Tips on How to Write a Good Proposal

IMPORTANT: Different donor agencies have different proposal guidelines. Therefore, before you even begin to put pen to paper, you should know what is required by that particular donor. Visit the prospective donor website. Read the guidelines carefully, then read them again, and once again.

Typically, guidelines contain the following:
1. Submission deadline(s).
2. Eligibility criteria.
3. Proposal format.
4. Proposal review timetable.
5. Budgets and what's covered and what's excluded.
6. Evaluation process and criteria.

The general purpose of any proposal is to persuade your readers.

A good proposal offers a plan to fill a need. Your reader will evaluate your plan according to how well your written presentation answers questions about **WHAT** you are proposing, **HOW** you plan to do it, **WHEN** you plan to do it, and **HOW MUCH** it is going to cost.

While writing your proposal, it is therefore paramount that you take into consideration, some very important factors that will make your proposal stand out from the crowd and catch the readers' eyes.

There are several formats to a proposal, but one that has the most flexibility and has achieved the widest acceptance is as follows:

Choosing your research topic: This is the first step you make while thinking of writing a research proposal. Most donors outline priority research areas they are willing to support. It is important that you do your homework thoroughly and be able to identify the prospective funder that is interested in your research area.

Many donors give priority to projects managed principally by **women,** especially in the developing world. You may want to focus on gender related issues and projects that remedy problems affecting women and children- the underrepresented. Many donors are keen to support women scientists and researches focused on gender issues. Why not take advantage!

Title page: The title page should contain, neatly arranged, the following:
1). Title of the project
2). Name(s) of the author(s) and nationality.
3). Name of the faculty advisor(s)/collaborators
4). Date of submission

The title page should look professional and neat. However, do not waste time using fancy report covers, expensive binding, or other procedures that may send the wrong message to the potential funding agency. You are trying to impress the potential funding agency with how you need funding, not the message that you do things rather expensively!

Think of your title as a mini-abstract. A good title should paint a quick picture for the reader of the key idea(s) of your project.

Try and use only a single sentence for your title. If the sentence is getting too long try removing some words. When all else fails try using a two part title with the parts separated by a colon (use only as a last resort!). Do not attempt to use the title as an abstract of your entire proposal.

The problem: This includes the background, rationale, comparative advantages. Describe the problem you are investigating, its importance, size and questions which guide the research process. Size also relates to relevance of problem globally and regionally or locally. How will this project contribute to solving the problem? Why is it necessary and to whom? Is there a special reason why you and/or your organization are uniquely suited to conduct the project? (Geographic location, language expertise, prior involvements in this area, close relationship to the project clientele, etc.) Clearly indicate how the problems that will be addressed in your project will help the potential funding agency in fulfilling their own goals and objectives. As you write, keep the funding agency in your mind as a "cooperating partner" committed to the same concerns that you are. Use the statement of the problem to show that your proposed project is definitely needed and should be funded.

Purpose and objectives: Describe the high order objectives/aims of the proposal. Your objectives will form the basis for the activities of your project and will also serve as the basis for the evaluation of your project. You can start by stating the general objective of your proposal before zeroing in to specific objectives (these should not be more than five in number). Present measurable objectives for your project. If you are dealing with "things" it is easier for them to be measured than if you are dealing with abstract ideas. Your proposal is easier for a prospective funding organization to understand (and the outcomes are much more clear) if you describe your objectives in measurable ways.

Outputs and milestones: The outputs are the results which the project seeks to achieve. The outputs should, as much as possible relate to 'tangible products' (quantifiable, qualitative or verifiable) from conduct of the research. Milestones refer to outputs that are realized. They indicate viable achievements.

Approach and activities: Describe how the work will be undertaken. This section should clearly indicate how the methods that will be used in your research will allow the outcomes of your project to have value for others beyond your project. The prospective funding agency will be looking at your methods to see what it is that you are proposing that will be new, unique or innovative. Make sure you clearly present the innovative aspects of your idea. If collaborators are involved, indicate at what stage and what their contribution to the project is.

Impact and beneficiaries: Who will the project benefit, when and how. How will the outputs of project be disseminated to target beneficiaries. There is a distinction between direct recipients and ultimate beneficiaries. Also distinguish between immediate impact of research (end of project situation) and longer-term. Ultimately, development impacts are those on productivity, environment, biodiversity, social-economic factors.

Project location: It is important to indicate where the project will be carried out e.g. countries, regions. You could consider providing a map of your location.

Collaborators: Indicate who your collaborators (if any) are. Major collaborators always include other non-governmental organizations (NGOs), government parastatals, universities among many others.

Budget: What is your total budget? What is the donor requested to fund? Make your budget **realistic**. Carefully think through exactly what you will need from the funding agency to carry out the project and establish your budget around this amount. (Do not forget, funding agencies receive lots of requests for funding. They can easily tell when someone has inflated a budget in order to procure funds for other purposes. Don't get caught in this situation.) A good strategy to use with a potential funding agency is to ask for a small amount of funding for the first phase of the project. Specify in your proposal what you expect to achieve during this "minimal funding phase" and when you will be returning to the funding agency to ask for funds for the next phase. This can suggest to the funding agency that they can terminate the relationship easily if your project is not successful (and then it is essential for you to make sure the first phase IS successful). If the potential funding agency doesn't have any suggested/required budget categories, organize your budget around a set of meaningful categories that work for the project you are proposing. Categories that you may want to consider for itemizing your budget are:
Personnel (salary and benefits)
Consultants (salary)
Instruction
Equipment
Supplies
Communication (telephone/postage)
Materials preparation
Travel
Rental of facilities
Evaluation
Other expenses
Indirect costs (costs that your organization requires that you include)
Unless otherwise noted by donor, always indicate your budget in US$.