

## **Weber State University OSP How to Write a Proposal**

### ***A Few Basics:***

Congratulations! You've matched your idea to a specific funding opportunity. You've cleared a significant hurdle, but now you have to convince the sponsoring agency that your idea is worthy of their financial support.

To start, here are a few basic things to keep in mind as you prepare your proposal:

- The proposal is the primary basis for evaluating your project and determining whether financial support is justified, so you must give reviewers a reason to fund your proposal. Your proposal should leave reviewers with a clear understanding of what your objectives are, as well as the implications or “so what?” of your project. Reviewers must be convinced that your project is worth doing and that you are qualified to do it.
- Keep in mind that reviewers must evaluate many excellent proposals in a short time. Therefore, your proposal must stand out for the reviewer by being readable, well organized and concise, and it must avoid technical jargon that could confuse lay readers.
- Writing a grant proposal to obtain funding differs from writing an academic paper for publication. While both focus on an idea's significance and broader impact, you must market the ideas in your proposal to obtain grant funding by turning them into practical, realistic and fundable projects for the reviewer to evaluate.

Dozens of grant-writing tips and guidelines links are available on the Internet. One of the better general-purpose publications, and the source for much of the information in this document, is “Developing Competitive Proposals”, by the Grants Resource Center (GRC) of the American Association of State Colleges and Universities (AASCU). If you are interested in receiving a copy of this document, please call your Sponsored Project Administrator

Some federal agencies and private funding organizations also have versions of grant-writing guidelines—generally geared to their individual needs. For example, the National Science Foundation (NSF) and National Institutes for Health (NIH) have their own proposal preparation/submission guidelines, which contain detailed requirements that supplement any solicitation. Any such additional guidelines/requirements will be referenced in the solicitation.

But there is no “one-size-fits-all” set of instructions on how to create a winning proposal. Each grant is different and has its own unique requirements, even those originating in the same agency. The following guidelines are intended to help you prepare a clear, concise, and compliant response to a variety of solicitations. Keep in mind that the Office of Sponsored Projects (OSP) can assist your proposal-development efforts in a variety of ways.

Here are five things to keep in mind:

#### **1. Follow the directions!**

- Read, study, understand, and comply with all of the requirements of the solicitation to which you're responding.

## **2. Follow the directions!**

- This is not a typo; this point cannot be stressed too much. If your proposed program does not meet the specific needs of the funding agency, you will not be funded.
- Solicitations include both the general and specific goals for the grant program. You must explain in detail how your project meets those goals.
- Most also include very specific formatting requirements, including the document's font size and margins—and page limits. Failure to follow even these seemingly trivial requirements could result in your proposal being rejected without review.

## **3. Go beyond the solicitation**

- Take advantage of all the information that might strengthen your proposal. Most funding entities' websites include links to other resources, such as abstracts or full copies of previously successful proposals, performance reports from funded institutions, and external sites that might be of value as you transition from idea to proposal.

## **4. Structure your response**

- The structure of your proposal is critical as it allows reviewers (and you!) to make sure you're addressing all the requirements. Make sure your proposal structure makes it easy for the reviewers to find what they're looking for. In some cases, they will have a checklist of the grant requirements, and if they can't easily locate the elements they're supposed to evaluate, your proposal's rating could suffer.
- The first step in structuring your proposal is to create an outline that complies with the requirements, and is easy for evaluators to follow—using headings that match the solicitation's requirements
- OSP can help you develop a detailed outline and structure for your response. If you developed White Paper using the template on the OSP website ([http://www.weber.edu/OSP/white\\_paper.html](http://www.weber.edu/OSP/white_paper.html)), you have a good start—that template follows a general outline that can be adapted to many proposals.
- Some solicitations specify the structure of the responses by identifying specific topics that applicants must address. An effective structure also can be gleaned from the evaluation criteria: the factors the reviewers will use to rate your proposal.

## **5. Contact the Program Officer**

Nothing can replace a personal contact with the program officer. This person can give precious insight to the thinking of the agency. Many program officers are willing to personally invest time and effort in your behalf.

