

Style

You have only one chance with most grant reviewers, so the way you present your ideas is central to the success of your proposal. The people who read your proposal will sometimes be reviewing hundreds of others and are likely to be overburdened with other projects as well. Your goal is for the reviewers to be able to understand your research purpose and judge its relevance and importance without having to work to do so. Regardless of your project's intellectual merits, a proposal that puzzles reviewers with complex syntax, ill-defined terms, or inelegant prose is not likely to win a favorable rating. Without style, your proposal's substance is likely to be ignored. With this in mind, the following four central criteria may help you make your proposal as lucid and explicit as possible. You may also wish to refer to George Orwell's *Politics and the English Language* (viewable at this website).

Clarity

Clarity is the most important aspect of style for proposal writing. The clearer your proposal, the easier it will be for the reader to understand and follow your logic and writing. The following are some suggestions for enhancing your proposal's clarity. (See also "The Art of Writing Proposals" by Adam Przeworski and Frank Salomon, at the Social Science Research Council website.)

Think first. The first step of clear writing is clear thinking. The clearer the ideas are in your head, the clearer they will be on the page. Thinking through your proposal should leave you with a solid understanding of what you are proposing to research, how you plan to accomplish it, and its broader relevance to scholarship and to the world. After you have written a draft, leave yourself time to think it over and then, without looking at the original draft, see if you can say what is important in a clearer for accessible way. Many of the students we spoke with told us that doing this not only made the writing much easier and more satisfying, but also helped integrate the overall structure and logic of the proposal.

Use Outlines and Sketches. If you work well from outlines, lay out your thoughts in that structure to organize and direct a logical flow for your proposal. While you may or may not follow this outline exactly or even use it as you write (though we suggest that you do), thinking through the overall structure and logic of your proposal will help focus your writing and lead to a clearer proposal. You may also want to sketch out certain parts of the proposal or ideas before you start writing. If you are reviewing a particular concept, for example, it may help to write out what you mean by the term on its own. This allows you to test out ideas and logical connections without having to integrate them into your broader argument. If these ideas are clear to you before you write, your proposal is likely to benefit.

Be explicit. A proposal should not read like a mystery novel where the key to the story comes at the end. Never assume that the reader knows what you mean or where you are going with your prose. State your research question and objectives early on and make it clear that you are doing so. If you haven't gotten to it by the first paragraph, make sure it comes on the first page. While you need to leave your position open to reconsideration, present your argument (or your hunch) in the most straightforward manner possible. It is hard to overstate this piece of advice. Many reviewers will spend only a brief few seconds searching for the main purpose of your research. Making it hard for them makes it much less likely that they will read the rest of your proposal.

Write simply. As the saying goes "write to express, not to impress." This often means writing in short, simple sentences using simple language (see below). When possible, write short paragraphs that begin with informative topic sentences that tell the reviewer what you are going to do in the

paragraph; then do it. Use simple verbs and place them next to the subjects to which they pertain and, whenever possible, eliminate complex clauses or language that may be open to multiple interpretations. Use subsections and verbal maps that orient the reviewer “up front” to your direction and purpose.

Minimize jargon. As a general rule, keep your proposal as jargon-free as possible. Too often, language used to impress proposal reviewers obscures more than it reveals. Keep in mind that what is considered conceptual precision to one reviewer might be alienating and impenetrable to another. If you feel that there are terms that may be foreign to some readers but are conceptually critical for your argument, briefly define them in your text to avoid alienating anyone. Try to use language that is widely recognized and used in different disciplines to improve the likelihood that a reviewer from another field or subfield will be familiar with the terms you are using. The best way to ensure your text’s ‘democratic’ credentials is to have it read by colleagues from other disciplines (see below).

Be brief. It enhances clarity if you convey the maximum information in the minimum number of words. For example, substitute “now” for “at this point in time,” “whether” for “whether or not,” “to” for “for the purpose of,” etc. Perform an “efficiency review” of your proposal with the aim of deleting words and phrases that are not crucial to the meaning. This helps eliminate wordiness, which gives you more room to convey important information and helps communicate your ideas more clearly.

Share. We highly recommend talking through and sharing your ideas with others at different stages of your proposal writing. This is absolutely essential when you have a working draft written, but talking to others is also helpful when conceptualizing and outlining your proposal. Doing so helps you see early on the potentials and pitfalls of a given project and lets you hone your argument. When choosing casual reviewers, select people who will bring different strengths and perspectives to their reading of your work. People from outside your field, those with good editing skills and those with strong theoretical and/or empirical backgrounds are likely to prove particularly useful.

Tone

An inappropriate tone—one of arrogance or apology—can condemn a substantively sound proposal. Remember that the reviewers are not just funding your research idea; they are investing in you and in the likelihood that you will be able to carry out the proposed research. The tone in which you express yourself is likely to influence the reviewers’ estimation of you and your capacities.

Be confident. Your writing should convey a respectful confidence. Expressing a measured confidence in your research and yourself is likely to enhance the reviewers’ faith in your ability to carry out a rigorous academic investigation. To do this, use straightforward language and simple verbs (avoid using the subjunctive or excessive conditional clauses). Instead of, “If I am funded I would hope to conduct interviews during the final phase of my research,” say “I will conduct interviews during the final phase of the research.” Avoid the passive voice as much as possible. The passive voice avoids specifying who or what did, does, or will do the action of the verb. The result in most cases is a less direct and often less confident tone. Rather than, “the research will be conducted over a one-year period,” write, “*I will conduct* the research in one year.”

