

Proposal Writing: Grantsmanship

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Q. WHAT IS A PROPOSAL?

A. A proposal is an essay.

Q. WHAT IS IT INTENDED TO DO?

A. It provides a succinct statement of a problem to be addressed and proposes a feasible means to address it.

A proposal does not ask for money in its focus. It proposes to solve problems in this world, improve social conditions, build new institutions and carry out other such activities in the public good. A grant-making organization or program is established to make these improvements, not to give away money. A grant is not a gift of cash; it is a means made available from the foundation for an organization to achieve a social, educational, intellectual, cultural or artistic end that the foundation is interested in.

Foundations and grant-making organizations have fewer and fewer funds to operate with than in the past. Therefore, they look for projects with as wide a scope as possible, increasingly with a national scope. In response, your proposal should intend to demonstrate the breadth of the project's scope. This may be defined in terms of geographical regions, or equally importantly, in terms of the various disciplines and groups of individuals it will affect.

Q. WHO IS WRITING THE PROPOSAL?

A. Obviously, you the individual are the author. But in a larger sense, you are writing on behalf of your institution, your consortium, your region, your field, or in some sense a framework far larger than you.

This has major impact on your writing. You do not write in a personal style. Your tone is objective and neutral. Avoid "I" and the first person singular pronoun. Personally, I prefer writing style that avoids "we," when authors use "we" to indicate the institution on whose behalf they are writing. For example, "If provided the necessary funds, we will carry out a national acquisitions program based on the following guidelines" is better stated as "If provided the necessary fund, the committee will carry out a national acquisitions program based on the following guidelines."

Q. WHO IS A PROPOSAL WRITTEN TO?

A. The first and most important thing in considering your audience is that whoever they are, they don't know you, however well known your institution and program might be, or at least you cannot assume they know you.

At the same time, they are probably pretty well read persons with sound judgment, or they wouldn't be in a position of responsibility.

Therefore, the first answer to the question "Who is a proposal written to?" is "the generally educated reader."

The second answer to the question "Who is a proposal written to?" is "the officers and board of the foundation or grant program I am submitting this proposal to."

Q. WHY DOES IT MATTER WHOM I'M WRITING TO?

A. It matters a great deal. Whom you are writing to dictates how you write your essay, and what you include in it.

Q. WHAT DOES THAT MEAN SPECIFICALLY FOR MY PROPOSAL?

A. It means a great deal. Because you are writing for a generally educated reader, you must be able to provide a powerful statement of the problem to be addressed. Because you are also writing for the officers and board of a specific grant-making institution, you must be certain that your proposed solution to the problem falls within the guidelines of the foundation or agency's grant-making programs.

This means two things. First, you must know how to present sufficient, but not overly detailed or trivial, background information to the problem at hand. The problem you are describing must be put in the most meaningful contexts possible through presenting background that will highlight the specific problem. It must, above all, persuade the reader of the importance of the problem and the actual need to address it. This will require all your best writing skills. Also, it means that you must be precise in spelling and grammar. Nothing is more discouraging than a good idea that is ruined by poor writing, grammar faults, spelling errors and typos.

Secondly, you must know the foundation or program you are writing to.

Do your homework! Read all the material you can find about the organization through the Internet, archival research and direct request for information from the organization. Once you have read the organization's materials and believe that your idea will be of interest to it, make contact with the organization. Describe what it is you want to do and ask for contact with an appropriate program officer. If you can, meet with her or him in person. It is always more meaningful when an organization knows that you are planning to submit something to it. The program officer is the most important contact you will make. She or he will counsel you on the most appropriate ways to submitting the proposal to that specific organization. It is always best when the program officers can put a face to a name on a proposal coming in. But remember, above all, it is your idea that will be persuasive, not the reputation of your institution or flattery of the gran

Q. HOW DO I KNOW WHAT TO ASK FOR IN A BUDGET?

A. Some grant-making organizations will have specific guidelines for the budget and will publish specific amounts you may ask for, or specific boundaries within which you may ask. Other grant-making organizations, such as my own, do not publish such guidelines.

Certainly, it is always easier when the organization tells you what to do and how much to ask for. But even in the case where no guidelines to budget are published, there are at least two things you should do in preparing your proposal.

First, in doing your homework, study the history of the organization's grant-making activities of the past several years. Identify projects that are similar in scope and nature to your. See what the organization has made available in its recent history as a guide to what you might expect.

Second, and as a corollary, you cannot just ask for a lump sum.

That will make it seem particularly as though you are just seeking money, not wanting to do work. You must work out your budget from the activities you describe in your essay, as you state how you will go about addressing and solving the problem you have identified. Does the narrative call for a team of five persons to meet three times to draft, then discuss and finally conclude a work plan? How much are the airfares going to cost, at least on average? How much

will the per diem be? What are your office costs? In other words, you must present a detailed budget based on line items that mirror the activities in the narrative. The narrative and budget must be consistent. All activities described in the narrative must be represented as line items; there should be no surprises in the line items – that "salary" that you "forgot" to mention in the narrative, for example. The costs should be based on single units multiplied out by the numbers you need. A

Q. SHOULD I SEEK PARTNERS TO SHARE THE COSTS OF THE TOTAL BUDGET, OR SHOULD I ASK THE ONE FOUNDATION FOR 100 PERCENT OF THE BUDGET TOTAL?

A. That depends on the tradition and guidelines of the foundation. Some foundations want to fund the entire project, or none of it. Others, such as my Commission, do not have sufficient funds to be able to respond to all requests in their entirety. They ask potential grantees to seek out other sources of funds to share the costs, and to indicate in the budget who will be asked to fund which parts.

It is important to seek clarification from the foundation or agency what their tradition and preferences are in this regard.

Also, when a project seeks funding from more than one source, it is important to determine which parts each source would be willing to support, and to make clear in the budget how the various sources will complement each other throughout the line items.

Q. ONCE I HAVE WRITTEN MY ESSAY AND DRAWN UP MY BEUDGET, WHAT ELSE CAN I DO TO MAKE MY PROPOSAL ATTRACTIVE?

A. All proposals make claims. They make claims, for example, about the scope of the problem and its importance. They make claims about the level of support from the institutional base for the proposal. They make claims about additional intellectual or financial support from other interested groups. They make claims about past records of success, to demonstrate that they are capable of carrying out the project they propose. All proposals make numerous claims.

One of the most attractive features of a good proposal is the supporting documentation that the author should attach. These are, for example, letters of support from interested administrators and advisory boards. They are letters from cooperating institutional partners. They may be brochures indicating the general outlines of the institution or proposing organization. They may be full academic CVs that were abbreviated in the proposal proper. They may be full budget details, which were abbreviated in the budget included in the narrative. At any rate, supporting documentation, presented in a highly organized and accessible fashion, is an excellent addition to a good essay.

Q. WHAT ARE THE CRITERIA ON WHICH A PROPOSAL IS JUDGED?

A. I can speak only for my own Commission.

There are generally five criteria:

- The importance of the problem being addressed
- The feasibility of the proposed solution, and the track record of success of the institution sponsoring the proposed project
- The expertise of the individuals involved in the activities proposed
- The reasonableness of the budget

- The "fit" of the particular proposal in the Commission's mandate for grant-making activities.