

OSRP Handbook - Section 3 Proposal Preparation

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PROPOSAL PREPARATION

The responsibility of writing the proposal is that of the faculty or staff member; however, OSRP staff can facilitate refining ideas and identifying funding sources. Feedback regarding project design and proposal format, preparing and checking budgets, and reviewing compliance and assurance statements can be provided. Contact OSRP early in the planning process, even weeks or in some cases months before the submission deadline.

If the proposal involves several investigators, other institutions, a complicated budget, match requirement, or numerous agency certifications, bring the proposal to OSRP at least two weeks before the submission deadline. An uncomplicated proposal takes about 14 days for University routing; therefore, complex proposals need more lead-time. Also, if the proposal is to be submitted electronically, plan for more time. For a proposal to begin the routing process on campus an abstract, budget, budget narrative or justification, and draft of the narrative are required.

Writing a proposal to obtain grant funding is a complex process. To be written properly, several weeks, and sometimes months, are necessary in development of the proposal. Many agencies require several months to make a funding decision, so it is not unusual to begin at least a year before you intend to work on your project.

In planning the proposal, it is a good idea to consult your department head and dean early. Also, consult with the professional staff in the University's Office of Sponsored Research. The dean and department head should be informed of your intentions and any aspect of the proposed project that might affect departmental and college administration or duties. Early discussion of personnel and facility commitments will smooth the way for the proposal later.

OSRP has several good references on proposal writing and several workshops are provided throughout the year. Workshops can also be requested by groups of faculty and staff.

Writing a proposal for a grant or contract for research or a program is a practice in persuasion. It is well to assume the reader/reviewer is a busy, skeptical person who has no reason to give your proposal special consideration and is faced with more requests than can possibly be granted, or even read thoroughly. This reader wants to determine quickly and easily the answers to the following questions:

- ❖ What do you want to do, how much will it cost, and how long will it take?
- ❖ How does the proposed project relate to the sponsor's interest?
- ❖ What difference will the project make to the University, students, state, nation, etc.?
- ❖ What has already been accomplished in the project area?
- ❖ How do you plan to implement and evaluate the project?
- ❖ Why should you, rather than someone else, do this project?

These questions can be answered in different ways and receive different emphases, depending on the nature of the proposed project and on the agency to which the proposal is being submitted.

Selecting the right sponsor is an important first step. A call to the program officer at the potential sponsoring agency is often helpful. Once you have located a potential sponsor, study the detailed instructions or guidelines for the preparation of proposal to be sure your project fits with the sponsor's parameters before you begin writing the draft. For those agencies that do not have guidelines, the following format is generally acceptable. There may be some variations depending upon the nature of support you are seeking (research, in-service, curriculum development).

The following elements are standard for most research proposals:

- ❖ Title Page
- ❖ Abstract
- ❖ Table of Contents
- ❖ Introduction (statement of problem, purpose and significance or research)
- ❖ Background (literature review)
- ❖ Objectives
- ❖ Methodology
- ❖ Description of Relevant Institutional Resources
- ❖ List of References
- ❖ Personnel
- ❖ Budget
- ❖ Appendices

TITLE PAGE

Most sponsoring agencies specify the format for the title page or cover sheet, and some provide special forms to summarize basic administrative, fiscal and technical data for the project. Generally, the principal investigator (PI) and officials representing the university sign the title page. In addition, the title page includes the title of the proposal and sometimes the proposed starting date, budget period, and the total funds requested. If a title page/cover sheet is not required, include a

simple title page as part of the narrative section.

A good title is usually a compromise between conciseness and explicitness. Some agencies limit the character and spaces of proposal titles, yet PIs are expected to make titles clear and descriptive to indicate the nature of the proposed work. One good way to cut the length of titles is to avoid words that add nothing to a reader's understanding, such as "Studies on...", "Investigations in...", or "Research on some problems in...".

ABSTRACT

Every proposal, even short ones, should include an abstract. Most reviewers rely on it for a quick overview of the proposal and often return to it to refresh their memory on main issues. Some reviewers read only the abstract. The abstract is often used by agencies for compiling records on projects funded or for disseminating information about successful projects.

Though the abstract appears first, it should be written last. Guidelines usually specify the length (usually 200-250 words). It should appear on a page by itself with a small Roman numeral if the proposal has a table of contents and with an Arabic number if it does not.

