

# Hot Proposal Tips

## Procedures

1. If the funder has guidelines, follow them faithfully. Organize your information under the headings provided. (You can add your own subheadings.)
2. Before writing your proposal, learn as much as you can about the funder. Questions to consider include:
  - What is the range of grants awarded?
  - Has the funder given money to similar projects before?
  - Has the funder given money to others in your region?
3. Request a copy of a proposal that has been funded by the funder, or talk with the authors of successful proposals. You want to clarify the funder's:
  - Preference for length and detail
  - Need for background information
  - Requirements on budget detail, statistical data, and other attachments
  - Preference regarding personal contact
4. Thoroughly understand the basic intent and objectives of the funder's program. Read through enacting legislation, annual reports, and all published materials that explain the intent of the program. Remember to use the language of those documents when developing your proposal.
5. Before writing a full-scale proposal, test the viability of your project idea on associates by developing a concept paper. Their perspectives on the concept paper can help focus and strengthen your idea. Also, if they feel that they have helped shape the idea, they will usually want to help you succeed in implementation.
6. If you do not have the time, talent, or experience to write a proposal, find someone who does. Do not let the proposal writing process become drudgery; it will show.
7. Know your limitations. If you don't have a strong writer on your team, hire a professional writer to edit and rewrite your proposals. If you can't handle statistics, find a capable professional who can advise you or compute the statistics for you in your evaluation process.

8. Write a first draft and don't try to make it perfect. The task is to capture your ideas on paper. Editing and rewriting come later. This process can help you clarify your understanding of the problem you will present to your funder.
  9. While you are in the early stages of development, think about potential partners. Identifying partnerships early in the process can not only strengthen your proposal, but may provide critical assistance in the development of the concept.
  10. Your editor should identify for you the strengths and weaknesses of the draft. Provide them with the following items for reference:
    - The draft proposal
    - The application guidelines
    - A statement of the funder's mission and goals
  11. Ask your editor to summarize the proposal. Can they tell you the "gist" the proposal? Can they identify and articulate the challenge, what part of the challenge you plan to address, and how that fits into the mission of the funder?
  12. Have a friend or associate not directly involved in the project proofread the proposal, looking for:
    - Grammatical mistakes
    - Mathematical errors in the budget
    - Opinion words (don't use them - the facts should be compelling enough)
    - Unfounded assumptions
    - Weak documentation
    - Unsupported arguments
    - Gaps or weakness in logic
    - Undefined or confusing terms
    - Unjustified budget items
    - Ways to improve the overall impact
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## **Content**

1. If the proposal is ten pages or longer, include a table of contents.
2. Don't make a mystery out of your proposal. Begin with the most important point.
3. If you are applying to a federal or state agency, use its data to document the problem.
4. Be selective in your use of data. Use one or two clear facts or statistics, rather than many examples.
5. Mention any and all partners or collaborators. There is a national trend toward funding those organizations that are working with others. Let them know, for example, that the Lions Club always assists with your annual fundraiser, or that the local League of Women Voters will provide the facilitator for a series of meetings.
6. If you don't have partners, try to enlist the participation of one or two other organizations. It will greatly strengthen your request if, for example, your statewide smoke detector campaign includes the involvement of the Statewide Fire Marshall's Office (even if only in an advisory capacity).
7. Refer to model programs. If you were designing a curriculum focusing on Arctic science you would want to mention the very successful curriculum already developed that focuses on the Antarctic. It lets the funder know that you are aware of what is happening in your field, and that you do not intend to reinvent the wheel but rather build on successful models.
8. Even if your project is very local - like a new soccer field for the local elementary school - it is still advisable to make reference to other successful projects.
9. Fill in all blanks on federal applications. Write NA (not applicable) rather than leave something blank.
10. When you are seeking one-time-only funding, articulate that point to address the funder's concern that you might apply for funding again and again.
11. Use maps, charts, and graphs to summarize and illustrate your points whenever possible.
12. Use captioned photographs.
13. Consider the use of vignettes in your introduction or problem statement to show the motivating, human dimensions of your issue and to draw your reader into the proposal. Support the anecdote with broader information on how the problems highlighted by this vignette reflect community conditions.

14. In your cover letter, summary, and introduction, show that you understand the funder's mission and goals and how your project addresses them. Quote from their annual report or from enabling legislation.
  15. In your summary and introduction, state why this project must be funded now and why this funder is the best source of money.
  16. Make letters of intent succinct; don't let them ramble to multiple pages. Describe who you are, what is proposed, and how much is needed.
  17. Your organization should have an established administrative fee. (A normal range is 10 -18%.) This covers audits, bookkeeping, and other overhead expenses.
  18. Specify the funder benefits in your cover letter and your dissemination plan. Corporations usually seek public recognition; private foundations are generally more interested in seeing that the project results reach as many people as possible.
  19. Emphasize client benefits in your title, goals, summary, and evaluation plan.
  20. In your attachments, include letters of support from administrators, government leaders, and clients. Draft these letters yourself and make sure each one makes a different point linked to the funder's reasons for giving.
  21. The conclusion of your project narrative should be strong and should serve the purpose of summarizing your proposal.
  22. Include a title page with your title, amount requested, project time period, name, address and phone number of organization and contact person, and submission date.
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## Style

