

Why Halloween Is Bad for Proposals, Part 4

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There are many scary Halloween costumes you might *inadvertently* wear to mask the identity of the research idea put forward in your proposal, and unfortunately any one of them will result in more tricks than treats when it comes to the success of your grant. Of course, the premise here assumes that a fundable idea lies cloaked beneath a number of correctable grant-writing mistakes identified sufficiently before the due date to allow for their correction. Unlike Halloween, when scary costumes earn treats, program officers and reviewers will not reward ideas cloaked in ghoulish disguises. Unfortunately, a number of all too common scary costumes can so successfully ***disguise a potentially fundable idea that the idea becomes unrecognizable to the reviewers.*** To avoid spooking reviewers, don't submit your proposal cloaked or masked, or wearing one of the more common scary costumes guaranteed to horrify, as addressed in the below ***examples of possible proposal disguises.***

Wearing an NIH Costume to an NSF Costume Party

Perhaps imposter Frank Abagnale, Jr., played in the movie *Catch Me If You Can* by Leonardo DiCaprio, might pull off this disguise successfully, but in most cases it is best not to attempt to wear an NIH costume to an NSF costume party. Some major alterations will be in order. For example, if your NIH costume identifies you as a biochemist able to significantly accelerate the "bench to bedside" benefits of your research in order to impact a specific human disease, you might want to consider wearing a new costume for the NSF party. In this case, your new, ***NSF-appropriate costume*** might better focus on how you will advance the frontiers of biological knowledge, increase our understanding of complex biological systems, and provide a theoretical basis for original research in many other scientific disciplines. Unfortunately, wearing the wrong research costume to the wrong agency costume party is a fairly common "fashion faux pas" not limited to researchers attempting to expand their funding opportunities by moving beyond NIH and including NSF as a potential funder of their research. This faux pas is quickly recognized and noted by reviewers.

The Claiming Rather than Explaining Mask

In grant writing it is always better to explain than to claim. ***Adjectives and superlatives do not have the power to confer legitimacy on your ideas, nor do they communicate anything more than unsubstantiated opinions.*** While your intent may be to use adjectives and superlatives to add a compelling "glitter" to the significance of your research narrative, the most likely result is that they will act more like chaff, annoying or distracting reviewers, much like chaff acts as a countermeasure to confuse radar systems. If something is novel, innovative, unique, or compelling about your research, then demonstrate that with the specificity and detail required to prove it. Claiming that your research is novel, innovative, unique, and compelling without proving it by substantive statements and well supported examples is

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nothing more than wishful thinking, somewhat analogous to the sixteenth-century English proverb "If wishes were horses, beggars would ride." In the case of a research narrative, it is better to heed Benjamin Franklin's observation: "**Industry need not wish.**" The significance of your ideas should not need the adornment of "linguistic bling" in the form of gushing superlatives. A clear and simple statement directed to reviewers and program officers describing the significance of your idea will suffice.

I Love Being in the Weeds Mask

To ensure that reviewers use your proposal as a sleeping aide, overwhelm them with a blizzard of technical minutia achieving the density of a black hole. Take them ever deeper into the disciplinary weeds, page after painful page, extinguishing their hope of finding even a glimmer of significance. Reviewers asked to slog through a seemingly endless series of arcane minutiae will quickly rebel against the numbingly repetitive experience, as desperately as TV meteorologist Phil Connors (Bill Murray) in *Groundhog Day* tries to escape the endlessly repeated series of trivial events. It can be easier to write page after page of familiar technical detail than to write a more disciplined research narrative representing a clear and simple description convincing reviewers of the significance of your research and its likelihood to advance the field in some way. Use technical detail **judiciously to help prove your case rather than disguise it.**

In some cases, the initial writing of technical detail can help you psychologically "jump start" the proposal narrative so you at least have the illusion of words on the page rather than a blank page. Ultimately, however, technical data dumps are nothing more than listings of technical capacities, expertise, and details **without any guiding intelligence** that explains the relational connections among the details and the resultant significance or importance to an agency mission. Excessive technical minutiae in a research narrative unlinked to research relevance forces reviewers into the position of the National Security Agency that gathers massive amounts of global communications but then must mine the "raw data" for relevant information demonstrating a pattern of significance to the agency. Don't expect reviewers to do that job for you. Use the appropriate amount of technical detail to support your arguments, but never assume that "raw" technical details alone will make the funding case for you.

The All Hat and No Cattle Disguise

Putting forth grandiose ideas grounded on generalities rather than specifics is a fairly common failing of some proposals. Grand visions, overly ambitious plans, and unfocused ideas cobbled to unbridled enthusiasm will not impress reviewers. While effusive epiphanies may have their place on your back deck with a bottle of wine at sunset, they are most often, thankfully, ephemeral, and should not find their way into a proposal narrative.