Writing Grant Proposals

1. Preparing to Write
   A. Consider your target audience
      Typically, proposals are read by a mixed group:
      - program officers and staff – generalists whose job it is to make sure that the proposal fits within the agency’s general goals;
      - specialists in the particular research area, whose job it is to evaluate the scientific merit of the proposal.
      Your proposal must respond to the needs of both groups of people.
   B. Carefully Read the Current Program Announcement or RFP
      - find general review criteria
      - find agency’s overall mission statement, objectives
      - study specific program objectives
      Your proposal must respond to both the explicit and implicit requirements of the RFP.
   C. Do Some Brainstorming
      What are the specific goals of your research project?
      How, specifically, does your research project respond to the explicit and implicit goals and values of your target funding agency?
      What prior research has been done in this area? How, specifically, does your research advance, or move beyond, what has already been done?
      What specific steps will you need to take to reach your goals? What resources will you need? How long will it take? Are your goals reasonable, given your time frame?
   D. Look at Models—Successful grant proposals in your field
      But: be advised that some of these may have succeeded in spite of rather than because of their writing

2. Organizing the Proposal
   Organize your proposal according to the most-current directions provided by the funding agency. Most proposals contain the following:
   - Abstract
   - Title Page
   - Table of Contents
   - Project Description
   - Budget
   - Biographies of investigator(s)
   - Other (information about handling of human subjects or hazardous materials, for example, or about facilities)
   - References
The Project Description is the heart of the proposal—it usually consists of the following:

**Introduction**: establishes the purpose, significance, and objectives of the proposed research

**Background**: explains the context for the present research project, including literature review

**Methodology**: explains how the proposed research will be conducted, including rationale

**Overall Significance**: explains how the proposed research will further the broader aims and goals of the funding agency

**A. Introduction**
The introduction to a proposal typically makes four moves:

- **Move 1** Announce the Topic
- **Move 2** Summarize previous knowledge and research
- **Move 3** Prepare for present research by indicating a gap in previous research and/or by raising a question about previous research.
- **Move 4** Introduce the present research by stating the purpose and/or by outlining the research

(Swales 1984, qtd. in Penrose and Katz 1998)

Be sure to explicitly tie your research plans to the specific goals of the program.

**B. Background**
In this section, you will provide a thorough grounding/rationale for your research project by reviewing the literature and explicitly tying your proposed research to what has already been accomplished in the field. This accomplishes two things:

- it educates the generalist readers, helping them to see why your research is important, and how it builds on previous, established science;
- it shows your specialist readers that you are familiar with the current state of knowledge in the field

Consider ending with a statement of your specific research objectives.

**C. Methodology or Work Plan**
The methodology section of a proposal usually differs from that of a journal article in two ways:

- it is less specific
- it has more rationale

Your objective is not only to explain what you will do, but why your plan is better than other options.

**D. Overall Significance**
Somewhere in the proposal you should explicitly discuss the larger significance of your proposed project—in the terms of the funding agency’s goals and values. Where exactly you place this material will vary. You might include it at the end of the Introduction or
Methodology sections; you might make it a separate subsection in Methodology; or you might make it its own section at the end of the proposal, as suggested here. Your decision will depend on the nature of your research project; how obvious the larger significance of your project is to the general reader; how obvious the connection of your research project is to the funding agency’s goals; whether the program announcement asks, explicitly, for a section on significance.

3. Organizing within Sections

A. Use Headings & Subheadings

Use *functional* headings for the major divisions of your proposal (Introduction, Background, Methodology);

Use *topical* headings and subheadings for the divisions within the Background and Methodology sections (and possibly the Introduction as well)

B. Craft Forecasting / Signposting Sentences

To improve coherence and readability, tell your reader at the beginning of each subsection and paragraph where the section/paragraph is going, and why. This “forecasting” of your intentions will guide your reader through your proposal. Without such forecasting, the reader may become lost in the wealth of specific detail and lose track of why the detail is being provided.

References


National Aeronautics and Space Administration. (NASA) Research Announcements. [http://research.hq.nasa.gov](http://research.hq.nasa.gov)


A Few Parting Shots On Process

Drafts are for the writer:

Brainstorm without self-editing or self-censure
  Use audio recorder / turn down screen
Ask yourself questions generated by the call
  What question or problem are you addressing?
  What are your goals?
  How do these fit the funder's mission?
  What has already been done in this area?
  What will it take to reach your goals?
  Why are you in particular worth funding?
Be willing to print out and spread out to aid revision
  Write about your writing to clarify structure
  Help your reader follow your argument
  Recognize that revising takes time
  Set reasonable goals
  Break the work into small parts
  Set deadlines for yourself
  If you're writing collaboratively:
    Keep brainstorming sessions positive
    Don't take criticism personally
    Assign specific tasks and deadlines
    Know the limitations of track-changes
    Show your work to a mix of colleagues
    (include lay people, not just specialists)

Here are a few prompts to help get you going:

A. Let's work on a key "move" at the heart of any grant proposal--where the writer clarifies her pitch for the funding.

    To date, no one has precisely determined / explained / studied / ____________ in / using
    / in light of ______________. The current research will ___________ to establish /
    clarify / confirm ____________.

B. Often in a literature review or a theory section you have to "locate" yourself in a body of others’ thinking on your topic, as you strive to show your reader you know the landscape of your research field and are prepared to investigate it in an original way. For this exercise let's try this at the micro level, with this pattern.

    "Unlike ___, who studied ___ and concluded ___, or ___ who examined ___ and
    held ___, our preliminary research indicates that the explanation is more complex:
    ____________.”

Don't worry if the first result is unwieldy: such a pattern gets edited and refined as you fill in paragraphs based on each of the blanks, but it can really help focus an important part of your thesis or proposal. For one thing, many fields prohibit personalized identifications, and who knows, your proposal may be reviewed by one of your quoted experts. So try it an impersonal way as well:

    ____________ has been well established (citation); however, the exact mechanism /
    process of ____________ has not been fully explained. Our preliminary research
    suggests that ____________, and extending these investigations will ____________.

C. At this point let yourself fantasize a bit. Brainstorm for 20 minutes or so and narrate the progress of your fully funded research, as if you are writing the report for the successfully completed grant. This means use the past tense, and for the purposes of this exercise you may use the pronoun "I" or "We"--trust me, it'll be easy to change it. Touch on any milestones you reached, problems you overcame, and conclusions you reached. Finish by showing how your work leads naturally to another phase of research in your area.