

Why Halloween Is Bad for Proposals, Part 3

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There are many scary Halloween costumes you might *inadvertently* use to mask the identity of the research idea put forward in your proposal, and unfortunately, any one of them will result in more tricks than treats when it comes to the success of your grant. Of course, the premise here assumes that a fundable idea lies cloaked beneath a number of correctable grant-writing mistakes identified sufficiently before the due date to allow for their correction. Unlike Halloween, when scary costumes earn treats, program officers and reviewers will not reward ideas cloaked in ghoulish disguises. Unfortunately, a number of all too common scary costumes can so successfully ***disguise a potentially fundable idea that the idea becomes unrecognizable to the reviewers***. To avoid spooking reviewers, don't submit your proposal cloaked or masked, or wearing one of the more common scary costumes guaranteed to horrify, as addressed in the below ***examples of possible proposal disguises***.

The Recycled Proposal Mask

Recycling discarded, broken, failed, or unused items is great for the environment but not so good for declined proposals. Like most recycled materials, old proposals are best left at curbside to be removed for chemical or mechanical processing, or more specifically in the case of a research narrative, substantive rethinking. Unlike the Phoenix, a mythical sacred firebird, a declined proposal rarely will have the ability to be reborn from its own ashes. A recycled proposal submitted in an attempt to do so will be quickly "unmasked" by program officers and reviewers for the truth that lies beneath it—a PI unwilling, unable, or too disorganized to rethink and restructure a research narrative in a way that remolds it into an essentially new proposal. This is not an easy task, but it is a necessary one. ***Proposals have a very specific home within a very specific time frame, not a generic home within an open-ended time frame.***

Shopping declined proposals around to multiple agencies is something akin to (pick your analogy) a snipe hunt, wild goose chase, or fool's errand. ***Proposals are not fungible across agencies, within agencies, or even within programmatic areas within agencies, nor are proposals fungible over time.*** All proposals enjoy fifteen minutes of fame, as Marshall McLuhan might have observed, during the period when reviewers are making the decision to recommend or not recommend funding. However, when a proposal is declined, a resubmit is many months if not a year away in most cases. It is time to begin anew given that a declined proposal, while perhaps not a lemon, certainly had some serious problems that needed fixing. Don't try to pass it off "as is" like a used car with mechanical or electrical problems to some other unsuspecting buyer, i.e., some other funding agency.

The Stove-Pipe Disguise

When an invitation to a "proposal party" arrives in the form of a solicitation wherein research and/or education integration is explicitly addressed as a key factor in the evaluation of

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the proposal, or research integration across multiple disciplines is implicit in the research objectives and outcomes of interest to the sponsor, don't show up disguised as research silos or stovepipes. One common and often fatal mistake in writing a proposal that must demonstrate synergy and value-added benefits to multiple research strands is to compose the narrative sections as separate research articles loosely addressing a common research theme without close coordination or integration.

Given the dramatic increase in research funding over the past several years to support research that explores and illuminates the boundaries, interstices, and intersections of multidisciplinary environments in search of new discoveries, it is critical for successful authors to both recognize and avoid siloed sections and ***learn the more difficult skill of writing integrated research narratives***. If the multiple authors of the multiple research sections of a transdisciplinary proposal cannot demonstrate and clearly describe how the intersections of "disciplinary catalysts" accelerate the research discovery process in the research narrative, then programs officers and reviewers will be unlikely to fund the proposal, trusting that the required research integration might magically happen in practice.

The "Trust Me" Mask

The "trust me" mask is typically worn by a very vague proposal narrative containing a lot of reminiscence of past accomplishments and accompanied by long descriptive narrative sections that read like a textbook, but with only a fuzzy hypothesis and few specifics about what is actually being proposed and its significance. The subtext of the "trust me" proposal is "just give me the money and great research will happen." It often reads like a daisy chain of effusive superlatives, but lacks any grounding in specificity and detail. Reading a "trust me" proposal will put you in mind of H. L. Mencken's comment about "an army of words marching across the page in search of an idea." In other instances, the "trust me" proposal may present a grandiose idea embellished with vague claims of significance. Ultimately, however, the "trust me" proposal, to quote Macbeth's famous soliloquy, ***"is a tale told by an idiot, full of sound and fury, signifying nothing."***

As Lieutenant Worf observed in *Star Trek: The Next Generation*, "trust is earned, not given away," when told by Counselor Deanna Troi that "the Cardassians are our allies now, Mr. Worf. We have to trust them." ***Think of reviewers as Lieutenant Worf.*** To be successful, proposals must exchange the "Trust Me" Mask for the Sergeant Joe Friday Mask: ***"Just the facts:"*** what you will do, why it is important to do it, the significance and impact of your research on the field and agency mission, why you are the right person to do the research, why you have the capacity, expertise, and experience to perform, and evidence of your access to the institutional infrastructure that will support your efforts when required.