Editorial Tips for Proposal Writing

Stage 1: Developing the Proposal
Stage 2: Writing the Proposal
Stage 3: Improving the Proposal
1. Have a great idea ...

... and be sure that it is ready to move from conception to proposal.

How to accomplish this?

• Talk to your peers about your ideas, your main objectives, your methods, your outcomes – **early peer review**.
• This helps to refine your ideas BEFORE you start writing.

Plan before you write
– then show your plans to your peers.
2. Start early

An early start is essential for early peer review

Once your idea is refined, there is still work to do:

• Familiarize yourself with the components of the application – **read the guidelines**.
• Write and revise on your own.
• Have your draft reviewed by your peers (**late peer review**).
• Have your draft reviewed by an editor (**editorial review**) – preferably **after** it has been reviewed by your peers.

Stage 1: Development
3. Read the guidelines and target your proposal

Different sponsors have different criteria

Before you write:
• Check the website, call the program officers, contact research services and get as much information as you can.
• Identify the components of the proposal before writing and develop logical headings based on the program guidelines.

As you write:
• Clearly address the evaluation criteria provided in the funding program description.
• State the relevance of your work to the mandate of the sponsor, and do this more than once.
4. Know your audience

• Find out as much as you can about the review process and the review committee.

• Not all reviewers will be experts in your field. Make your proposal understandable for a non-expert audience, especially in the summary and background sections.

Tell a compelling story - Make your reviewers your advocates

“How interesting.”

“This is such an excellent and necessary undertaking; we have to fund this project.”

Stage 1/2: Development/Writing
5. Make it easy for the reviewers

Remember reviewer fatigue

• Write as clearly as you can – your subject matter may be complex, but the writing need not be.
• Remember that the proposal is about what the reviewers want to know, not what you want to say.
• Make it easy for reviewers to find what is being asked for in the funding guidelines – write the review for them.

Stage 2: Writing
6a. HQP training counts!

- HQP training counts for 1/3 of your overall score.
- Permeate your application with evidence of your successful HQP training and strategy.
- How? We give 3 tips based on NSERC evaluation criteria below.

1. Demonstrate a strong record of HQP training

In the CCV:
- Get permission to name your HQPs, and list their project, and where they are now.
- Highlight your HQPs in the author list of your publications (this is still possible using “*”).

Contributions to Training of HQP section:
- Give a summary of HQPs you’ve trained (if you are new, list undergrads, Master’s, etc.) and highlight their successes.

Stage 2: Writing
2. Show HQP involvement in high quality research

Research Proposal:
• When introducing and describing your research, highlight student involvement in the projects of your program.

HQP Training Plan and Budget Justification:
• Present clearly defined HQP projects
• Demonstrate appropriateness to student’s level
• Give timelines (consider a figure like a Gantt chart).

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Stage 2: Writing
6a. HQP training counts!

3. Highlight your HQPs’ employability and skills

- Provide jobs statistics for skilled people in your field (is demand rising? Why?).

- Emphasize interdisciplinary skills (e.g., biologist working with industrial engineers) and transferrable skills (beyond the academy: oral and written communication, statistical skills, international experience, experience training others).

- Highlight experiences unique to your lab (e.g., industry experience, international fieldwork, access to state-of-the-art equipment or computer programs).

Stage 2: Writing
6b. Have a Compelling Summary

This is the first impression you make on reviewers

- Successful grant writers often write the summary first (as a scaffolding) and then revise as the proposal takes shape.
- Write the summary in plain language and make it compelling.
- Have as many people as possible read the summary and revise it until everyone says it is crystal clear.

Stage 2: Writing
7. Write a readable proposal

1. Start early
   • Get the ideas down – even in incomplete form.
   • Once the ideas are down, make the content correct and complete.

2. Revise, revise, revise
   • Even the best writers have drafts that are disorganized, disconnected, dense and too long.
   • Revise for coherence, cohesion, clarity and concision.
Coherence: A sense of wholeness

• Logical flow of ideas, sentences, paragraphs and sections.
• Makes writing easy-to-read because the reader knows what to expect.

To write coherently:
1. Open each section with a short introductory segment.
   • In these introductory segments state the main point of the section and the key concepts that follow.

2. Open each paragraph with an introductory sentence.
   • These sentences are the scaffolding of your document and give the reader its logical structure.

3. Make everything within the section or paragraph relevant to the introductory statement.

Stage 3: Improving
Cohesion: A sense of flow

- The way that sentences seamlessly flow together.

To write cohesively:
1. Begin sentences with familiar information.
2. End sentences with new information.

Questions about the nature of the universe are raised by scientists studying black holes. The collapse of a dead star into a point no larger than a marble creates a black hole. So much matter compressed into so little volume changes the space around it in puzzling ways.

Questions about the nature of the universe are raised by scientists studying black holes. A black hole is created by the collapse of a dead star into a point no larger than a marble. So much matter compressed into so little volume changes the space around it in puzzling ways.
Clarity

• Sentences are easier to read when their meaning is transparent.

To write more clearly:
1. Make important actions the verbs of your sentences.
2. Make main characters the subjects of those verbs.

Prof. X’s more effective presentation of her study resulted in success, despite stiff competition from other researchers.

Who are the main characters? Prof. X and other researchers
What are they doing? Presenting and succeeding

Prof. X succeeded because she presented her study more effectively than the other researchers.

Stage 3: Improving
Concision

• Writing in a way that makes every word count

1. Delete words that mean little or nothing

× Most students generally find some kind of summer work.

✓ Most students find summer work.

2. Delete words that repeat the meaning of other words

× In the business world of today, official government red tape seriously destroys initiative among individual businesses.

✓ Government red tape destroys business initiative.

Stage 3: Improving
Concision

• Writing in a way that makes every word count

3. Delete words implied by other words

Energy used to power industries and homes will in years to come cost more money.

Energy will eventually cost more.

4. Replace a phrase with a word

A sail-powered craft that has turned on its side or completely over must remain buoyant enough so that it will bear the weight of those individuals who were aboard.

A capsized sailboat must support those on it.

Stage 3: Improving
Concision

• Writing in a way that makes every word count

5. Change negatives to affirmatives

There is no reason not to believe that engineering malfunctions in nuclear energy systems cannot be anticipated.

Malfunctions in nuclear energy systems may surprise us.

6. Avoid excessive metadiscourse

It is almost certainly the case that totalitarian systems cannot allow a society to have what we would define as stable social relationships.

Totalitarianism prevents stable social relationships.

Stage 3: Improving
Take home messages

1. Plan before you write – then show your plans to your peers.
2. Start early.
3. Target your proposal.
4. Know your audience.
5. Make it easy for the reviewers.
7. Revise your writing for coherence, cohesion, clarity and concision.
Style Guides that Inspired these Tips

*Style: Lessons in Clarity and Grace* (Tenth edition)
by Joseph M. Williams and Gregory G. Colomb

*Stylish Academic Writing*
by Helen Sword

*The Elements of Style*
by William Strunk Jr. and E. B. White
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