1. Open with a strong sentence. For example, "In Alaska today, Athabascan culture dies one elder at a time [names and dates]. Each of these people knew traditional ways to hunt, tell stories, settle disputes, dance, honor leaders, and bear grief. Each grew old and died without traditional contact with family and friends..."
2. Use short paragraphs.
3. Avoid confusing words and technical jargon.
4. Brevity is better. What information, words, or phrases can be deleted?
5. Trust your intuition: if something sounds confusing or strange, it probably is. Work to improve it.
6. Don't be afraid to use subtle humor.
7. Write in the third person. It sounds more generous to sing "their" praises than your own.
8. Use contractions when two words sound too stiff or formal. "It isn't appropriate to pursue that course of action in an election year," rather than "It is not..."
9. Be positive. Discuss your proposal as if it is funded, but be clear about the distinction between current and proposed work. "Staff will report progress to the board each month," rather than "staff would report." "The director will lead three workshops," rather than "the director would lead." "Clients can request editorial assistance as well," rather than "clients could request."
10. When referring to a situation or event that may occur in the future, use the word "believe" rather than the word "hope." The latter word implies uncertainty and a state of wishful thinking not based on solid facts.
11. "Iffy" and hopeful statements weaken your presentation. Stick to the present, the facts, and your most accurate projections of results.
12. State the facts. Let your readers come to their own conclusions. When your facts are well chosen and your logic is tight, understatement is a powerful tool.
13. Avoid the use of opinion words, but don't hesitate to be warm and personal. Speak of friendship, joy, grief, and confidence, but avoid references to selfish tactics, incredible scenery, immeasurable value, and wanton waste.
14. Use the active voice. "The community will determine the content of the film," rather than "The content of the film will be determined by the community." "The advisory board will select an architect to design the planetarium," rather than "The planetarium will be designed by an architect selected by the advisory board."

15. Include examples of real people with relevant needs.
16. Be thorough but concise.
17. Explain any omissions rather than hope no one will notice.
18. Use charts, graphics, italics, etc., to make the job easier for the person reading your proposal.
19. Use a table for complex text or numerical data, or when comparison is important. Label every table. Use consecutive Arabic numbers and a unique name.
20. Explain all abbreviations and terms someone outside your organization may not understand.
21. To make your title more interesting, include a "handle" and a descriptive phrase. The handle is a catchy, intriguing, inspiring phrase. The description clarifies the subject and region. For example:
  - **Waiting to Happen:**  
Preparing Alaskan Native Villages to Meet the Threat of AIDS
  - **Mining the Wastestream:**  
A Model Project to Promote Recycling in Interior Alaska
22. Create a title that emphasizes the benefits and results, rather than the problem or the activity you propose. "Project Nurture" is a better title than "Trans-disciplinary Counseling for Alcoholic Mothers."
23. Consider using a quotation or graphic on your title page.
24. Write as if you are communicating with one person. This may be the person to whom you addressed your cover letter. Assume that this person will be responsible for distributing and presenting your proposal to the others who are involved.
25. When stating your need, use the words of a client, an expert, or a contact with whom the funder is familiar. This lends credibility to your case.
26. Break up long lists of information with bullet points or a numbered series.
27. Use lowercase letters in parentheses for shorter lists within a sentence. For example: The target population for this project includes: (a) bilingual teacher's aides, (b) certified Alaska Native teachers who are not fluent in their indigenous language, and (c) high school students interested in bilingual education as a career.

28. Number every page in the narrative. Place the number in either the footer or the header.
29. Identify attachments in the bottom right corner (with the exception of letters of support) with the name and appendix letter assigned.
30. Create a simple flow chart to show organizational relationships, or how the project will alter the current situation over time. (A computer's table and draw functions make this task easy.)
31. Never criticize a rival organization, especially one competing for funds from the same source. If a reference to that organization is essential, be factual and positive.
32. Check the reading level of your document manually or with your computer. Use simple, short words, and brief sentences. Remember: reviewers often have dozens of proposals to read in a short time. Even highly educated readers appreciate a narrative that is easy to grasp. Writing at a level higher than 12th grade puts your document in danger of not being read or of not being understood. (Reading level scores for this section range from 7th to 9th grade.)
33. Be aware that reviewers commonly read a proposal out of order. Often, a reader may look first at the abstract, then at the budget and budget narrative, then at goals and objectives. These three sections create a snapshot of your project. Be sure to make them count.
34. Choose a style manual and follow its instructions to create a consistent format for your document and references. If your funding source recommends a particular style, always use it. Otherwise, follow your favorite format. Most bookstores carry a variety of style manuals.