

## The Grant Writer's Narrative Checklist

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The best strategy to avoid the common mistakes made in writing the research narrative is to correct them before you make them by anticipation and avoidance. At the least, it is helpful to start the process of writing the research narrative with a list of the characteristics of the poorly written research narrative and a list of the characteristics of the well written research narrative in mind. Moreover, if you learn by your mistakes as well as the mistakes of others, this list should grow and mature over time to become a very robust aggregate of what to do and what not to do in writing a research narrative. Of course, it is always preferred that you learn from the mistakes others have made in writing unsuccessful proposals, thereby avoiding reinventing the flat tire. Unfortunately, too many of us are experiential learners, a characterization familiar to anyone with teenage children, and seem destined to learn only from our own mistakes, but not those of others who offer us warnings that go unheeded.

Of course, a key preliminary step in this process is to avoid organizational mistakes in the research narrative from the get go, particularly as they relate to writing a research narrative that fails to respond fully to the funding solicitation. The most common unresponsive narratives are those that do not fully address the questions asked by the sponsor in the solicitation, or, too often, inexplicably answer questions that were not asked by the sponsor and have little or no relevance to the research goals and objectives detailed in the solicitation.

A good first step to ensure you write a well organized, fully responsive research narrative is to use the funding solicitation as a template to create the first draft of the proposal, thereby addressing the project goals and objectives, review criteria, and other referenced documents in the order and with the thoroughness expected by the sponsor. This initial template serves as the checklist ensuring that every question asked by the sponsor is fully addressed in the project narrative and in the order and context in which it was asked. This is particularly important because poorly structured and poorly organized narratives are excruciatingly difficult to correct.

Keep in mind that a well organized narrative is also a proportionally organized narrative. Proportionality brings balance to the project narrative in a way that establishes the relative importance, **or the weighted relevance**, of the topics you choose to address in explaining your research. For example, if buffers are not important to the research, don't belabor buffers. Proportionally allocate narrative space within the page limit of the proposal in a way that best reflects a **hierarchical ordering of the importance** of what you most need to communicate about the significance of your proposed research. A similar proportionality should be achieved between what is described in the research narrative and what is requested in the budget.

Another important preliminary step prior to writing is to clearly understand your audience and write a narrative accessible to that audience. Most likely your audience will be agency program officers and reviewers. Therefore, in characterizing your audience it is important to understand the review process itself and thereby gain insight into the likely composition of the review panel and the expertise each member of the panel brings to the

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review of your proposal. For example, is the review panel comprised of technical experts in a narrow field, or is it a more multidisciplinary panel required for cross disciplinary research, or does the panel include experts from outside the field that bring a broader perspective to judging the value of the research. Also, keep in mind that for larger research projects, a more diverse review panel may be required to address the multidisciplinary nature of the proposed research. Regardless, always write with a target audience in mind. In most cases the audience to have in mind is a “generic reviewer” who is scientifically literate but not an expert in the field.

With this in mind, consider prior to writing some of the common mistakes made in drafting the research narrative. It will benefit you to keep these in mind prior to writing rather than after the narrative has been completed:

- As you write, translate disciplinary jargon into plain English. Understanding your proposed research should not require members of the review panel to possess a *Captain Midnight Secret Decoder Ring* to make your narrative accessible to them.
- Get to the point of your research quickly in the narrative, preferably in the first paragraph or certainly on the first page, if the agency format allows it. Don’t bog down the narrative and the reviewers by writing a background section that reads like a long-winded history of the discipline starting with ancient Greek metaphysicians and plodding along century by century until, finally, you explain how this background culminates in your proposed research project.
- Keep in mind that successful proposals quickly answer some basic questions that are always asked by program officers and reviewers. Can you answer these questions about your proposed research in a **clear and simple narrative style** that explains your:
  - Research goals and objectives
  - Research plan
  - Significance of the research
  - Value-added benefits of the research and impact on an agency mission or a research field
  - Prior results/preliminary data that validate your capacity to perform
  - Barriers and challenges to achieving results and your plan for overcoming them
  - Payoffs from your success (answering the so-called “So What/Who Cares?” question).
- While writing in a **clear and simple** narrative style is difficult for even the most experienced writers, and typically requires multiple draft iterations to get it right, there are some common elements of the well-written narrative that must be kept in mind before, during, and after you write a first draft, for example:
  - **Write sentences that channel Ernest Hemingway, not William Faulkner.** Rhetoricians refer to Hemingway’s style or technique as parataxis, but in keeping with the advice in this article, “parataxis” is merely jargon for writing short, concise sentences, as opposed to Faulkner’s very long sentences that are meant to convey a hierarchy of dependent meanings, what rhetoricians might refer to as hypotactic polysyndeton. If you were explaining this in a proposal, in keeping with the spirit of this article, you would skip the jargon and simply state

