

## Why Halloween Is Bad for Proposals, Part 6

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By [Mike Cronan](#), co-publisher

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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.***

### The “Why Should I Bother to Write a Budget Justification” Mask

It is wise to treat the budget justification section of the proposal as an opportunity to write a more competitive proposal rather than as an inconvenient boilerplate disconnected from the project description. Whether through inattention or disregard, a poorly written description of the budget justification unlinked to the research narrative risks missing an opportunity to give additional detail and specificity about the operational and management structure of the project, or other factors unique to your proposal.

At the core of a successful proposal must lie a good idea that reviewers judge to be significant, compelling, and meritorious for funding. But it is also the case that your success will depend upon convincing program officers and reviewers that you have the operational and management expertise to manage a research award wisely and successfully over several years or longer, particularly a major award that may involve multiple researchers, post docs, and graduate students, along with other possible program components aligned with the research objectives.

A funded award, after all, represents a major, strategic investment by a research agency in your capacity to perform. Of course, your case for funding is made in the project description in various sections, including in the management and operations sections. However, the budget justification section allows you additional space to explain the budget request at a level of detail that space constraints in the project description may prohibit. In this respect, the budget justification section serves as a functional bridge between the project narrative and the raw budget numbers. It is a place where narrative text and budget numbers may be joined to give reviewers a clearer and deeper understanding of the operational logic of your proposed research and how it will be accomplished using the sponsor's money.

While the format and content of the budget justification section will vary by agency, and often by program and program size within an agency, it is another important factor in the success of your proposal (if it is a specified component of the solicitation) and, as such, should

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be approached by the proposal writing team to ensure that it will serve as an illuminating complement to the project description. After all, successful proposals are the sum of an accumulation of marginal advantages, as economists might describe it, whereby every required component of a proposal is brought as close to perfection as possible, recognizing that the aggregate of these factors cumulatively determines the outcome. Failing to give the budget justification section of a proposal the attention it deserves squanders an opportunity to gain further competitive advantage and hence a funded proposal.

### **The Freddy Krueger Mask**

In the seemingly endless series of Freddy Krueger movies beginning with *Nightmare on Elm Street*, the victims all have recurring nightmares and die in their sleep. Program officers and reviewers might also welcome this fate when the “Freddy Krueger Proposal” is submitted to their agency for review with every indication that it has come to them by a circuitous route of prior ***serial rejections by other research agencies***. Some of the most egregious examples of horror stories recounted by program officers and reviewers include having to read proposals containing obvious artifacts of prior submittals, such as instances in which a project timeline or most of the research narrative has been clearly copied and pasted into the current proposal from a prior proposal, occasionally so hurriedly as to incorrectly identify the agency to which the “perennial proposal” is currently being submitted.

But even if the most obvious tell-tale signs of a recycled proposal are deleted from the most current resurrection, most reviewers and other readers will quickly recognize other “crime scene” evidence indicating that the proposal’s author is attempting the grant-writing equivalent of “speed dating” funding agencies, perhaps using the same logic that people use in buying lottery tickets. It is fairly easy to recognize when a proposal does not respond to the specific solicitation to which it is being submitted, perhaps because the authors assume such a greatness in the proposed ideas that program officers and reviewers will not care, or eagerly overlook, the fact they are not relevant to the agency mission priorities. Or perhaps authors of recycled proposals assume that all research funding agencies and their programs are fungible, and so a proposal submitted in the past to one of the defense agencies can be tweaked a bit and submitted for an NSF CAREER award.

Unfortunately, the Freddy Krueger Mask is scalable, as the PI’s of large research proposals have likely learned. PI’s should take note when a potential research team member provides an “off the shelf” narrative contribution that has likely been inserted in many past efforts.

The Achilles Heel of recycled proposals is that they ignore the basics of successful grant writing; specifically, they forget that competitive proposals must contain competitive ideas that respond clearly to the funding agency’s mission priorities or other research objectives defined in the solicitation. Recycled proposals are destined for rejection. Before trying to recycle an old proposal for a new program, it would be wise to heed U.S. House Speaker Sam Rayburn’s observation that “there is no education in the second kick of the mule.” A recycled proposal is most likely to have suffered a series of “mule kicks” by reviewers in the past, and this should be taken to heart for future efforts.

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Bottom line: if you are proposing new research ideas, express the significance of those new ideas, and all topic components of them, in newly-crafted writing for every word of the proposal narrative. Success in proposal writing will not be achieved using recycled parts—successful proposals are not renovations of the past but a creation for the future, together with the compelling arguments you make for the place and significance of your research ideas in that future.

### **The “I am a Researcher not a Wordsmith” Mask**

Mark Twain once stated that he never trusted a person who could only spell a word one way. Unfortunately, Mark Twain will not be reviewing your proposal, but rather program officers and reviewers who may not be amused by errors in spelling, grammar, and punctuation, and the resultant ambiguities they create. When it comes to the mechanics of writing a research proposal, it is prudent to assume a level of perfection in grammar, spelling, and usage equivalent to that of writing a computer program with zero tolerance for coding errors.

While one or perhaps two errors in a major proposal may be tolerated by reviewers, or escape notice, anything more than that will likely draw attention, and not of a positive kind. Reviewers will likely assume, and justifiably so, that sloppy errors in language and usage will translate into sloppy errors in research. Unfortunately, there is no equivalent concept in grant writing to the “Navaho rug flaw,” whereby a purposeful imperfection is woven into a wool rug or blanket to allow evil spirits the opportunity to exit the design.

The last comment you want to read in your reviews is that the proposal was poorly written and contained numerous typos, or was in need of wordsmithing. Reviewers will occasionally comment on how well the research narrative was written, or how poorly it was written. But reviewers rarely recommend funding for poorly written proposals. Fortunately, errors of grammar, usage, and spelling are correctable by taking the time to closely proofread your narrative, or, better yet, by getting a fresh set of eyes on the proposal by an experienced editor.