### ***Basic Proposal Elements:***

- Whatever method you use to structure your proposal, all proposals will contain the following elements (in one form or another).

*Narrative*

- The main body of the proposal should be a narrative laying out exactly what you plan to do, why, and how you propose to do it. The narrative should include all of the elements in your outline, with supporting information and elaboration.
- Generally, begin with a statement of the need or problem you will address. The importance of the problem should receive considerable and persuasive attention. For service projects, you should provide the results of a needs assessment. For research projects, you should provide a clear rationale as to why the work in your particular area is likely to be fruitful, including a literature search to build your case.
- Next, state the overall goals and specific objectives of the project, making sure there is a clear, logical connection between the problem you have defined and the response you are proposing, including how the activities carried out within your project are related to the expected outcomes.
- Finally, describe your plan of action or methodology, providing sufficient detail for the reader to judge whether your project can be run both efficiently and effectively. The narrative should demonstrate that you have carefully thought through all aspects of the project. It must convince the reviewer of the significance of the problem, the appropriateness of your proposed response, and your ability to conduct the planned activities. Be sure its logic is cogent, its organization strong, and its writing convincing and concise.

#### *Project Evaluation*

- How will you assess your project’s accomplishments? Evaluations are becoming increasingly important as funders want to know that their dollars will serve their intended purpose, so you must assess the project’s impact. Include information on what records you will keep or data you will collect, and how you will use that data.
- Evaluation should always be built into the fabric of the proposal, not tacked on at the end. The best way to do this is by associating your overall project goals with your project’s short-term objectives and long-term outcomes. In order to help the reviewer better judge your project’s impact and worth, these objectives and outcomes should be specific, measurable, action-oriented, and realistic.
- Use of either an internal or external evaluator has become common in fields such as education and the social sciences. It is often useful to get the evaluator on board as the proposal is being developed to assure the project’s goals can be adequately evaluated.

#### *Timeline*

- In order to help the reviewer understand what you plan to do and when, include a well-developed timeline for project activities. A realistic, careful timeline demonstrates to the reviewer your thorough organization and planning skills. It also shows that you have thought through your project’s long-term needs and goals. (*Sometimes, the timeline is part of the Project Management section—see below.*)

#### *Project Management*

- Are you, and the institution, capable of successfully performing all the tasks required by the project? Have you identified all the personnel and resources you need; are they available for your project? Do your Dean, Chair (and in some cases the University

Administration) support your efforts? Can you financially and programmatically manage the grant? Will you submit all the required reports on time?

- This part of your proposal also might include the qualifications and experience of the key personnel who will be involved in the project, an organization chart with clearly defined lines of communication and authority, and a summary of similar grants you and/or the University have administered (preferably for the same organization).

### *Budget*

- Although too often viewed as a tedious technicality, the budget is, in fact, a key element of any proposal. Every budget should tell a story, and budgets, along with the timeline, often are used by reviewers for a quick sense of a project's organization and the proposal writer's credibility as a manager. Budgets also present your project in quantitative terms.
- Always contact OSP for help with your budget.
- All federal proposals require submission of Form SF-424, a budget spreadsheet; some private entities also require some form of this document. All proposals also should include a Budget Narrative, where expenditures are explained and justified in detail.
- Personnel costs are usually a major budget item. They should be broken down to indicate the number of professional and support staff, their salary and fringe levels, and the percentages of their time to be devoted to the project.
- Other typical budget items include travel, equipment, materials, and facilities and administrative costs (also called indirect costs or overhead). Facilities and administrative (F&A) costs are based on negotiations between the federal government and applicant institutions. These negotiations establish an amount that can be applied to grants and contracts to cover the aggregated educational and general expense contributions that an institution makes to a sponsored project. In theory, overhead pays for such things as building, maintenance and utilities, libraries, administrative costs of managing grants and contracts, and departmental/school/college academic administrative costs.
- Your budget also must show any proposed institutional or third-party matching funds or cost sharing contributions, which sponsors increasingly expect or require (though many federal grants do not require cost sharing). If institutional cost-sharing is being requested, this must be shared with OSP as soon as possible. When an award is given based upon a proposal that has cost share/matching commitments, whether mandatory or voluntary, this becomes a condition of the award.
- Strong budget sections also feature an accurate estimate of all costs. Reviewers know the cost of doing work in their field and figures that are too high or low may cause them to question your familiarity with your specialty and your abilities as a project manager.

