

No Squishy Commitments or Weasel Clauses

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Many proposals require various commitments of resources such as space, facilities, administrative support, and related institutional commitments, including cost sharing and matching funds, specific to the funding agency and the particular solicitation. In some cases, these commitments are made in the form of letters of support included in the proposal as an appendix, or placed in a section following the project description dedicated to this purpose. The letters may detail commitments to the project made by various university administrators, such as a provost, vice president for research, dean, department head, etc., or the letters may detail commitments of partner institutions, e.g., other universities, research laboratories, instrumentation centers, etc., or perhaps school districts, science centers, museums, or other stakeholder groups impacted by the project in some significant way.

When the required commitments are very specifically described in the solicitation, e.g., matching funds as a defined percentage of the total funding requested, then the applicant cannot resort to ambiguity—either the required matching funds are described and available in an identified account, or they are not. When the sponsors of the solicitation detail and prescriptively define matching commitments, they leave no room for smoke and mirrors. However, in other cases, commitments may be defined in more general terms in a specific solicitation, or by a specific funding agency, particularly when the commitments required are unique to the programmatic configuration of each proposal submitted in response to a common solicitation. In this case, the solicitation may give general guidance on letters of support, including noting whether the letters are optional rather than required, and thereby may leave it up to the proposer to include commitments that she feels best strengthen the proposed project.

In these instances, when letters of support are unique to what is being proposed in the project description, the funding agency guidance on the content of the support letters will allow great latitude to the applicant. Proposal guidelines that offer flexibility rather than prescriptive rigidity on structure and content are always to be preferred. However, it can open the door for letters of support that might generally be described as “squishy,” or otherwise vague, ambiguous, or non-specific when the funding agency expects detail and specificity and, most of all, **substantive commitments that clearly advance the proposed project in some important way**. Letters of support characterized in this way are often referred to as “smoke and mirrors.” In other cases where the letter of support is preconditioned on multiple “contingencies” that must take place before the support is given, the letter might be said to be filled with “weasel clauses.”

Squishy letters of commitment can be written for several reasons. In some cases, the principal investigators are so focused on writing the research narrative that they pass on the task of drafting or obtaining commitment letters to someone with only a general or vague understanding of the project. Or they may ask a colleague to write a commitment letter without sufficiently informing them about the project itself, or the requester’s role in it.

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Unfortunately, in other cases, squishy letters of support occur because, in fact, the support given the project is actually squishy and not substantive, specific, or detailed. While the former may occur when those responsible for garnering letters of support do not fully understand the perhaps at times unstated requirement that **letters of support be grounded on substance rather than superlatives**, squishy support letters can lead reviewers and program officers to the conclusion that the applicant is trying to “pull the wool over their eyes,” somewhat along the lines of the sixteenth-century trick of pulling woolen wigs down over a person’s eyes. It is definitely not a good thing when reviewers and program officers think your letters of support are trying to pull the wool over their eyes. Once that seed is planted in their minds, it may lead them to question the actual substance of other elements of your proposal.

Letters of support written in flowery language with glowing superlatives of support but without a detailed knowledge of the project should not be included in your proposal—they will do more harm than good. Don’t insult the program officers and reviewers with letters that give the illusion of support but amount essentially to empty promises, somewhat like a politician running for office on a platform of free beer and wide roads. You don’t want reviewers reading your letters of support and asking themselves, like the elderly woman in the Wendy’s ad, **“where’s the beef?!”**

For example, avoid **“where’s the beef letters”** that sound like the one below, signed by various academic or research officers, or partner institutions:

“I am honored and excited to offer the full and enthusiastic support of My Office to advance the critical goals and compelling objectives described in this groundbreaking proposal. I can assure Funding Agency that this proposed effort is fully and uniquely aligned with the strategic research objectives of this University. Moreover, the exciting and transformative research described in this proposal will clearly impact the field in novel ways and have profound and long-lasting implications for our national research enterprise. The research proposed herein is clearly seminal and will profoundly advance the field for decades if not generations to come, often in unimaginable ways. My commitment to supporting and sustaining this extraordinary research project is made with a profound sense of obligation to use the power and resources entrusted to me under my fiduciary responsibilities as High Ranking Administrator to ensure this project is successful in making an enormous impact at both national and global scales and thereby making an extraordinary contribution to the future of Human Kind.”

In conclusion, if in doubt, either when drafting a letter of support you would like someone to sign for inclusion in your proposal, or when providing someone with points to make in a letter of support, keep in mind that the **fundamental objective of a letter of support is to align additional resources with your project in ways that clearly make it stronger, more robust, or better able to achieve the vision, goals, and objectives described in your research narrative**. Letters of support are not meant to be letters of “bon voyage” wishing you good fortune on your research journey, the functional equivalent of well wishers standing on the pier waving “good luck” as your ship departs to explore new research frontiers. Letters of support need to indicate that the person signing the letter will actually make the voyage of exploration with you and **contribute in specific, defined, and substantive ways that will enhance your success**.