Writing Reviewer Friendly Text

Judy McShannon

Manager of Research Development

West Hall, room 228

835-6940

judith.mcshannon@nmt.edu

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Write to Your Reviewers

➢ **DO NOT write the application for yourself, unless you plan to fund it yourself**

➢ You MUST convince an entire review panel, the program officer, and the funding agency

- Reviewers have varied experience
- First-time reviewers to veterans
- Subject matter experts to generalists with minimal knowledge in the field

Limited time for reading your proposal

Review many proposals

Do not have time to find information that is not well organized, clear, visual, or highlighted

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How Do Reviewers Read Proposals?

- Reviewers approach to your proposal is similar to how you approach reading a technical paper. Reviewers attempt to understand complex information quickly and clearly and, most importantly, to determine whether or not the value of the proposal warrants a closer reading

- Reviewers look for shortcuts that help them do an "end run" around organizational structure of the document in a non-linear way

- This approach helps to more quickly determine whether or not there is value to be gained from continued reading

http://www.sciencemag.org/careers/2016/03/how-seriously-read-scientific-paper

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Different Agencies
All the Same Review Criteria

Department of Education Review Criteria	NSF Review Elements Intellectual Merit
Significance: The potential contribution of the proposed project to increased knowledge or understanding of education problems, issues or effective strategies.	Potential of the activity to advance knowledge and understanding, and benefit society
Quality of the Project Design: The extent to which the design of the proposed project is appropriate to, and will successfully address, the needs of the target population or other identified needs.	Well-reasoned, well-organized plan for proposed activities
	Originality, creativity and transformative nature of proposed activities
Personnel: The relevant expertise of your research team, the responsibilities of each team member, and each team member's time commitments.	Qualifications of individual(s), teams, or institution
Adequacy of Resources: The adequacy of support, including facilities, equipment, supplies, and other resources from the applicant organization or the lead applicant organization.	Adequate resources to carry out proposed activities
Quality of Project Evaluation: Extent to which the goals, objectives, and outcomes to be achieved by the proposed project are specified and measurable.	Mechanism to assess success

What Reviewers Consider

Applies to research, education, and broader impacts contributions:

- What the proposers want to do

- Why they want to do it

- How they plan to do it

- How they will know if they succeed

- What benefits would accrue if the project is successful

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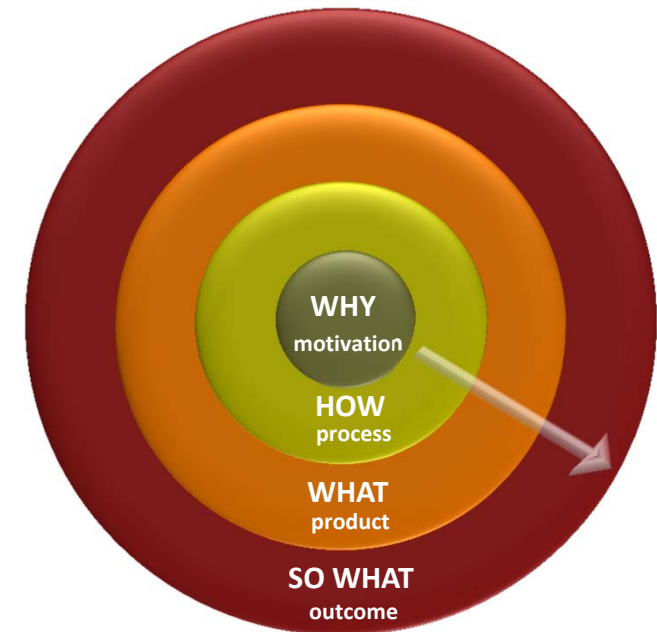
Sell Your Idea!

1. Set the stage – Lay out the problem **(Why/Who Cares?)**
    A.   Get interest at the outset
    B.   Identify the importance – stress the need
    C.   Summarize the state of the art
    D.   Describe the technical challenges to solving the problem

2. State the theme – Your solution **(What and How?)**
    E.   Describe the concept and establish credibility
    F.   Describe your project's fundamental purpose

3. Create a vision **(So What?/Benefits)**
    G.   Show how your work will advance the field
    H.   Discuss the potential benefits

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Understanding the Program Goals, Priorities, and RFP Is Key for a Competitive Proposal

"A sound concept, but it does not fit our current funding priorities"

60% of all proposals are eliminated on first reading because the writer did not make an adequate project match or failed to follow directions

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Keep in mind. . .

There is no grantsmanship that will turn a bad scientific idea into a good one...

BUT

...there are many ways to disguise a good idea

Your Proposal Must STAND OUT from All the Others Being Reviewed by the Funding Agency

- Highlight your unique and innovative approaches to accomplishing your goals.
- Use technical terms judiciously, reviewers have different levels of expertise in subject matter
- Review each section of your proposal. Make certain your methods, management, timelines, budget, and evaluation pieces are on target, are connected, and are realistic
- Write clearly and concisely
- Style and format are as important as content
- Follow instructions on how to present information

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# Your Proposal Is a Sales Document Not a Scientific Or Scholarly Paper

Good proposal writing turns the scientific or scholarly model many authors know from their professional experience upside down. Rather than drawing conclusions from an array of details, proposal writing begins with a conclusion and arranges substantiating facts to support it.

Scientific/Scholarly Writing
Scientific or scholarly writing starts with the details and subordinates main points.

