

## Getting the Writing Right

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By [Katherine E. Kelly](#), Ph.D., Editor

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### Effective writing emerges over time

How often have you re-read drafts of your proposals, reports, or even scholarly papers after letting them set for a few days and been perplexed (or dismayed) by the sentences you encounter? The crucial element here is “set for a few days,” as re-reading your prose within hours of completing it is likely to convince you that it sounds just fine. It takes time away from a draft to make it truly visible and audible to yourself, and when you do see and hear it one or more days after you’ve written it, you will know whether it conveys the sense you intend or whether it’s likely to confuse, distract, and generally annoy the reader. And so we encounter the first principle of getting the writing right: *good writing emerges gradually through a process of successive drafts separated by at least 24 hours*. Don’t forget to build this time into your proposal planning.

But the truth is that, no matter how many drafts you create, your writing will benefit from another set of eyes, preferably the eyes of a colleague who knows the field, the state of the field’s funding, and who has successfully secured funding from the same or a similar funding source. But before asking that colleague to read your draft, do them and yourself the service of telling them how you would like them to read and respond to your document. They won’t be able to read your mind on this point—if you don’t give them guidance, expect a cursory and superficial review. As you consider how to approach asking for a review, let’s clear away a false assumption. It’s customary to think about writing as if it were divided into two parts: content and style. But, contrary to that belief, the content of a proposal will be conveyed as fully through the author’s writing choices, or style, as it will by the concepts they’ve selected as worthy of funding. Style and content inform one another. So, for example, it would not be helpful to ask a colleague, “Please review this proposal for its content. I’ll worry about the style later.” If the style is poor—riddled with errors, long-winded, scattered in focus, unevenly developed, and siloed into isolated sections—even the most fascinating concept will be sabotaged by gaps in the argument, ambiguities in language, organizational distractions, and the appearance of sloppiness. You can, of course, ask a colleague for a review of isolated sections of a proposal, but you will want someone to look at the entire document in its near-finished state to gain the full advantage a review can give you.

### Ask for a frank review

So how might you ask for a review? A second principle of getting the writing right is to ask for a *frank review* of the nearly completed proposal that pays attention to the proposal’s ideas and to the writing itself. Time for this review will also need to be set aside in the proposal planning process. Give the reviewer sufficient lead time to complete a detailed reading and response. You might note that you are submitting this after careful thought and would appreciate attention to the document’s effectiveness with respect to the ideas advanced and to how well the writing conveys those ideas. For example, you might ask the reviewer whether

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the proposal adequately answers all of the questions posed by the funder using clear and consistent prose. Does field-specific jargon get in the way at any point? Are the terms used appropriate and consistent throughout the document? Let your reviewer know that you welcome close attention to the writing itself. Without such an assurance, some reviewers might steer clear of commenting on the proposal's language either to save any possible embarrassment or to minimize the time needed to complete the review.

### **Select a level of review**

Yes, commenting on the style-content of a proposal can take more or less time, depending upon the thoroughness of the review. The third principle of getting the writing right is deliberately to select the level of review you give or solicit from others. If you are asked to review a colleague's proposal, or if you are seeking a professional editor to check your current draft, keep in mind a level of editing you would like to perform yourself or to have performed by a professional. The first or most elementary level would include checking the document for correct spelling, punctuation, and grammar. Second-language speakers are likely to benefit from an editing at this level, if not also from the other two levels described below. Spell checking programs accompanying text programs like "Word" can be used to find most spelling errors. But remember they do not identify whether "their" or "there" should appear in a sentence. The author/editor has to make that decision. This technology has made spelling errors close to inexcusable, so be sure to use a spell checker and also to read through a document for any words that may have been spelled correctly but used incorrectly. The second level of editing includes suggested rewriting to improve the logical coherence of sentences, paragraphs, and sections; to ensure that transitions help the reader from one paragraph and section to the next; and to cut out excess words where necessary. At this level, look hard at the author's use of verbs. Does some form of the verb "to be" appear in nearly every sentence? If so, suggest more active verbs to give the writing a clearer sense of agency, energy, and focus.

The third level of editing includes reviewing the solicitation and other background as needed to prepare for a deep rewriting of the document. This rewriting will ensure that the proposal actually addresses the terms used in the solicitation, and that it does so using clear, precise, and accessible language. It will also ensure that paragraphs within the proposal feel connected to one another and to the proposal's primary claim. This level of rewriting will need the author's cooperation and consent; otherwise, she may feel offended or criticized by the sheer amount of change suggested.

In summary, the three principles for getting the writing of a proposal right for both authors and reviewers include: (1) allowing time in the proposal planning process to produce multiple drafts of the document following a series of reviews; (2) requesting/offering a frank review of the document; and (3) specifying the review level expected or offered given the constraints of time. In all cases, writers and editors will be aiming for linguistic precision and compression. To quote Dr. Seuss, "*The writer who breeds more words than he needs, is making a chore for the reader who reads.*" You don't want to burden your reviewer at a granting agency; instead, *make it easy for them to say yes to your proposal.*