

## GUIDES TO UNDERTAKING RESEARCH

### 2.3 Writing a Short Research Proposal

Here, we outline some general pointers to writing an effective but short document for seeking funding or some other type of research support.

*Decide what the proposal is about then write it down in a single sentence*

This is a good way to refine the central idea in a proposal. This sentence can be turned into a project title that is short and descriptive. Title brevity and clarity makes an impact.

*Be mindful of who will review it*

Any proposal must be tailored to its reviewers and the interests of the funding agency stakeholders, but (surprisingly) this is often forgotten – so do not forget it. The worst and most difficult type of proposal to write is one intended for a lay reader, because after long training in a highly professional and technical environment it is extraordinarily difficult to write in lay language using easily understood concepts without jargon. This is a real craft, and practice and feedback from others, especially lay people, is the only way.

*If the proposal is short it must be highly structured*

It is a bad idea to waste any space by rambling around the subject. Every single sentence must help propel the proposal and its arguments. Thus, a sentence or text block can be tested by deleting it to see if that makes the proposal stronger or weaker, more readable or more confusing. When starting the writing process it can also be useful to make a set of simple dot points for each section, which can be later turned into flowing prose. Using journal citations to substitute for boring detail is another trick (particularly in the Methods section) but this should not be taken too far.

*The overall structure of a proposal*

This should generally resemble the following:

- A short preamble (that include the research question);
- Some briefly stated research aims;
- A more general introduction to the subject;
- Methods and approaches;
- Details of the proposed work (usually divided into sections) and, lastly,
- Significance of the proposed work.

In the individual sections detailing the work there should be :

1. A brief rationale (why something should be done),
2. The detail (what will be done), and finally
3. the expected outcomes (what is likely to be achieved) of that part of the project.

*Use diagrams, flow charts and illustrative images where possible*

1 picture = 1,000 words.

*The text should flow and be easy to read*

The proposal language should be clear with links between ideas and a good style that leads gracefully and logically from one point to the next, which of course takes practice, hard criticism and consulting others. The style and vocabulary typical for the field should be employed, since it otherwise becomes an irritating distraction for the reader. Those conventions evolved for a reason.

### *Writing a short document is hard*

Short documents are harder to write than long ones because shortage of space means a document must be very carefully structured (see above), and that is a surprisingly hard thing to achieve. It involves stripping the document of much desirable detail, as well as careful ordering and logical linking of concepts. Often a good approach is to make a solid attempt (which will be too long), then abandon it for a while, then upon return obvious edits and unnecessary ornamentation will be quite evident. If the document size goal is not reached, repeat the cycles of abandonment and return and, in time, it will get there.

### *Read project submission guidelines carefully and adhere to them.*

Usually for short submissions the key feature is length of the proposal, and of each section field. Like all guidelines these should be respected in every detail or the submission may be unacceptable, or impossible to submit online.

### *The first section or page is the most important*

This is where 90% of the impact is made. Any reviewer will be impressed by an opening that has a short, cogent summary of the subject in nice flowing English that links together the big concepts to make a compelling case. A grandiose style should be avoided but it is good to sound interesting and creative where possible. However, since this is hard to do, conservative is prudent. The ideal is to entertain, or at least revive, the poor tired reviewer who may have read 50 proposals before this one.

### *Try not to be boring*

Break up text into short paragraphs and with figures, make it visually interesting, and use diagrams and pictures where possible. This reduces available text space, but what can be written in 100 lines can usually fit in 95. There is nothing worse for a reviewer than seeing blocks of dense, poorly written prose. Bold and italic fonts should be used sparingly. Keep sentences below three lines long.

Use short paragraphs with linked ideas and linked paragraphs to keep the flow. If possible, break up text with short titles that help comprehension and look good on the page. Sound precise and slightly fussy in detail (especially method descriptions, if there is space) without being annoyingly long-winded.

### *Try not to be repetitive*

If you said it once, why say it again? Repetition is only useful if it is being used to emphasise a point, not simply to fill space or to cover up the shortage of ideas. Certainly avoid saying something twice using the same form of words, which always looks incompetent. Note that the major concepts and important points do have to be restated in different forms in different sections of the proposal, but this should be crafted so as not look repetitive and pasted in. Thus, careful rephrasing and reframing (without straight copying) should be employed. With a little effort a clinical problem may be baldly noted in the preamble section, carefully deconstructed and described in detail in the main text, then briefly recalled in the outcomes section; none of these should look the same even if they say essentially the same thing.

### *Get someone to read the proposal critically*

For all but the most trivial project this is absolutely crucial. A disinterested reader brings objectivity, and constructive criticism is needed even by the very best of writers. The statements in the proposal need to be examined from a variety of points of view, and the language and argument structure checked.

### *Do not be precious about your work when receiving criticism.*

Take criticism about writing very seriously and consider it a gift. What is better – having flaws pointed out by a colleague or by a reviewer? It should always be remembered why the proposal is being written – the reviewer is the gateway to something significant, such as money.

*Make the expected outcomes/conclusions look different to the aims.*

It often happens that the expected research outcomes look the same as the aims. This is sort of logical as the outcome will be (one hopes) what was originally aimed for. Nevertheless, it looks bad and looks repetitive, so this needs some extra care. Outcomes should be presented differently to the

aims, put in a wider context and presented in a more discursive (i.e., less terse) way. The same type of problem can occur with aims and conclusions.

In sum, simple, clear and easily understood proposals tailored to the reviewer and target institution have a good chance of being well received and, who knows, being successful.

**Author:** Julian Quinn

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Royal North Shore Hospital, DIVISION of SURGERY and ANAESTHESIA

