Tips for Successful Proposal Writing

There are some things you can do, both before you start writing and after, to give your proposal a better chance of success. These include:

- Time management. Start several weeks in advance! The earlier the better.
- Make the broad impact of your proposal clear.
- Diversify: Make sure you will still have actionable research results if your hypothesis is wrong.
- Write your proposal like a news article, not an academic paper. Summarize your proposed research as early as possible, *then* give your background information.
- Use short words, short sentences, and short paragraphs.

More on these below!

Before writing: the Planning Stage

First tip: manage your time! This proposal will take longer than you think. You will need time to handle the problems that come up (they will) and incorporate feedback. I would suggest having a draft you can circulate *at least two weeks* before your deadline. Your final draft should be ready to go out the door *at least three days* before the deadline. Earlier is better in both cases.

Here are some questions to think about and some suggestions before you start writing:

1) What is the impact of your proposed research? You may be looking at a very specific area within your field, but are there also impacts on a broader scale? This can be a good question to ask people who are outside your field. Do they see other places where your work/new methodology/etc. would be useful or provide insight?

This can help you avoid the dreaded "incremental" critique: reviewers typically want research that is going to move a field forward and answer "big picture" questions more than filling in the gaps. That doesn't mean you can't fill in gaps! Filling in gaps is important too – this is the detail work that can make those big pictures workable. But you might want to have at least one broader impact aim as well if possible, or explain how your research will form part of a bigger, currently incomplete picture that we need to fill in (and why).

2) But don't go too broad! Your claims of impact need to be believable. You want to convince your reviewers that your research is important and worth funding. It doesn't need to cure cancer to do so, and overbroad claims will erode your credibility.

2) What happens if your research is not successful? Will there still be valuable research outcomes even if your hypothesis is wrong? What are they? Try to present your research as a "win-win" situation if you can: if your hypothesis is right, look at this! Even if it's wrong, look at all this great information we will get out of the research!

3) Strategy: it's always nice, if you can, to incorporate two pathways you will pursue simultaneously: a higher risk, higher impact path and a less exciting but highly likely to succeed path. Higher risk, higher impact paths are interesting and will grab a reviewer's attention; lower risk paths give reviewers something that is likely to be successful even if your high risk work doesn't work out.

By: Courtney McQueen, PhD, Research Development Team
https://research.jhu.edu/rdt/about/
RDT@JHU.edu

You've fleshed out your ideas and you're ready to start writing your proposal. Where do you begin?

1) Start writing: for your first pass, the most important thing is to get the words down on paper. Don't worry about page limits, grammar, structure, or anything else; just get something down that you can work with and refine later. You may find it useful to create an outline first and then add more detail to it until it's essentially a proposal.

2) Once you have your ideas down you can start working on the structure and the quality of the writing. Structure will vary by sponsor but in general you will have a background section, a place to talk about the impact of your work, your proposed work, and some detail on that proposed work. Some tips here:

- State what you're planning to do right up front, as soon as you can, in plain language. Many people write proposals the way they write papers: background and introduction, here's my question, here's what I'm going to do. For a proposal you want to think more like a news article. What is your 'lead'? What do you want to accomplish? State this right up front so your reviewers know why they're reading the rest of it. Then you can go on to explain the necessary background information, the particulars of what you want to do, etc. I would suggest having no more than **one brief explanatory paragraph** before you describe what you want to propose. (Note that this can be a simple one or two line summary: you can provide more details later on.)
- Don't be too technical. It's almost always better to over explain than assume your reviewers know things they don't. Write out any acronyms the first time you use them: "We will be performing a functional magnetic resonance imaging (fMRI) study of…." If you have trouble remembering which terms are general knowledge and which are field-specific, you can ask for feedback from a friend/colleague in a different field. **This is especially important if you are submitting to a private foundation or a limited submission opportunity; your reviewers may not be from your field**.
- Keep your words, sentences, and paragraphs short. This helps with proposal readability. It's particularly important for paragraphs: many proposal writers write very long blocks of text in huge paragraphs. Try to break these up and introduce some white space; your reviewers will appreciate it. Do this even if you need to cut text to do it.
- Make sure your grammar and spelling are correct. Ask a friend/colleague to edit for you (even your parents or siblings! Anyone who can write well), or hire a professional if that's possible. Do this even if you're a good writer. A second set of eyes is always better.
- Make sure you follow the application specifications. Proposals can and do get rejected for wrong fonts, margins, etc.
- Make sure you've answered all questions/addressed all areas requested by your funding opportunity.

After Writing: The Review Stage

Now that you have a draft ready to circulate, start circulating! Ask your colleagues to weigh in. Ask people outside your field to weigh in. The more feedback you can get, the better.

But also remember these are just suggestions; you don't have to accept them! In the end it's your proposal and your decision. Happy writing!