

# TIPS FOR PREPARING A SUCCESSFUL PROPOSAL

For a Principal Investigator (PI) seeking funding from an external sponsor, proposal writing provides an opportunity to develop an idea into a reality. The act of putting an idea into words is a process that causes the proposal writer to expand, clarify and refine the idea. In the process, the idea becomes more substantive and flaws in reasoning or missing information in the proposal are more easily identified. A written proposal may become a vehicle for moving a new idea forward.

## BASIC TIPS

- *START EARLY*
- *DEVELOP A PROGRAM THAT IS REALISTIC AND FEASIBLE*
- *DEVELOP AND ADVANCE AN IDEA*
- *WRITE CLEARLY AND CONCISELY*
- *EDIT TO SIMPLIFY AND CLARIFY THE NARRATIVE*
- *ORGANIZE THE PROPOSAL IN A LOGICAL FORMAT*
- *CHECK BUDGET CALCULATIONS*
- *MAKE THE FINAL DOCUMENT READABLE AND NEAT*
- *MAKE SECTIONS EASILY IDENTIFIABLE*
- *PROVIDE AN ACCURATE TABLE OF CONTENTS*
- *PROOFREAD*
- *OBTAIN NECESSARY SIGNATURES IN THE CORRECT PLACES*
- *SUBMIT THE REQUIRED NUMBER OF COPIES*
- *MEET DEADLINES*

**START WITH A GOOD IDEA.** People ask “Where is the money?” The best place to start is with a good idea. Don’t look for money first. Successful proposal writers commonly start by developing the idea for a program based on their professional experience and expertise. Then they are prepared to look for a funding organization whose mission is to support that kind of activity.

**KNOW SPONSOR INTERESTS AND SELECTION CRITERIA.** Proposal writers should look for sponsors that share their mission. Learn about these organizations by carefully reading the sponsor’s guidelines and application materials. Determine which sponsor interests most closely match those expressed by the idea. Then consider how the idea might be modified to enhance its appeal to a specific sponsor.

**REVIEW FUNDED PROGRAMS.** Look at sample proposals and lists of awards on the sponsor’s website or ask a program officer for copies of previously funded proposals. Look for common characteristics and information about how program ideas were developed and defended. Borrow good ideas and learn from common mistakes. Identify ways in which others have failed and understand their problems.

**IDENTIFY AND CONTACT SPONSOR PROGRAM STAFF.** When appropriate, call, write or visit the people who run the funding program. Discuss the sponsor’s priorities and its approach to ideas with a program officer. Most sponsors are eager to hear the new ideas of faculty. By sharing thoughts about a proposed program, a PI may indirectly influence the sponsor’s thinking and help them to articulate what they are trying to accomplish.

**DEVELOP THE IDEA.** A successful program must be feasible as well as innovative. Once a program idea has been identified, a PI may contact OSP for help in developing the idea into a program that merits funding. Work with other investigators in the same research area and discuss the idea with colleagues and mentors. The creative input of several people often results in a stronger project. Now, refine and focus the idea. Many proposed research projects are too broad and too ambitious.

**CONDUCT AN EXHAUSTIVE LITERATURE REVIEW.** Understand the ideas and research of others who have done related work. A research program should contribute to and expand the current literature.



**DEVELOP A LONG-TERM PLAN.** A proposal is usually stronger when it is a part of a long-range strategy. By developing a plan, a proposal writer may be able to develop other approaches to obtaining funding.

**DEVELOP PRELIMINARY DATA.** Pilot or preliminary data often enhance a proposal.

**SEEK INTERNAL SUPPORT.** Proposal writers seeking external funding are encouraged to consult their Department Chair and/or Dean in the early stages of preparing a proposal. The Dean's Office often can provide useful assistance in developing a program.

**CREATE AN OUTLINE.** As a program idea develops, a detailed outline will help a PI to write a better organized and more convincing proposal. Be realistic. Always keep in mind what is feasible and possible. Ideas at first glance may be exciting, but upon closer examination may be seen to be the product of enthusiasm rather than realistic, knowledgeable thinking.