A common problem is to summarize at length the need and rationale for the project, yet be concise with the objectives and methodology. In presenting the essential overview of the proposal, the abstract should summarize the answers to the questions listed earlier in this section, excluding the budget. The abstract should represent the entire proposal, even though parts may be read separately. Remember that the abstract is a first impression, a memory refresher, and sometimes, a last impression.

TABLE OF CONTENTS

For short proposals, a table of contents may not be necessary. A lengthy proposal may include a list of illustrations (or figures) and a list of tables, in addition to the table of contents. If this is the case, place the table of contents first and follow with the lists of illustrations and tables with each page numbered with a lower-case Roman numeral.

INTRODUCTION

Use a theme or capsule statement to begin introduction. Be direct. The main purpose of the introduction is to introduce the subject to a stranger, the reviewer. Administration and agency program officers need to get a general idea of the proposed work before having it reviewed by persons who will judge its technical merit. Therefore, both the abstract and introduction should be intelligible to informed lay people, giving enough background to allow readers to place your particular problem in a context of common knowledge and show how its solution will advance the field. Do not overstate, but don't be neglectful in stating how important your research is.

In introducing the research problem, it is helpful to say what it is not, especially if it can be confused with prior or related work. You may even need to explain the underlying assumptions or hypotheses to be used. This section often includes a literature review describing relevant work. For research projects, proposals must demonstrate familiarity with related research and explain how the project relates. With training or service projects, the proposal should use statistical or demographic data to document need.

If the exposition of the proposal tends to be long or complex, the introduction can end by specifying the order of the following sections, as this will assist the reviewer with an orderly impression of the proposal.

The tone of the introduction should reflect subdued self-confidence with some enthusiasm. It can show enthusiasm, but be careful with extravagant promises. (Take note, however, that solid self-assurance with a research proposal to a private corporation is advised).

BACKGROUND

This section may not be necessary if the introduction presented a relevant background in a few sentences. With complex proposals, pertinent works and your evaluation of them will contribute to your evidence of knowledge on the topic. Let this review of work done by others lead the readers to a clear impression of how you will be building upon what has already been done and how your work will be different.

A short background discussion of your own work relating to the proposed project is an opportunity to illustrate why you are suitable to undertake the project. This is also an opportunity to inform sponsors how your previous work was funded.

OBJECTIVES

Include a listing of long-term goals and short-term objectives written in measurable terms for easy evaluation. Typically with grants the objectives indicate that certain activities will be undertaken with the hope of achieving certain results. With contracts the indication is that for a certain number of dollars a certain activity, product or result can be expected. In light of this, state objectives to reflect the nature of the award whether it is a grant or contract. Remember, the objectives are what the agency is "buying".

METHODOLOGY

This section may include several sections and is the heart of the proposal. The following are some tips to strengthen this section.

1. The program of work should be realistic and feasible. A frequent comment from reviewers is that the research plan should be scaled down to be more manageable with a strong evaluation component.
2. Assumptions and hypotheses should be explicit.
3. The focus of the research should be clear.

4. If the project has several components or is multi-year, divide it into phases that can be evaluated easily and are conducive to progress reporting.
5. The schedule of proposed work should be detailed to provide the sponsor assurance that you are capable of step-by-step planning and implementation. This will also simplify justifying the budget.
6. The evaluation plan should be specific and related to the objectives or hypotheses.
7. The connection between the objectives, methodology, and evaluation should be evident.

DESCRIPTION OF RELEVANT INSTITUTIONAL RESOURCES

This area is dependent on the project, but generally addresses the resources available to the proposed project. It should convince the sponsor why your university is best suited to conduct the project. Some points to be made are the University's demonstrated competence in the pertinent research area, faculty expertise that may benefit the project, and supportive services that will have a direct benefit to the project.

LIST OF REFERENCES

A general rule of thumb is that if there are six or more references, use a reference list. If there are less, the references can be inserted into the text. The list of references usually precedes the budget. Use a format consistent with that of your discipline.

PERSONNEL

This section usually consists of an overview of personnel requirements with a short paragraph about each of the main participants and vitae for each participant. The length of detail on qualifications, experience and publications is usually limited in the guidelines. Any student or graduate student participation should be described.

BUDGET

Budgeting the cost of the project is a critical activity. Begin this process early and contact OSRP for instructions. Budget detail and accuracy and complete budget justification will facilitate the University routing process and demonstrate a well-planned project to the sponsor.