

Proportionality and Sequence in the Project Narrative

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Proportionality and sequence contribute significantly to the overall quality and readability of the project description, and hence to the competitiveness of your proposal. Proportionality in the project narrative is the linguistic analog of the geometric aesthetic expressed in the [Golden Ratio](#) or Golden Rectangle that has charmed artists and architects since ancient times. Proportionality brings balance to the project narrative in a way that **establishes the relative importance of the component sections at various scales** (e.g., sentence, paragraph, section, etc.), that, in aggregate, comprise the project description. Sequence provides the underlying order or logic to the narrative structure, ensuring that it unfolds in a way that meets readers' expectations for an orderly presentation of ideas and a convincing, stepwise rationale for funding the proposed project.

Moreover, it is important to recall that proportionality is a limited property of the project description, i.e., it is bounded by the page limit allowed for the project description, as well as sometimes limited by internal page allocations for proposal sections set by the solicitation. **Therefore, poorly proportioned and sequenced narrative text amounts to a highly inefficient use of space.** Think of the page limit as a **page budget**, much as you would a monetary budget that determines the available money you have to allocate to various personal expenditures on a monthly basis. Therefore, within this limit, you must allocate your **page budget** in a way that **best reflects a hierarchical ordering of the importance of what you most need to communicate to program officers and reviewers about the significance of your proposed research. You are attempting to put forward a compelling case for funding.**

Keep in mind, too, that funding agencies are not Keynesians when it comes to page limits—**there is a zero tolerance for page inflation**, not only for page limits but for any attempts to circumvent the intent of page limits by using smaller font sizes than those allowed, perhaps by the excessive placement of narrative text into tables, footnotes, figures, and graphics where smaller fonts are allowed. Of course, the quality of your ideas does not increase as a function of decreasing font size or highly compressed narrative text, **but the irritability of reviewers certainly does.**

Therefore, while proportionality and sequence establish the argumentative symmetry or balance of the project description, many perturbations can degrade the needed symmetry. For example, one of the more common perturbations to the balance and symmetry of the research narrative is the excessively long background section used to introduce the reader to the research topic. Narrative generalities meant to set the stage for the importance of the proposed research topic can have the unintended effect of losing the reviewers' interest, and, more importantly, squandering the space allocations of your page budget.

In other cases, excessive background particularities can imbalance the project narrative with a blizzard of minutiae meant to demonstrate your grasp of the research. This, too, can have the unintended effect of losing the reviewers' interest, and, more importantly, squandering the space allocations of your page budget. Too much general detail and too much

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minute detail commonly plague many first drafts of the research narrative, and, unfortunately all too often, carry over into the final submitted draft as well. Much like the NASA search for a “Goldilocks Planet” that balances perfectly within a star’s inhabitable zone and whose gravity approximates that of the earth, successful grant writing involves a perpetual search for the “Goldilocks Narrative,” one that is perfectly balanced, or “just right.”

Fortunately, it is fairly easy to plan the project narrative to ensure that both proportionality and sequence will optimize the narrative’s balance. Simply using the solicitation as a narrative template will take you a long way towards understanding the relative importance the funding agency assigns to the topics you must address in the project description. Using the solicitation as an organizational template will also set the basic framework for the sequence in which the narrative addresses topics. Of course, some solicitations may define the structure, scope, and scale of the project narrative and the key questions and topics the agency wants addressed; others, however, may give the proposer latitude in organizing the proposal narrative to most effectively communicate the case for funding the proposed project.

Ultimately, however, optimizing proportionality and sequence in the project narrative follows from a series of good decisions made by the author(s) while drafting the project narrative. These good decisions are based on a keen sense of what is and what is not important to communicate to the reviewers (e.g., if buffers are not important to the research, don’t belabor the buffers). Moreover, the most pertinent information must be assigned an order of relative importance to achieving the end goal—a funded project. Astute authors assign value to information as they write, thereby determining what to emphasize the most and the least, as well as where specific information falls on a value scale from the most important to the least important.

Moreover, the relative value of information can be either enhanced or degraded by the logical sequence in which it is presented to the reviewers in the project narrative. A well written proposal amounts to a persuasive argument made to program officers and reviewers convincing them to fund your project. Persuasive arguments have an internal logic dictating the sequence in which information is presented. In this regard, a proposal is not unlike a novel or a movie. It creates its own, self-contained reality. The proposal contains all that the funding agency and review panel should need to know about your capabilities and your capacity to perform.

Except for very large grants, an agency bases its decision to fund or not fund entirely on your proposal and the persuasive reality it creates. Proportionality and sequence are two key attributes of the reality you create that enables program officers and reviewers to better understand, appreciate, and support your research. ***These attributes lie at the core of the competitive proposal.*** They represent the essential framework upon which you craft and structure the logical, internal connectedness and balance of your proposal to ensure that you submit a Goldilocks Proposal—one that is ***just right.***