

## Notes from an “NSF DAY” - Submitting a Proposal to the NSF

### Step 3. Writing Your Narrative

Welcome back to Notes from an NSF Day! This third article in the series is about writing your narrative. We will talk about what the most important elements of the narrative are, what mistakes to avoid when writing, and how to craft a compelling narrative.

Most NSF narratives are allowed to be 15 pages long. Your list of References Cited and your Budget Justification are not included in that page count. In those 15 pages you must demonstrate to the review panel and the program director that **your research project will be impactful and that you have all the elements in place to make it successful**. When a NSF Program Director was asked what his mental checklist is as he reads a proposal, he offered that he considers the following:

- a. Is the project meaningful – does it contribute knowledge and benefit society?
- b. Is the project creative and/or transformative?
- c. Does the project plan makes sense?
- d. Do you have the right people working on it?
- e. Do you have the right resources to accomplish it?

When writing your proposal narrative, your goal should be to address each of these considerations and spell them out clearly for the reviewers. And it is important to do this by adopting a **writing style that is energetic, direct, concise, and makes the subject matter easy to understand**.

There are many excellent resources that can help you write an effective grant proposal. As an SIUE faculty member, you are invited to make use of the **Proposal Editing Services** offered through the Graduate School. This program offers support through proofreading and editing services that will help improve the quality of proposals being submitted to external sponsors. Information about how to access this service can be found [on the ORP website](#).

There is also ample guidance available online about how to write effective grant proposals. For example, the table below lays out what the different perspectives are between academic writing and grant writing and is from an article in *The Journal of Research Administration* that was written by a program development manager at a large research university. The article gives plenty of helpful advice about how to write a good grant proposal, and it starts with helping researchers understand the difference between writing for an academic audience and writing for the recipients of a grant proposal. The full text of the article is available [here](#). The contrasting perspectives detailed in the table make it clear that grant writing is not like academic writing.

*Academic Writing versus Grant Writing: Contrasting Perspectives*

Academic Writing	Grant Writing
<p><b>Scholarly pursuit:</b> <i>Individual passion</i></p> <p><b>Past oriented:</b> <i>Work that has been done</i></p> <p><b>Theme-centered:</b> <i>Theory and thesis</i></p> <p><b>Expository rhetoric:</b> <i>Explaining to reader</i></p> <p><b>Impersonal tone:</b> <i>Objective, dispassionate</i></p> <p><b>Individualistic:</b> <i>Primarily a solo activity</i></p> <p><b>Few length constraints:</b> <i>Verbosity rewarded</i></p> <p><b>Specialized terminology:</b> <i>“Insider jargon”</i></p>	<p><b>Sponsor goals:</b> <i>Service attitude</i></p> <p><b>Future oriented:</b> <i>Work that should be done</i></p> <p><b>Project-centered:</b> <i>Objectives and activities</i></p> <p><b>Persuasive rhetoric:</b> <i>“Selling” the reader</i></p> <p><b>Personal tone:</b> <i>Conveys excitement</i></p> <p><b>Team-focused:</b> <i>Feedback needed</i></p> <p><b>Strict length constraints:</b> <i>Brevity rewarded</i></p> <p><b>Accessible language:</b> <i>Easily understood</i></p>

With grant writing, **the goal is to communicate what you hope to accomplish** with your project, and not to report on something you have already done. The proposal you send to the NSF is your opportunity to **share your enthusiasm for your research** with the reviewer as you spell out what the scientific gap you are filling is and what outcomes you plan to achieve. Make sure your project description communicates your research vision as dynamically and effectively as possible as you:

- ✚ Detail **WHAT** you are going to do
- ✚ Convince the reviewers about **WHY** you should be funded to do it
- ✚ Explain **HOW** you are going to do it
- ✚ Define your **SUCCESS CRITERIA**
- ✚ Demonstrate that your vision is **ACHIEVABLE** with the time and monetary investment you are proposing
- ✚ Present your vision as a **STORY** as you answer all potential questions

It is important to understand what you *should* do when writing a grant proposal, but it is also easy to miss the mark when trying to write an outstanding grant narrative. In an article for *The Chronicle of Higher Education*, a research scientist/development consultant and a program development coordinator co-authored an outline of the **“10 Common Grant-Writing Mistakes”** that scientific-proposal writers often commit (the [full text of the article can be found here](#)):

**No. 1: Square pegs and round holes** – starting with a compelling research idea but failing to adapt it to the stated priorities of the organization you are asking for money.

**No. 2: Poor Planners** – drafting a vague summary page or departing in the actual proposal from decisions explained in the summary.

**No. 3: “The Loner”** – attempting to do the research alone. Agencies and foundations value cross-disciplinary participation.

**No. 4: Promising too much or too little** – failing to align the proposed scope of work with the time period specified or the amount of money requested.

**No. 5: Throwing spaghetti** – chasing grant opportunities without being really committed to the research question.

**No. 6: Running in place** – engaging in many different activities without focusing on something achievable.

**No. 7: Death by 1,000 cuts** – failing to identify a unifying theme in criticisms of recent research or use positive language about how you will make broad-scale advancements.

**No. 8: Methods madness** – leaning too much on technical detail while failing to establish the human impact.

**No. 9: So what?** – failing to create a proposal that is compelling to a broad audience.

**No. 10: Feedback fatigue** – feeling overwhelmed after soliciting feedback for a proposal from too many experts.

Writing a compelling Project Summary and Project Description will make the difference between receiving and not receiving funding. They are worth your time and effort to make them the best they can be! But they are not the only parts of a successful proposal. How you will spend the funding you are requesting is also a huge part of your proposal. Because the budget you create will use SIUE resources it must be approved by the university. The next article in this series will explain how you will work with the Office of Research & Projects to develop your budget and submit your proposal into SIUE’s internal routing process.

**Next time in Notes from NSF Day – Working with the Office of Research & Projects**

## References

Mikal, Jude P. and Rumore, Gina. (January 4, 2018). Retrieved on January 20, 2018 from [https://www.chronicle.com/article/10-Common-Grant-Writing/242150?cid=pm&utm\\_source=pm&utm\\_medium=en&elqTrackId=267560404e6](https://www.chronicle.com/article/10-Common-Grant-Writing/242150?cid=pm&utm_source=pm&utm_medium=en&elqTrackId=267560404e6)

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