

The Importance of Writing the 1.5-Page Practice Proposal

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When seeking research funding, it's just as important to ask the right questions (*How to go from Research Ideas to Research Dollars*, June 2013) as it is to answer them correctly. Moreover, answering the core generic questions asked by every funding agency is not a trivial task, particularly given the simplicity and clarity typically required for success. Even very experienced researchers oftentimes struggle with explaining succinctly and in simple terms the core vision, goals, and objectives of their research within the context of its significance or value-added benefits to the funding agency or the field. Success at grant writing is a learned skill grounded on multiple experiences of planning, developing, and writing proposals. In addition, it depends upon learning, from both failures and successes, how to amplify reviewer identified strengths and eliminate reviewer identified weaknesses in your research narrative.

In this context, it is important to keep in mind that reviewer comments you receive from one specific program solicitation, or in response to an investigator initiated (unsolicited) proposal, often have relevance beyond the immediate proposal under consideration. Program officers' and reviewers' comments often help illuminate the broader characteristics, both good and bad, of your grantsmanship, and thereby give you a better insight into improving your grant-writing skills on all your proposals, not just the one under review. The basic mistakes you make in writing one proposal will typically manifest themselves in the other proposals you write.

Common, basic mistakes in grant writing are eerily transportable from one proposal to another. The metastases of mistakes throughout proposals is something you must contain if you hope for sustained success in research funding. Keep in mind the admonition of Congressman Sam Rayburn, Speaker of the U.S. House of Representatives for 17 years, that "*there is no education in the second kick of the mule.*" Learning and perfecting the art of research grant writing will serve as a firewall to prevent common mistakes from corroding the competitiveness of all your proposals. For instance, if you are writing as part of a team, you may be structuring a siloed research narrative (bad) rather than an integrated, synergistic one (good). In other cases, the proportionality of your research narrative may be poorly balanced, perhaps by writing too much about the general research background of the disciplinary field and writing too little about the importance of your research to that field.

Furthermore, as has often been noted in this newsletter, no amount of grantsmanship can turn a bad idea into a good one, but there are many ways in which poor grantsmanship can disguise a good idea (see the 7-part series "*Why Halloween is Bad for Proposals*," April-October 2012, on how these disguises defeat good ideas). Proposals commonly fail as a result of poor writing and poor planning, development, and structuring. In this context, poor writing means the poor communication of research ideas, which occurs, for example, when ambiguity is

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introduced into the research narrative. Ambiguity is the nemesis of the successful research narrative; it is to proposals what Kryptonite is to Superman.

Of course, the basic mechanics of good writing must always be followed in proposals, such as correct grammar, punctuation, spelling, and sentence structure. In many ways, proposals are not unlike surfing, golf, baseball, tennis, curling, and numerous other activities that can benefit enormously from countless hours of repetitive practice. However, it is not necessary, and likely undesirable, to be a trained rhetorician to write successful proposals. Proposals are a very unique “genre” representing a mix of persuasive writing, marketing, and sales (a research “pitch”), but above all the successful proposal is able to represent your ideas clearly, simply, and logically. Successful proposals quickly answer some basic questions that are always asked by program officers and reviewers, such as: *What research do you propose to do? What is the significance of your research? What value-added benefits derive to the agency or the field from your research? What prior research/preliminary results validate your capacity to perform? What barriers or challenges must be addressed if your research is to be successful?*

While each funding opportunity will differ, both within agencies and across agencies, with respect to the goals and objectives of a specific solicitation, or guidelines for submitting an unsolicited proposal in a specific topic area, the aforementioned core questions will typically resemble the requirements of a funding opportunity. Learning to craft an initial response to these questions will give you valuable practice in refining and developing your ideas in a narrative format. Think of this as writing a “Goldilocks Proposal,” one that is neither too long nor too short, but just right.

For these purposes, a 1 to 1.5 page practice proposal offers a significant opportunity to develop your skill at crafting and revising what lies at the core of a well-written and hence competitive proposal—a concise narrative overview of your research that responds to the key questions program officers and reviewers expect you to address in any proposal. Moreover, most research agencies, regardless of their mission or objectives, will ask you to answer the above questions. Obviously, these questions will be asked and framed within the context of the specific agency’s mission, culture, and language, but their essence will be essentially the same across agencies and disciplines—from DARPA to NEH.

Moreover, writing the “Goldilocks Proposal” is different than practicing the so-called “elevator speech” that you might develop for talking to program officers and colleagues about your research, perhaps at a research conference. The transition from talking about your research to actually writing about your research is one often fraught with difficulty, not just for new faculty but for all faculty. Verbal communications are by nature ephemeral, whereas written communications represent a permanent record of how well or how poorly you explain your research. Moreover, keep in mind when writing your Goldilocks Proposal Mark Twain’s observation in a letter to a friend—*“if I had had more time I would have written you a shorter letter.”* Writing simply, clearly, and succinctly is a difficult but foundational skill that must be mastered if you are to succeed in grantwriting. If you meld Twain’s observation with Albert Einstein’s observation that *“If you can't explain it simply, you don't understand it well enough,”* you have the two key waypoints needed to start the process of becoming a more successful proposal writer.

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Just as golfers go to driving ranges and batters go to batting cages to improve their game by better mastering through repetitive practice the ***fundamental, correct techniques*** of their sport, writers of research proposals will benefit significantly from a similar process that will help them develop the fundamental, correct techniques of research grant writing. One way to start this process is by imposing some very limiting boundary conditions on the process.

For example, ***my initial goal for this exercise is to describe in 750 jargon free words or less the following seven points in a way that is understandable and easily accessible for a scientifically or disciplinarily literate audience but not an audience of experts in the field:***

- Research goals and objectives
- Research plan
- Significance of my research
- Value-added benefits and impact on an agency mission or a research field
- Prior results/preliminary data that validate my capacity to perform
- Barriers and challenges to achieving results and my plan for overcoming them
- Payoffs from my success

My midterm goal for this exercise is to ask colleagues or a mentor to read my 750 word “Goldilocks Proposal” and give me feedback on this narrative, such as, what was clear and what was not clear; what was convincing and what was not convincing; what questions came to mind that were not adequately addressed; how could the write-up be improved, etc.

My final goal for this exercise is to consider the review comments of my colleagues and rewrite the “Goldilocks Proposal” to improve it by addressing those comments ***while concurrently reducing the document from the initial 750 words to 600 words.***

Keep iterating this document to perfection!