

Facilitator Notes

# Effective Writing Style:

# Advice for Preparing Proposals

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

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

|  |  |
| --- | --- |
| Module Title | Effective Writing Style: Advice for Preparing Proposals |
| 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 the importance of writing style to the success of a proposal, (2) know how to help make the writing in a proposal clear, concise, persuasive, and well-formatted, and (3) be aware of some sources of further guidance on writing effectively. |
| Learning Outcomes | By the end of this module, participants will be able to (1) explain why writing style is important to the success of a proposal, (2) state and apply key advice for making a proposal clear, concise, persuasive, and well-formatted, and (3) be able to access some relevant resources on writing style. |
| Facilitator Profile | This module could best be facilitated by someone experienced in writing, editing, or reviewing grant proposals or by someone who teaches English-language writing; perhaps ideally it would be facilitated by a team consisting of both. 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, each participant should bring a proposal or other piece of writing that he or she has drafted. |
| 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: 08\_Effective Writing Style |
| Visual Aids and Resources | Computer with PowerPoint; projector for PowerPoint presentation  Internet access, if possible  A draft proposal or other piece of writing by each participant |
| 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 country or region from which the participants come. For instance, they may insert one or more slides on avoiding English-language problems common among native speakers of the participants’ language(s). |
| 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 (“Importance of Writing Style”)   + Emphasize that funders generally decide whether to approve a proposal solely on the basis of what is written.   + Note that therefore it’s important for a proposal both to have excellent content and to communicate it effectively. * Slide 3 (“Key Elements of Writing Style”)   + Note that this session will focus on the four listed items.   + Now can be a good time to state the aims or objectives of the session. * Slide 4 (“Writing Clearly”)   + Suggest that participants remind themselves that although they are very familiar with what they are proposing, those evaluating the proposal will not be.   + Suggest trying to view one’s proposal from the standpoint of someone who has not seen the proposal before and has not heard before about what is being proposed. * Slide 5 (“Writing Clearly”)   + Re “Provide overviews before details.” Perhaps ask the group for examples of doing so. Some possible examples are the following:     - providing an abstract at the beginning of a proposal     - placing a topic sentence at the beginning of a paragraph     - beginning a section of a proposal with a paragraph providing an overview of what the section will say   + Re designing tables and figures for easy understanding, emphasize keeping tables and figures simple and uncluttered.   + Re “Expand abbreviations/acronyms”: Note that the standard practice is spell out an item in full the first time it is used and put the abbreviation or acronym in parentheses after it; thereafter the abbreviation or acronym generally can be used by itself. Perhaps also note that if some reviewers might read the sections of a proposal in an order other than that in which they appear, it can be useful to define the abbreviation or acronym the first time it appears in each section or to provide a table of acronyms and other abbreviations. * Slide 6 (“Writing Clearly (cont)”)   + Emphasize that, as stated in a previous presentation, peer review of a draft can help ensure that a proposal is clear and otherwise of high quality.   + Perhaps give an example of a case in which such review resulted in improvement of a proposal or ask participants for such examples (or both). * Slide 7 (“Writing Concisely”)   + Because participants sometimes lack an accurate sense of what “concise” means, note that being concise means saying things in a brief, simple way.   + Ask participants why being concise is good. One reason is that concise writing is easier to read. Another reason is that being concise helps ensure that a proposal stays within the allowed page count or word count.   + Note that writing concisely may require changing one’s habits if one generally has been trying to use long words and say things complexly, for example in an attempt to impress readers.   + Perhaps note that in proposal writing and other scientific writing, a principle to follow is “Write to communicate, not to impress.” Readers should be impressed by the quality of the content, not the fanciness of the writing.   + Perhaps also present another quote from George Orwell: “Good writing is like a windowpane.”—meaning that good writing does not draw attention to itself but rather allows direct, easy access to the ideas being presented.   + Note that being concise tends to be difficult when drafting a proposal or other piece of writing. Suggest rough-drafting the proposal without worrying much about conciseness and then revising the proposal for conciseness. (This point leads into the next slide, which presents a brief exercise on revising for conciseness.) * Slide 8 (“Writing Concisely: A Brief Exercise”)   + For each word or phrase on the slide, have the group provide a more concise alternative, in keeping with the principle above it.   + A key to this exercise is as follows. Similar answers also are acceptable.     - attempt → try     - fundamental → basic     - red in color → red     - totally destroyed → destroyed     - at this point in time → now     - in the event that → if     - produce relief of → relieve     - provide an explanation → explain   + Perhaps note that making changes such as the above can often shorten a document by at least several percent without deleting any content. * Slide 9 (“Writing Concisely (cont)”)   + Re bulleted item 1: Perhaps note that in general each sentence should have only one main idea. Perhaps also note that sentences in drafts often are too long and that when revising a draft, it can be helpful to divide some long sentences into more than one sentence.   + Re bulleted item 2: Perhaps note that in proposals, medium-length paragraphs (a few sentences long) tend to be most appropriate. A paragraph of only one or two sentences can work well in a newspaper but generally is too short to use in a proposal. At the other extreme, a paragraph that occupies much of a page generally is too long. * Slide 10 (“Writing to Persuade”)   + Emphasize that, as discussed in a previous presentation, proposal writing is a type of persuasive writing.   + Perhaps mention that achieving the right tone can be especially challenging when one is communicating cross-culturally, writing in a language other than one’s native language, or both. * Slide 11 (“Writing to Persuade (cont)”)   + One good approach to discussing the material in this slide is to present the examples in this slide and identify features of the wording (or, better yet, have participants do so) that make the respective sentences appropriate or inappropriate.   + An alternative, if time in the session will permit, is as follows:     - First present a version of this slide without the Xs and check mark and without the items in parentheses. Have the participants discuss, as a full group or perhaps preferably in small groups, which sentence is most appropriate and why.     - Then present the current slide as a “key” and discuss it. * Slide 12 (“Writing to Persuade (cont)”)   + Note the points in this slide.   + Perhaps mention the following: In parts of the proposal other than the introduction and conclusion, other items can contribute to persuasiveness, as discussed in the session on writing a proposal. These items include stating reasons for choices, providing supporting evidence, and writing competently. * Slide 13 (“Formatted Writing”)   + Note that good formatting can help make proposals clear and readable.   + Note that, on the other hand, poor formatting can make it difficult for reviewers to read and understand proposals.   + Perhaps also note that by looking unprofessional, poor formatting may contribute to an overall negative impression of a proposal. * Slide 14 (“Formatted Writing (cont)”)   + Present the points on this slide. Perhaps mention or show some examples of using these techniques or ask participants for some.   + Perhaps ask the group to identify some reasons not to use ALL CAPITAL LETTERS to emphasize words or phrases. Some reasons are the following: Text in all capital letters (1) takes up a lot of space, (2) tends to be hard to read (because there isn’t as much variation in letter size and shape), and (3) may seem like “screaming.” * Slide 15 (“Formatted Writing (cont)”)   + Present the points on this slide.   + Regarding the third bulleted point: Note that in breaking a long list into more than one list, it is advisable to group related items together. For example, it might be appropriate to break a long list of tips on writing scientific papers into a list on content and organization, a list on writing style, and a list on other aspects. * Slide 16 (“A Final Check”)   + Emphasize the importance of careful proofreading.   + Perhaps suggest also having the proposal proofread by someone who has not seen the proposal before and thus might notice errors that the author missed. * Slide 17 (“Some Resources”)   + Note these resources and perhaps say a little about each.   + If time permits and internet access is available, follow the links and show the resource.   + If internet access won’t be available at the session, perhaps add slides showing screenshots of some or all of the resources. * Slide 18 (“Exercise”)   + For this exercise, participants should work in groups of about three or four. Each participant should first use points from this session to make at least three improvements in the piece of writing that he or she brought. Then the members of each small group should share the improvements with each other.   + If time permits, participants also may trade pieces of writing and suggest improvements to each other.   + At the end of the small-group work, bring the full group together and have people identify some types of revisions that they or fellow group members made to make the writing more effective. * Slide 19 (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 20 (“Wishing you much success!”) and Slide 21 (Creative Commons information etc):   + (These are the standard closing slides for this series of presentations.) |