proposal would you remember?

The First Impression

A common mistake in writing proposals is to spend the first critical paragraphs explaining to the reviewer something that he surely already knows and probably has read in all the proposals leading up to yours. The saying that *you never get a second chance to make a first impression* is particularly true when it comes to proposals. Your reviewer's interest is at its height when she starts reading your proposal. At that point, you can either get her excited or lull her to sleep. Starting with an introduction that does nothing to distinguish your project from all the other proposed projects will lull her to sleep.

To develop an exciting introduction, you need to identify the kernel of your great idea. How is your idea different from what others will propose? What important problem will it solve? Why is it innovative and exciting? Don't bury that kernel in the bottom of page 3 after you've lulled your reviewer into a pleasant stupor with generic discussions about your topic area. Put it right up front in the first paragraph. When you finish your first paragraph, it should be absolutely distinctive. If that introductory paragraph could be put into another proposal on the same topic area, delete it and start over.

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Many PIs like to start their proposal with a description of the need or problem they're addressing. This approach is fine, but be sure to pinpoint the *specific need or problem* you'll be addressing (not "biofuels production needs to be made more economical," but "step x in the production of biofuels is inefficient") and quickly follow with a discussion of how you'll address that problem (e.g., "We have an innovative idea y for increasing efficiency of that step by 40%").

Providing Context Without Boring the Reviewer

It is important to demonstrate to the funder that you understand the importance of the topic area and the motivation for the program, but it's not necessary to discuss those things in the first couple of paragraphs. Save that discussion for your background section, which should be placed after an introductory section that provides a compelling overview of your proposed project. This overview should concisely summarize what you're going to do, why you're going to do it, and why it's significant. When you get to that background section, be sure to tailor it to your specific project. You'll not only want to demonstrate to the funder that you understand the funder's goals for the program, but at the same time you'll want to describe how funding *your specific project* will help the funder achieve those goals.

Similarly, when you discuss the state of the art, it can be tempting (particularly if you've been teaching a course on the subject) to write a long section that is essentially an introductory lecture about the topic. Unless you have good reason to believe that the reviewers are not well versed in the subject of your proposal, it's best to avoid this temptation and instead focus quickly on the specific problem or challenge within the topic that is the focus of your proposed project. What have others done to try to address this problem? What holes in current knowledge must be filled in order to solve this problem?

So, taking our earlier biofuels example, that would mean discussing the state of knowledge about the specific synthesis step that you plan to improve, not providing a long description of the state of the art in biofuels. If your state of the art section could be interchanged with that from any other proposal on the topic, then you can be assured that the reviewer will be asleep by the time he finishes reading the section. Even more concerning, he will have gained no insight into the motivation behind your particular proposal, as compared to all the other proposals he has been reading.

Remember that your proposal will be evaluated along with a pile of other proposals submitted in response to the same funding opportunity. Whatever you can do to make your proposal stand out as more original, more thoughtful, more significant, or more exciting than the others will increase your chances of funding, and that starts with a strong introduction.