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**“Hemingway writes short sentences and Faulkner writes long sentences.”** The meaning is the same, but the jargon-free version makes the statement accessible to everyone. **So how long a sentence should you write, you may ask?** Einstein once said that *“everything should be made as simple as possible, but not simpler.”* The same might be said of sentence length in a proposal. It should be as long as required to communicate the key information, but no longer. For example, if your sentences are becoming overgrown with commas, semi-colons, coordinating conjunctions (e.g., and, but, for, or, etc.), and embedded and transitional phrases, somewhat like kudzu along Interstate 20 in Alabama and Georgia, it is time to break the long sentence up into shorter ones, no matter how proud you are of crafting it. Sentences in the range of 12 to 25 words are nicely succinct. If your sentence gets up to 35 to 40 words, it deserves a yellow caution light and an automatic review to find ways to shorten it. If your sentence word count gets in the range of 50, 60 or more words, that is a full red alert requiring the mandatory use of two or more periods ruthlessly applied! Overly long sentences choke the reader. Think of it like eating a navel orange—it is always best eaten in the sections nature intended rather than swallowed whole. Most importantly, **excessively long sentences are not memorable to reviewers because they contain too many moving parts.** Of course, a too long series of sentences may be memorable to the reviewers as the point in the proposal where they all became totally confused and exasperated with the author.

- **Specifics are good and generalities are bad.** Specifics serve both to test and prove the value of your ideas, and when they are lacking, it tells a reviewer that your ideas may also be lacking, or have yet to become fully developed. Stating a research goal, for example, without offering a specific research plan to transition the goal to an outcome, will leave the reviewers without the sufficient detail needed to judge the merits of your proposal. Generalities appear as glaring flaws to readers and reviewers alike, especially those searching for the specificity needed to make an informed critical judgment on the project’s merit. A narrative laced with generalities leaves the reader **uncertain about what the proposer actually plans to do**--the reviewers’ equivalent of the **“where’s the beef?”** question. In effect, generalities represent an implied promise to accomplish something important if funded, but leave the actual performance details vague.
- **Superlatives are adjectives on steroids and must be stricken from the narrative.** Clarity and the lack of ambiguity are two of the most important characteristics of the successful proposal. Clarity is grounded on simplicity, detail, and specificity. Superlatives, on the other hand, are inherently ambiguous, **substituting an amplified emotional appeal for specificity and detail.** It may well be that your research is transformative, but a cascade of superlatives characterizing your research should **originate from the reviewers rather than from you.**
- **The antidote for generalities and superlatives is to quantify your research narrative.** Numbers matter. Numbers are the basis of comparative claims that inform program officers and reviewers alike and allow them to better judge the relative worthiness of

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your proposal. The old adage about a picture being worth a thousand words applies to the judicious use of quantitative information or data in the project narrative. You don't want to overwhelm reviewers with a cascade of quantitative information, **but neither do you want to leave them frustrated by its absence**. In this regard, too much quantification can be as problematic as too little. So it is important to be mindful of reviewers' reluctance to sift through extensive quantitative data to determine the merit of your proposed project. That is not their job. It is the job of the author, however, to explain the significance of any data used in a narrative in the most economical way possible. Proposals are about ideas, and data need to be judiciously selected to support the merit of the ideas described in the narrative. **But data in and of themselves are not ideas**. Rather, your narrative needs to explain and illuminate the significant patterns in the data you present rather than pass that task onto reviewers.

- **Ambiguity introduces significant uncertainty into the research narrative**, although ambiguity in the narrative does offer one certainty—**an unfunded proposal**. This is because **ambiguity in the project description imposes unwanted riddles** on program officers and reviewers alike. Ambiguity originates from many sources, including ambiguous solicitations and researchers' ambiguous readings and understandings of a well-crafted solicitation, the latter being the most common source. Ambiguity may also originate at the interface between the agency's research vision, goals, and objectives and your research expertise and research interests. Ambiguity may arise when your research expertise does not map well to the agency mission priorities, or when you try to force fit your research expertise and interests to an agency solicitation, or when you ignore the agency research interests and put yours forward in hopes the program officers and reviewers won't notice the mismatch. **In the end, the cure for ambiguity lies in writing multiple drafts of a narrative**, taking care that each iteration of the proposal improves its clarity.
- **Use visuals to clarify and integrate the research narrative**. Just as the Feynman diagrams brought clarity to understanding the interactions of subatomic particles, on a less grand scale, diagrams, graphics, figures, tables, pictorial representations, and other visuals can play a key role as an integrator of the research narrative. This holds true particularly in the case of complex project descriptions whose narratives describe interaction among multiple research strands. The graphical representation of a research vision, or diagrams showing how the component goals and objectives of a large project interact to form a coherent, synergized whole, **can make the proposal narrative less challenging both to write and to read**. In fact, graphical representations of the main ideas of a proposal discussed and developed concurrently with the drafting of narrative text, can help the members of the research team write their contributions to the overall narrative with more clarity and focus than might otherwise be possible. The end goal, of course, is to achieve a project description that integrates narrative graphics and narrative text so closely as to make both easily accessible to review panels and program officers, especially in those cases where complex interactions among various research strands must be accessible and memorable. Good ideas deserve and benefit

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enormously from the illuminating interplay between well-crafted narrative text and accompanying graphics.