

## Clarity in the Research Narrative

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It is open to debate whether or not Julian Barnes's observation in his 1984 novel *Flaubert's Perrot* was actually meant as guidance in writing the research narrative. But on its face, his noting that "*Mystification is simple; clarity is the hardest thing of all,*" is excellent grant-writing advice, regardless of the author's original intent. The wisdom of this observation will be clear to those who review proposals, either for funding agencies or for research colleagues.

Unfortunately, for anyone who has read, reviewed, or critiqued a considerable number of research narratives, either pre- or post-submission, "*mystification*" is a common response, often winning hands down over *clarity*. As William Raub, Former Deputy Director, NIH, noted "*There is no grantsmanship that will turn a bad idea into a good one, but there are many ways to disguise a good one.*" While there is a long list of possible ways to disguise a good idea, when it comes to grant writing, a lack of clarity, particularly organizational clarity, will be seen as a capital offense, in this case punishable by a mandatory sentence of "*Do Not Fund!*".

As Barnes noted, "*mystification is simple...clarity is hard.*" This explains a lot about the state of many research narratives, not just in initial drafts but often, unfortunately, in the final submitted narrative. **No special skills are needed to write a bad proposal—anyone can do it, and many do.** As NEH chairman Bruce Cole (2001-2009) noted in a 2002 issue of the journal, *Humanities*, "**Writing is thinking. To write well is to think clearly. That's why it's so hard.**"

These are important points to keep in mind for anyone assisting faculty in the planning, developing, and writing of a proposal. It is especially important in the current environment where funding agency budgets have often flat lined while the number of research grant applicants has surged. As "state-assisted" institutional budgets have declined, or institutions plan for increasing research expenditures as measured against peer rankings, we can expect this environment to intensify. Moreover, many funding agencies now describe and characterize fundable research using superlatives on steroids—transformational, cutting edge, novel, paradigm shifting, etc., **tempting researchers to cloak their work in the same superlatives.**

In fact, common advice to faculty in grant-writing workshops and similar forums is that "*agencies fund compelling research, not merely good research,*" or agencies fund "*exciting science, not just good science.*" While that is true, it is also a bit of a red herring. The distraction here is that too often this is interpreted to mean that a magical "witch's potion" can be applied to an otherwise lackluster research narrative in the days prior to submission that will transform it into a winning proposal. NOT!

The best advice is to realize that no grant writing legerdemain or slight of hand or waving of a magic wand can transform an unfundable narrative into a fundable one. Invariably, when an attempt is made to transform (pick your synonym) an uninspired, unimaginative, dull, bland, prosaic, dreary, or tedious research narrative into a compelling or exciting one, the tools of resuscitation tend to be a liberal sprinkling of hyper-adjectives and superlatives, **as if merely claiming research novelty is sufficient to make it so.** NOT!

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***However the solution to this conundrum is simple: narrative clarity.*** Ultimately, whether or not the proposed research represents a compelling and exciting project is up to the reviewers to decide. The most important narrative characteristic required for reviewers to make this decision is a clearly written and well organized research narrative. ***Value clarity above all else in the research narrative and take your chances.*** It may well be that clarity reveals to the reviewers why your research idea is not a fundable one. On the other hand, a poorly written and poorly organized proposal may be disguising a fundable idea. Of course, the worst thing to do is to clutter the research narrative with unsubstantiated claims of research exceptionalism while self anointing the proposed research with laudatory adjectives and superlatives that infest the narrative like a cloud of annoying mosquitoes.

The most important thing about clarity in the research narrative is to ***plan for it before you begin to write, not after you have written the first full draft of the proposal.*** Attempting to bring clarity to a proposal by a major rewrite is an arduous and painful task, even to the most skilled editor or grant writer. ***The first step in planning the research narrative is a plan for organizational clarity.*** Organizational clarity is the cornerstone of narrative clarity. If you don't get this right from the get go, all subsequent narrative planning is for naught. In most cases, the funding solicitation itself will serve as the organizational template for writing the research narrative. This will ensure that you answer every question asked by the funder ***in the order asked.*** It is not unusual for larger solicitations to require the applicant to answer upwards of 50 or more questions relating to the proposed project.

Also, keep in mind that ***reviewers do comment on narrative clarity and organization.*** Well written and well organized proposals are often acknowledged by reviewers, whereas poorly written and poorly organized proposals are not only noted by reviewers but elaborated upon in other ways that doom them to failure. ***The most damning inference reviewers can make is to assume that a poorly written and poorly organized proposal is a tell-tale sign of problems that would likely occur with the research itself were the project to be funded.***

If a proposal is written and organized in a way that makes it difficult to follow, ***reviewers will see that as a reflection of the applicant's difficulty in articulating and implementing the research project itself.*** Errors in grammar, spelling, and usage, for example, will leave reviewers to wonder whether these sloppy errors will migrate into the proposed research, i.e., ***inattention to perfection in the research narrative strongly suggests that the applicant may be inattentive to perfection in performing the proposed research.***