

Facilitator Notes

# Writing a Proposal: Components and Advice

These notes accompany the PowerPoint presentation of the same title by Barbara Gastel.

This module normally would accompany other modules on preparing a grant proposal.

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| Module Title | Writing a Proposal: Components and Advice |
| Course title (or analogous information) | This module can serve as part of a workshop on preparing grant proposals. It also can serve as part of a workshop unit, course unit, or short course on the topic. It is one of nine modules on preparing grant proposals. Typically, most or all of the nine should be used, in the order (or approximately the order) in which they are numbered. |
| Unit Title | Preparing Grant Proposals |
| No. of Unit | Not applicable |
| Session Day/Time | Not applicable |
| Length of Session | This module typically would run about 30 to 60 minutes. The length would depend mainly on how much the facilitator elaborates on points in the slides, how much discussion there is, and how long is taken for the exercise, |
| Aim | This module is intended mainly to help participants (1) recognize what helps make a proposal persuasive, (2) know how proposals tend to be structured, and (3) be aware of advice to follow when writing a proposal. |
| Learning Outcomes | By the end of this module, participants will be able to (1) list items that help make a proposal persuasive, (2) list common components of proposals, (3) state major pieces of advice to follow when writing proposals. |
| Facilitator Profile | This module would ideally be facilitated by someone with experience in writing, editing, or reviewing grant proposals. A less experienced facilitator also can present the module, as the combination of PowerPoint slides and facilitator notes provides sufficient information to do so. |
| Participant Profile | This module is primarily for early-career researchers with little or no experience preparing grant proposals. However, it also may aid mid-career researchers who wish to improve their preparation of grant proposals or their mentoring of others in this regard. In addition, it may be helpful to some editors and writing instructors. Participants having experience with grant proposals may be able to enrich the workshop by sharing their experience. |
| Pre-workshop Activities | No pre-workshop activities are required. However, participants are encouraged to identify beforehand a research project or other project for which they would like to seek grant funding. Also, if feasible, participants should be encouraged to bring examples of successful grant proposals. |
| Room Layout | Ideally, this module will be presented in a room layout facilitating interaction—for example, with several small tables, with tables in a U configuration, or with a conference table. However, this module also can be presented in a traditional classroom or a lecture hall. |
| Number of Participants | For optimum discussion, the number of participants should be limited to about 10–15. However, the module also can reasonably delivered to about 25 participants. |
| Files and Materials | PowerPoint file: 05\_Writing a Proposal: Components and Advice |
| Visual Aids and Resources | Computer with PowerPoint; projector for PowerPoint presentation  If feasible, internet access  If feasible, some examples of successful grant proposals. |
| Potential Embellishments of the PowerPoint | To keep the file small, the presentation consists almost solely of text. Images can be added to make it more visually appealing. For example, decorative images can be inserted between sections to signal a change of subtopic and provide visual relief. Also, relevant images can be added to selected slides if desired.  If desired, the facilitator can divide the material on a given slide into more than one slide or can format some slides for progressive disclosure, in which items on a slide are revealed one by one.  Facilitators may localize the PowerPoint to suit the institution, country, or region from which the participants come. For instance, in the latter part of presentation, the facilitator may include one or more slides containing excerpts from successful grant proposals from or relating to the participants’ institution, country, or region. |
| Learning methods and activities | The following notes may help facilitators to (1) elaborate on the content of some slides and (2) elicit group participation at suitable times. (Slide 1 is a title slide.)   * Slide 2 (“Overview”)   + Note the topics that the module will address.   + Note the module’s overall aim, which is stated earlier in this facilitator’s guide. (Feel free, of course, to frame it in the way that the group is likely to find most relevant.) * Slide 3 (“Follow-Up from Previous Session”)   + This slide is optional. It is intended to provide continuity with the previous session, which was on preparing to write a proposal. Of course, omit this slide the previous session wasn’t given or didn’t include the exercise on drafting timelines. Facilitators also may omit this slide if time is tight or if they think the discussion wouldn’t add much.   + If desired, facilitators who include this slide can adapt the content depending on the nature of discussion at the previous session. * Slide 4 (“Grant Proposals as Persuasive Writing”)   + Emphasize that the purpose of a grant proposal is to persuade the funding source that the item being proposed would be an excellent of its funds.   + Review the list of regards in which a grant proposal must be persuasive. If desired, add to the list. Ask participants for additions, if any, to the list.   + Note that weakness regarding any of the listed items may cast doubt on the value or feasibility of the item being proposed and thus prevent the proposal from being approved. * Slide 5 (“Some Items That Help Make a Proposal Persuasive”)   + Review the lists of items. If desired, include additional examples or otherwise elaborate on the content. Also ask the participants for additions or questions.   + In presenting the list of examples in the second bulleted item, perhaps note that sample-size calculations can be especially important to include.   + In discussing the third bulleted item (“Competent writing”), perhaps note that in addition to showing general capability, competent writing helps show that the researchers would be capable of writing publishable papers about the research. * Slide 6 (“Some Common Sections of Proposals”)   + Review the list of sections. Note that different funding sources sometimes use different titles for sections and that overall proposal structure differs somewhat among funding sources.   + Note that length requirements for proposals range widely, depending in part on the funding source and the type of proposal. Emphasize the importance of not exceeding the maximum allowed length.   + Perhaps note examples from your experience, or from colleagues’ experience, of proposals of different lengths. Also, perhaps ask participants for such examples. Especially if other examples aren’t available, perhaps present this list of examples (which is from the developer of these facilitator notes):     - a proposal for a mini-grant from the person’s institution (limit: 1 page)     - a proposal to a foundation (requested length: about 5 pages, plus supplementary materials)     - proposals to major government agencies (sometimes 10 or more pages of text, plus other materials) * Slide 7 (“Some Other Items Sometimes Included”)   + Review the list on this slide. If desired, elaborate on some of the items.   + Feel free to add items to this list. Also ask the participants for items to add. One possible addition is a table of abbreviations used in the proposal; such a table sometimes can be useful to readers. * Slide 8 (“Appendixes”)   + Note that appendixes sometimes are allowed and sometimes are not allowed.   + Note that appendixes are a place for material that isn’t part of the proposal itself but that reviewers might want to look at in order to evaluate better what is being proposed.   + Review the list of examples. Perhaps add examples from your experience and to ask participants to provide examples.   + Emphasize that reading the appendixes is optional and thus that all material that reviewers definitely should read should go in the body of the proposal, not an appendix. * Slide 9 (“Titles and Abstracts”)   + Present the points on this slide. Feel free to elaborate on them.   + Note that too often, authors of grant proposals hurriedly write the title and abstract just before the submission deadline and so don’t write them well. Emphasize that because titles and abstracts can be so influential in the review process, ample time should be devoted to writing and revising them.   + Perhaps note that even if it isn’t feasible to have the entire proposal edited, it may be worthwhile to have an editor review the title and abstract to help ensure that they are informative, clear, and polished.   + Perhaps note that particular care should also be devoted to any other sections that serve largely as overviews (for example, the section, required in some grant proposals, that is called “specific aims”). * Slide 10 (“Advice on Writing the Proposal”)   + (This slide is just a “divider slide” providing transition to the next section.) * Slide 11 (“Writing the Proposal”)   + The points in the first two bullets also appeared in the previous presentation, but they deserve reemphasis.   + The third bulleted item is in boldface type because proposals sometimes are disqualified because of failure to follow the instructions.   + Regarding the fourth bulleted item: It can be helpful to find out the general type of background of the reviewers. (If this information isn’t otherwise available, one usually can ask the program officer or other contact person at the funding source.) In general, proposals to major funding sources such as government agencies are reviewed by fellow experts in one’s field and so can be relatively technical (but still readable). However, sometimes for other funding sources, such as community groups, the reviewers include laypeople and so should be written for a more general readership. * Slide 12 (“Writing the Proposal (cont)”)   + Regarding the first bulleted item: Perhaps note that making sure the 5Ws and an H are included can help ensure that grant proposals—and other writing—are complete.   + Regarding the second bulleted item: Remind participants that including reasons for choices is an item that helps make a proposal persuasive.   + Regarding the third bulleted item: Note that especially because proposal reviewers tend to be very busy, proposals should be written in a way that is easy to skim and read. Feel free to elaborate on the listed advice for writing readably, to provide more pointers, and to ask participants for more pointers. Also note that Presentation 8 in the current set focuses on writing style for proposals. * Slide 13 (“Writing the Proposal (cont)”)   + Regarding the first bulleted item: Emphasize the importance of a carefully prepared budget. A thorough, realistic, well-structured budget helps demonstrate the applicant’s competence. A budget that is much too high may make the applicant seem incompetent or greedy. A budget that is much too low also may make the applicant seem incompetent—and if the proposal is accepted and insufficient funds are thus provided to do the work, the applicant is likely to face serious problems.   + Regarding the second bulleted item: If the session on preparing to write a proposal was given, remind participants that it addressed preparing timelines. Note that a good timeline can clarify what is being proposed, show that the proposed work is well thought through, and show that it is feasible.   + Regarding the third bulleted item: Note that tables and figures can help a proposal communicate effectively. Emphasize that tables and figures in proposals should be designed to be quick to understand and so should be kept relatively simple.   + Regarding the fourth and fifth bulleted items: These points also were made earlier in the presentation. They are being reemphasized here.   + Regarding the sixth (last) bulleted item: Note that funders often have forms for applicants to complete as part of the proposal. Mention that for some funding opportunities, the entire proposal consists of filling out the parts of an online or other form. * Slide 14 (“Writing the Proposal (cont)”)   + Regarding the first bulleted item:     - Note that some funders provide instructions regarding such items as typeface, type size, and margin size; emphasize the importance of following these instructions.     - Perhaps note that if such items are not specified, it generally is advisable to use 10, 11, or 12 point type and to use margins of at least 1 inch (2.5 cm).     - Perhaps also mention that in documents such as proposals and manuscripts, type with an unjustified (ragged) right margin tends to be more readable than type with a justified (straight) right margin.   + Regarding the second bulleted item: Note that internal peer review can help greatly in refining a proposal. Perhaps remind participants to schedule enough time for revision.   + Regarding the third bulleted item: Note that before submitting a proposal, it is advisable to make sure that all instructions have been followed, as it is easy to neglect one or more instructions.   Regarding the last bulleted item: Also advise participants to submit proposals somewhat early. If one waits until the last minute and then has a computer problem, one might miss the deadline. Also, around the deadline there sometimes are server problems at the granting agency because many people are trying to submit proposals. Submitting a proposal somewhat early helps ensure that the proposal is received despite the risk of technical difficulties.   * Slide 15 (“Examples of and Excerpts from Proposals”)   + This segment is flexible in length and content. It should focus on one or more successful grant applications, ideally of types that participants are likely to submit. If relevant, it may include sample proposals of different lengths (for example, a short proposal for a small grant from the applicant’s institution and a long proposal for a large grant from an international agency). The sample proposals may be obtained by the facilitator or brought by participants. Some sample grant proposals are available online, for example at <https://www.niaid.nih.gov/grants-contracts/sample-applications>.   + In this segment, it may work well to focus largely on proposal sections such as the title, abstract, and (if applicable) specific aims.   + This segment may be conducted as a demonstration (ideally, an interactive one, with the facilitator asking participants what they notice, especially as related to items presented thus far in this session, and pointing out additional items). Alternatively, if time and circumstances allow, this segment may be conducted as a small-group exercise, with pairs or small groups of participants looking at proposals or parts thereof and then reporting their observations. * Slide 16 (“Small-Group Session: Evaluating Proposals”)   + (This slide is just a “divider slide” providing transition to the next section.) * Slide 17 (“Evaluating Proposals”)   + For this exercise, participants should work in groups of about three. Each participant should first do whichever of the two options is applicable, using advice from this session. Then the members of each small group should give each other feedback on what they came up with.   + At the end of the small-group work, bring the full group together and have people identify some points from this session that they plan to use in refining or preparing their proposals.   + If participants are not drafting actual proposals, this exercise can be modified accordingly. For example, the facilitator may note a project for which participants should, for purposes of this exercise, imagine developing a proposal. * Slide 18 (In Conclusion”)   + Perhaps ask for any additional questions and request other points that participants would like to make.   + Wrap up the session, for example by expressing hope that this module has provided useful guidance, restating one or more key messages, and noting the subject of the next module. * Slide 19 (“Wishing you much success!”) and Slide 20 (Creative Commons information etc):   + (These are the standard closing slides for this series of presentations.) |