**THINK BEFORE WRITING.** Think through all the details of a proposal before writing. Discuss the idea of the proposed program with other people who are knowledgeable about the general area of its focus. Use their information and advice to evaluate and improve the idea.

**FOLLOW THE GUIDELINES.** Failure to comply with even one guideline may cause a proposal to be rejected automatically. Address all of the selection criteria.

**WRITE CLEARLY AND CONCISELY.** Avoid long sentences, archaic words, and technical jargon. Never assume that readers will know what is meant; be clear. Be as specific and detailed as possible.

**EXPLAIN THE IMPORTANCE OF THE PROGRAM.** Document what is important and distinctive about the proposed program. Why is this work needed? Why should the sponsor provide funding for the idea?

**PRESENT THE PRINCIPAL INVESTIGATOR'S CAPABILITIES.** Persuade the reviewers that the concept, the PI's ability to accomplish the task and the capacity of the institution to support the PI are superior.

**PREPARE A TIMETABLE.** A timetable that identifies planned activities and a schedule for their completion often helps reviewers understand a proposed program.

**ESTIMATE THE LIKELIHOOD OF SUCCESS.** Discuss the chances of a proposal's success with colleagues. Consider alternatives, potential problems and, if appropriate, other potential sources of support.

**KNOW THE REVIEWERS.** Determine the educational background and work experience of potential reviewers. Successful proposal writers often are familiar with the review process being used and the selection criteria they are using. When appropriate, recommend or disqualify reviewers if the funding agency allows it.

**DON'T GIVE UP!** The first proposal is usually the most difficult. If a first effort is not funded, don't give up! Contact the sponsor and ask for reviewer comments. Use these comments to write a better proposal. In many cases, awarded proposals represent a second or third attempt.

## PROPOSAL FORMAT

- **TITLE PAGE.** IDENTIFIES THE PROJECT TITLE, PROJECT PERIOD AND THE PROJECT COST.
- **TABLE OF CONTENTS.**
- **ABSTRACT.** BECAUSE REVIEWERS OFTEN JUDGE A PROPOSAL BASED UPON THE FIRST FEW PAGES THEY READ, A PERSUASIVE ABSTRACT IS CRITICAL. ALTHOUGH IT WILL APPEAR FIRST, THE ABSTRACT IS WRITTEN BEST AFTER THE NARRATIVE TEXT IS FINISHED.
- **INTRODUCTION.** DEFINES THE PROGRAM'S SCOPE AND INTENT.
- **LITERATURE REVIEW.** ESTABLISHES A PI'S FAMILIARITY WITH A SUBJECT AREA AND ILLUSTRATES HOW A PROPOSED APPROACH REPLICATES OR DIFFERS FROM PREVIOUS WORK.
- **GOAL AND RATIONALE.** STATES THE PROBLEM IN TERMS OF CURRENT UNMET NEEDS AND LONG TERM IMPORTANCE.
- **OBJECTIVES.** IDENTIFIES ANTICIPATED OUTCOMES BY WHICH THE SUCCESS OF THE PROGRAM IS MEASURED.
- **ACTIVITIES AND METHODOLOGY.**
- **PROGRAM TIMETABLE.** IDENTIFIES MILESTONES.
- **DATA ANALYSIS.** DEFINES PROCEDURES AND MODELS THAT WILL BE USED TO ANALYZE DATA.
- **EVALUATION.** DESCRIBES MECHANISMS FOR MEASURING INDICATORS OF PROGRAM SUCCESS.
- **BIBLIOGRAPHY.**
- **APPENDICES.** ATTACH MATERIALS THAT ADD IMPORTANT DATA BUT WOULD IMPEDE SMOOTH READING OF THE TEXT.
- **REQUIRED FORMS AND ASSURANCES.** PROVIDES ASSURANCES FROM BC, SIGNED BY OSP.