### *Abstract*

- An abstract must be a compelling presentation of your case. Reviewers will look at your abstract first, so you must prepare this element knowing that readers heavily rely on it to get a sense of your project. Be sure to cover all the proposal's key elements, especially any priorities that are mentioned in the application, within the stipulated length limitations (usually only one page). Finally, the abstract must be written for the lay reader, as reviewers will represent varied backgrounds and disciplines.

- In the final proposal the abstract will appear first, but it is best to write it last after you have completed the proposal’s main sections.

### *Appendices*

- Appendices, *if allowed*, can include any materials that add important data but would interrupt and be cumbersome to the narrative. Some solicitations request this supplemental information, and allow it to be included without counting against any page limits; others discourage, or even prohibit, submitting any information they haven’t specifically requested. Read the solicitation to determine what, if any, supplemental materials are required, acceptable, or prohibited.
- Letters of support can be included in this section, as it is always important to give the reviewer a sense of your credibility as a program director. Such letters should always figure prominently whenever a partnership agreement is involved. You also may want to include endorsements from institutional officials, preferably the chief executive officer. Avoid generic “this is a good idea”-type letters; any expressions support should be strong and specific.
- *Curricula vitae* of key project personnel can also be included here, but bear in mind that the sponsor is interested only in relevant work and experience, not entire career histories.

### *Table of Contents*

- Make sure to number each page and, if possible, include a table of contents as a service to your reviewers. Like the project timeline, this section serves a dual purpose. It aids the reviewer in quickly locating the various elements of your proposal, and it reinforces the reviewer’s impression of you as an organized and capable project manager.

### ***A Few Tips:***

As you write the full proposal, keep in mind the following points:

- Follow application guidelines to the letter. Your proposal should always fit the sponsor’s priorities, rather than make reviewers work to find your proposal’s relevance.
- Address stated review criteria thoroughly. To help reviewers, use headers to clearly identify each criterion.
- Draw on your strengths and the strengths of our institution.
- Impose the “so what?” test frequently as you write. If you don’t clearly state your proposal’s significance and value to the funding agency, reviewers might start asking themselves this question. If they do, you’ve seriously limited your chances for an award.
- Use clear, precise language. Avoid jargon or unnecessarily technical terminology. Spelling and grammar count! Don’t rely solely on spell-check programs to find and correct any typos or bad grammar.
- Make use of bullets and tables to summarize your ideas, rather than long descriptive paragraphs.
- Include a table of contents and clearly identify the various proposal sections that meet the criteria of the funder.

- Ask a colleague outside of your field, or OSP, to review your proposal for format, readability, and compliance to requirements. By the time you've finished writing, you're often too close to the proposal to effectively evaluate it.
- Contact OSP early in the proposal-writing process to alert us to what you are doing. As previously noted, the office can provide a variety of assistance.
- OSP also is responsible for all electronic grant submissions through Grants.gov (most federal proposals), FastLane (NSF proposals), and private-entity websites.
- Plan on completely finishing your entire proposal at least 2-3 days before it's due (earlier is better). No matter how well you've planned and executed your proposal, there always are a few last-minute details to nail down before submission. Also, the electronic submission process can take time, and is not without its own potential pitfalls. Waiting until the last minute, or even the last day, to submit your proposal runs the risk that it won't get in on time—in which case it won't be reviewed, and all of your work will have gone to waste.

***Finally:***

- Given the state of grant giving at foundations and the federal government, even well-executed proposals may not be funded, and multiple submissions may be necessary. It is still important to contact OSP for additional direction if you are not successful. For example, we can help you to obtain reviewers' comments for applications to federal agencies. Also, you may be able to contact the program officer for feedback and suggestions for improving your proposal. Many successful proposals are the result of revision and resubmission. Most importantly, if your proposal is turned down, do not give up. Successful proposal writing takes perseverance.