Be passionate. Do not hide your passion for your project. There are few graduate students in the humanities and social sciences in search of fame or fortune. Indeed, most care deeply about their work, are often normatively engaged with it, and are truly excited for the opportunity to do original research. When these attitudes are expressed through your writing, they may help pique the interest of even the most jaded reviewer. Communicating this passion is easier for some than for others and must always be done carefully. It may help to start by reflecting on what made you interested in your topic

when you first got involved and why you are still keen on the research. Do not state your feelings in the proposal directly, but express your passion in the way you frame and tell the reviewer of your story, your approach, and your work's import. The key is to express these sentiments while maintaining a respect for the formality of the proposal format.

Avoid arrogance and apology. One of the fastest ways to estrange a reviewer is to write your proposal in an overly arrogant or apologetic tone. You must find and respect the line between being pompous and being confident; apologetic and modest; passionate and unprofessional. Make sure the information you convey about yourself is information that the reviewer really needs to know for your role in the project and is not simply thrown in to impress. Express your enthusiasm through your topic or approach, not through personal information about yourself. Do not apologize for what you do not know, but focus on what strengths you bring to the research and how you will systematically overcome your shortcomings (e.g., language training). Finally, get friends, preferably close, honest friends, to read your proposal with tone in mind and ask them for candid comments.

Coherence

Proposals are frequently the products of innumerable drafts and revisions. While the linkages between and among the sections may be clear in your head, they may not always be so evident to readers of your proposal. As you revise, concentrate on ensuring a high degree of coherence, the logical and smooth integration of the text's various sections. For your proposal to be successful, it is essential that the research question you propose is logically linked to the methods you plan to employ, and that your theoretical frame adequately justifies the empirical cases and context which you hope to explore. And these linkages must be made explicit. The following paragraphs point to four common sources of discontinuity and disconnection. As with everything else, the only way to ensure continuity is to have others read your proposal.

Questions and Methods. Your research question (or questions) will be one of the most scrutinized sections of your proposal. Reviewers will closely consider whether the methods you propose to use are adequate to gather the information you need to answer the question(s) convincingly. We suggest that you place each question on one side of a sheet of paper and carefully map out *how* the methods employed will help you gather the information needed to answer each question.

Case and Theory. After taking years of course work and preparing for qualifying exams, researchers tend to organize their proposals around their theory. This can be all too apparent in the proposal itself and can result in the history or description of the research site and background seeming disconnected from the research itself. Often in these situations, a researcher will attempt to make the case or topic fit their theoretical framework too neatly exposing their ignorance of what is certainly a complex reality. Conversely, many students offer theoretical frameworks that come across as weak justifications for spending time in a place that interests the researchers. Such attempts are often very transparent and may raise a red flag to reviewers. To avoid this, carefully justify why you have chosen your case and how this selection relates to a broader theoretical debates and concerns. Similarly, make an effort to emphasize why this theoretical frame is particularly well suited to the trends and patterns unfolding in your area of interest.

Project and Time. One of the easiest ways to determine if researchers are realistic is to look at what they intend to do in the allotted time. Most first-time researchers, eager to overcome the shortcomings of past efforts, drastically overestimate what they can accomplish. Your timeline—a concrete part of your research design—must persuade the reviewer of two things. First, you must demonstrate that you have a good idea of what conditions are going to be like on the ground. If you cannot travel long distances during the rainy season, you must schedule this into your plan. Second, you must show that

you have prioritized the methods and approaches you are going to use. If answering your research question depends on a particularly kind of data, a good portion of your timeline should be dedicated to its collection. Speaking to others who have recently completed similar project or even trying out some of the methods at home will help you realistically understand the time needed to complete your proposed project. For more on this, refer to the research design page at this website.

Budget and Project. Quite often researchers have lofty ideas and ambitious goals, but the proposed budget appears insufficient to complete the research. Skimping on the money you ask for does not increase the chances of getting funded. Moreover, if your budget does not match the cost you will incur in your project, it conveys the impression that you do not realistically understand your research and may cause your proposal to be rejected because the project appears infeasible. If you need more money than the funding source offers, mention other sources you will be approaching for funds. Be specific about what costs you are asking a particular grantor to fund and what parts of your budget you are asking other donors to fund. To assure coherence between your budget and your proposal, be honest, realistic, and transparent in matching your budget to the actual work you will need to do to carry out the research. For more on budgeting, and sample budgets, refer to the budgeting page at this website.

Presentation

Academics pride themselves on their substance and seriousness. Such concerns can not, however, lead you to overlook your proposal's physical appearance. Proposals that are easy to read are simply more inviting to the reader. After a reviewer has looked at dozens of proposals, most from qualified, competent candidates, a clearly presented proposal can literally be a sight for sore eyes.

Readability. Make your proposal easy and inviting to read. Although researchers commonly give a great deal of attention to the presentation of a curriculum vitae or resume, they often neglect the esthetics and presentation of a proposal. Leaving lots of white space on pages and being clear and consistent with your style headings and subheadings, boldface, underlining, capitals, or italics can help the reader to visually navigate your prose. Finding a font that is easy to read and that leaves enough spacing between letters and words will only help in this regard. Avoid narrowing your margins or reducing the font size (in the text or in the footnotes) just to squeeze more words on the page. Try cutting out words instead. Attention to these fine points of presentation can help reviewers work less to see the gist of your argument and even enhance their comprehension of your more difficult substantive concepts.

Length. The desired proposal length varies greatly from one foundation to another. Some want shorter more conceptual proposals while others will ask for more robust research proposals of the type included on our examples page at this website. In either case, it is important to stay within the specified page or word limit or limits. Many foundations are very strict about these page limits and some will not review proposals that exceed the requested length. Do not simply adjust the line spacing, font sizes, or margins of your proposal to fit within the allotted length. Respect the funders' requests and shape your text so that it will fit within the required length utilizing standard margins, font sizes, and line spacing. Following the funders' guidelines by providing a concise statement of your research agenda is only going to help you to earn a favorable review.