

Grantwriting Style Tips

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In developing successful grants at Research Associates, we understand the importance of clarity throughout the grant narrative. It is vital in any grant proposal that reviewers understand exactly what we are attempting to tell them. Thus, a grant proposal should flow like a well-told story, with smooth transitions from one section to the next. You may accomplish this by using transitional or linking sentences to ease the reader from one topic to the next. For example, begin your description of project activities in The Approach with this sentence: “The information below describes our program components in more detail.”

Beyond clarity and smooth transitions, what other issues are important in grantwriting? What writing styles should grantwriters adopt? How important are word choices? What other issues should be considered? Based on our experience with many different reviewers through the years, we have gained insight that can be helpful in terms of writing style. These are expressed in our grantwriting style tips below.

◆ Write most proposals on a ninth- or tenth-grade reading level. This will ensure that your reviewers can read your proposal without getting snagged by excessively long sentences, complex sentence structure, and difficult words. (For ease of reading, most newspapers are written on a sixth-grade level!) If you are unsure about reading level, both Word and WordPerfect offer options that will determine the reading level of a section of text. (Note: The exception to this recommendation is the research or technical proposal that will be reviewed by professionals.)

◆ Avoid using technical language that may confuse the reader. Rather, write your proposal in layman’s terms (again, except for research proposals.) If you must use technical language, be sure to introduce or explain it to the reader.

◆ Avoid using contractions because they appear too informal. Thus, use “is not” rather than “isn’t.”

◆ Avoid abbreviations of proper names and undefined acronyms. Even if you define the acronym, a proposal full of *alphabet soup* is difficult to read.

◆ Resist using slang, because the reviewer may not know what it means! For example, don’t write about teens getting “wasted” if you mean getting drunk. Having your proposal reviewed by a diversity of team members can be helpful in avoiding this problem.

◆ Avoid jargon or trendy phrasing because the reviewer may not know what it means—or worse, its overuse may irritate the reviewer. We recommend that you “think outside the box” here. *Did you just cringe?* Do you see our point?

◆ Avoid sexist language that may irritate reviewers. Historically, we have referred to a person of undetermined gender as male. Today, however, writing “The grantwriter works

hard for his money” offends readers who consider this wording sexist. We recommend applying plurality to resolve this issue. In the above example, substitute “Grantwriters work hard for their money.”

◆Choose words that set the appropriate tone. For example, we recommend that two sections of your grant proposal should be written to create different impressions: (1) the Problem Statement should be predominantly negative, emphasizing community needs, not strengths and (2) the Approach should be positive or active, never negative, focusing on program plans and improving outcomes.

Word-Choice Tip! One additional recommendation about word choices is possibly our most important secret for grants success: always personalize your proposal. Write the proposal from the perspective that you live in the targeted community. Write about our problems and what we are going to do about them. This may be hard for many of you because this is not what you learned in school. You were taught to write impersonally, “Hunger is a problem in the community.” Now, we are encouraging you to write “Our children go to bed hungry.” *Which of these two sentences is more likely to compel the reader to help?* Also notice that our use of the first person is plural. Your proposal should never include the pronoun I; rather, it is about our community, our problems, and our solutions. *Even if—at times—the grantwriter is working alone!*

Now get busy and write some winning grants—just remember that you are telling the reviewers your story!

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