Details

MAIN POINT

Proposal Writing
Proposal writing starts with the main point and subordinates details.

Details
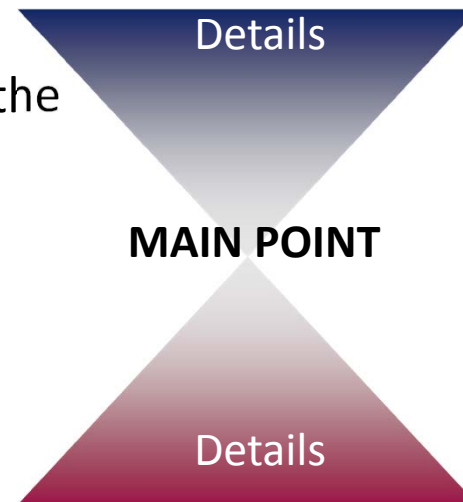
Academic Writing versus Grant Writing	
Academic Writing	**Grant Writing**
Scholarly pursuit - Individual passion	Sponsor goals - Service attitude
Past Oriented - What has been done	Future Oriented - What should be done
Theme-centered - Theory and thesis	Project-centered – Activities
Expository rhetoric – Explaining	Persuasive rhetoric - "Selling"
Impersonal tone: Objective	Personal tone: Excitement
Individualistic	Team-focused: Feedback needed
Few length constraints	Strict length constraints
Specialized terminology	Accessible language

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Create Reviewer-Friendly Text

- Ensure that main section headings mirror RFP requirements
- Use titles, section headings, and sub-headings that are descriptive and reflect the benefit. For example

  "Water Systems" vs. ***"Innovative Systems to Promote Efficient Water Usage"***

- Discuss main points first and then provide details
- Use the same terminology as that in the RFP and ensure it is consistent
- Use consistent writing style – one "voice"
- Define potentially unfamiliar terms
- Spell out acronyms and abbreviations

Create Reviewer Friendly Text

- Make it easy for reviewers to find the key concepts, benefits, and features of your proposal by using graphics and bulleted lists

- Examples of graphics:
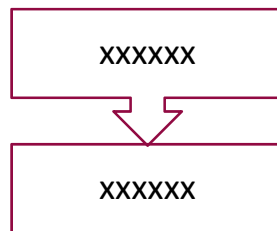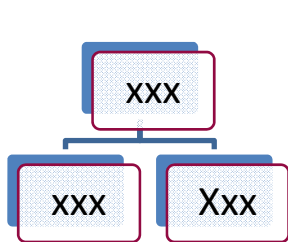
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Hallmarks of an Outstanding Proposal

- High degree of novelty and innovation
- Strong significance to an important problem in the field
- Strong track record by a well-qualified applicant
- Clear rationale
- Relevant and supportive preliminary data
- Clear and focused approach that provide unambiguous results
- Careful attention to details (clarity of data, proposal instructions, grammar and spelling, etc.)
- Good ideas, well presented

EXPECTATIONS

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Top Ten Mistakes to Avoid in Proposals

- **Number 10: Fonts too small**
  - Small fonts promote reader fatigue
  - PAPPG mandates: 11 point font minimum, 1 inch margins, 6 lines max per vertical inch
  - Reviewers HATE small fonts
- **Number 9: Figures Illegible**
  - Avoid "crowded" visuals
  - Don't assume reader will print in color
- **Number 8: Acronyms & Abbreviations**
  - Acronyms are UGLY and make text hard to read
  - Acronyms limit your audience to those who already know them
- **Number 7: Dissing the Competition**
  - Good idea: Citing others' work
  - Bad idea: Slighting others' work
  - "Others" may be sitting on panel

Figures are not eye charts — make them large enough to read
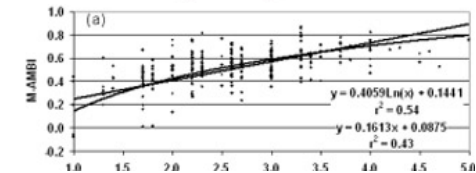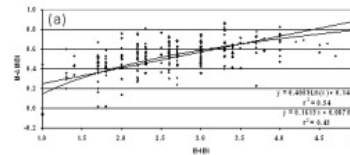
Top Ten Mistakes to Avoid in Proposals

- Number 6: Poor distinction between preliminary results and proposed work
  - Make a clear demarcation
  - Distinguish your results from others'
  - Provide clear road map for future work
- Number 5: Lackluster Education Plan
  - Should be integrated with research plan
  - Think beyond your present teaching duties
  - While the quality of the educational plan/broader impacts/etc. alone is not be enough to win, it is enough to lose!
- Number 4: Dull Broader Impacts
  - Broader Impacts ask: How will this work change society?
  - Don't confuse this with "extracurricular activities" not supported by the research plan
  - Outreach plan must be actionable

Research Office

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Top Ten Mistakes to Avoid in Proposals

Danger is near, if your path isn't clear

- Number 3: Confining yourself to your PhD work
  - Proposals should be forward-looking
  - Move above and beyond your PhD work
  - "Imagine a world ..."
- Number 2: "It wasn't clear ..."
  - Symptoms: Long-winded explanations, too many superfluous details, poor organization of thoughts into words
  - Remedies: Use fewer words, read first two pages aloud
- Number 1: Research Plan lacks Cohesion
  - Don't staple together unrelated ideas
  - Don't offer a laundry list with no prioritization
  - Don't make everything look like a nail to your one hammer
  - Tell a story with your narrative

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