

# Proposal Writing Basics

**\*\*Adopted from Osceola Florida School District Grant Management Center\*\***

## Rule No. 1:

**Follow the grant guidelines exactly as they are given!** Competition for grant funds can be fierce. Grantors can, and will eliminate prospective recipients if they do not follow the rules (i.e., double-space, typestyle, specific packaging, deadline, format, and keeping within the space provided).

## Additional Rules:

- Write your proposal convincingly and in plain English
- Put yourself in the background (no "I" or "me")
- Give direct answers to the questions listed in the application
- Revise and rewrite. Unnecessary words should be eliminated. Remember, the shorter the better!
- Avoid introducing opinion or assumptions. Give supporting evidence or documentation.
- Make your proposal clean, neat and easy to read.
- Utilize bullets, itemizing, **bolding**, underlining and anything else that will make your format attractive.
- Edit your writing to make it consistent, smooth and simple to understand.
- Have your proposal proofread by one or several other people so that all facts, spelling, grammatical and typographical errors can be checked.

## Outline for Development:

Although application guidelines may vary from program to program, they usually required the applicant to address several key components in their proposal. Whether you are writing a five or forty page narrative, your proposal will be complete if it includes all of the following components:

### Abstract:

**The abstract (usually limited to one or two pages) appears at the beginning of the proposal and concisely summarizes your project.**

The abstract gives the reviewer a first impression of your project. Since you want this impression to be a positive one, make sure the abstract is brief, clear, impacting, and interesting. You want the reviewer's reaction to be *Sounds like a good idea, I want to keep reading*, not *this doesn't make sense - where's the next proposal?* **Write the abstract last, after all other areas have been "ironed out."**

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**THE ABSTRACT SHOULD INCLUDE A BRIEF SUMMARY OF:**

- Who is applying for funding
  - The credibility of the applicant
  - The problem being addressed through the proposal
  - The objectives of the project
  - The target audience (who will be participating in the project)
  - The methods (what you will be doing)
  - The total costs (how much you are requesting and contributing to the program)
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**COMMON PITFALLS TO AVOID**

- Abstract does not contain all the information above
- Abstract does not motivate the reader to continue reading
- Abstract contradicts the ideas/plan presented in the narrative of the proposal
- Abstract never states what the applicant proposes to do, what they are requesting, or why
- Abstract is too long

## **Introduction:**

**The introduction should briefly describe the applicant agency, describe its qualifications for funding, and establish the agency's credibility.**

An effective introduction should set a positive tone with the reviewer from the outset and give a favorable impression that the applicant has the qualifications to conduct a successful program in the area for which funding is sought.

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**THE INTRODUCTION SHOULD:**

- State who is applying for the funds
  - Briefly outline the applicant's mission
  - Briefly describe the applicant's programs, services, and clients served, as relevant to the program being proposed
  - Briefly provide evidence of the agency's experience and accomplishments, as relevant to the program being proposed
  - Lead logically to the problem statement
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**COMMON PITFALLS TO AVOID:**

- The applicant's mission/goals are not clearly relevant to the proposed project
- The applicant's experience and qualifications are not presented, supported with evidence, or relevant to the proposed project
- The introduction does not transition to the problem statement

# Need Statement:

**The need statement describes, defines and substantiates the conditions, needs, or problems to be addressed by the project.**

The need statement is the foundation upon which your proposal is built. Without a well-defined problem, there is no basis for a proposal. An effective and persuasive need statement can convince the reader of the importance of your proposal, demonstrate your awareness of the issues, and enable the funder to understand the context in which your project will operate.

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## **THE NEED STATEMENT SHOULD:**

- Relate to the mission and goals of the applicant
  - Relate to the values and priorities of the funding agency
  - Be aligned to and be of appropriate scope for the project that is being proposed
  - Include statistical evidence supporting the existence of the problem (depending on the focus of the project, data could include students' academic scores, poverty data, mobility data, attendance data, etc.)
  - Include research from other authorities or experts supporting the existence of the problem
  - Reflect the needs of *clients* (i.e., children, parents, community), not the needs of the applicant (i.e., the school district and individual schools)
  - Be developed with input from key stakeholders (teachers, students, parents)
  - Have significance to other similar organizations or agencies, depending on the scope of the project
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## **COMMON PITFALLS TO AVOID:**

- The problem statement does not clearly state the problems to be addressed through the project
- The existence of the problem is not substantiated with research or supportive data
- The need statement is overstated or based on overly emotional appeals, rather than factual data
- The needs do not match the funding priorities of the agency
- Identified problems/needs do not relate to the objectives that follow
- Client's needs are not the basis of the proposal. Rather, needs identified are presented as value judgments or "I need" statements (i.e., "schools need," "community groups need")
- The problem statement and program methods are based on "circular logic" - i.e. "The school needs computers because the school has not computers, therefore the school will purchase computers"

## Objectives:

**The objectives section should describe the measurable outcomes of the proposed project.**

### **EACH OBJECTIVE SHOULD:**

- Correlate to a problem or need mentioned in the need statement (conversely, every major problem identified should have at least one objective)
  - Describe the behavioral or performance-related changes to be realized or define the products to be developed
  - Describe the specific target population to be affected
  - State the time by when it will be accomplished
  - Be measurable in some way
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### **COMMON PITFALLS TO AVOID:**

- Objectives are not related to the problems identified in the problem statement
- Objectives are not aligned to funding agency's values or stated priorities
- Objectives are stated as activities to be conducted and not as the changes to be realized or products to be developed
- Objectives are not measurable
- Objectives are not realistic (If the project is funded, the applicant will have to report to the funding agency on the extent to which objectives were actually accomplished)

## Project methods/project design:

**The project methods/project design section describes the activities to be conducted in order to achieve the specified objectives.**

This section is the "meat and potatoes" of the proposal. It should flow logically in a way that enables reviewers to paint a mental picture of the project being proposed.

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### **THE PROJECT METHODS SECTION SHOULD:**

- Be feasible and appropriate to the stated objectives
- Describe the clients to be served/impacted through the program, including numbers and characteristics, and the process for selecting them
- Clearly describe each of the activities proposed
- Establish a sound rationale for the proposed approach that demonstrates the applicant's knowledge in the field (shows the applicant knows what it is doing)
- Describe the steps involved in order to implement the project
- Provide a time line outlining when activities will occur over the duration of the project
- Describe the staffing of the project, including roles and experience of key staff

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**COMMON PITFALLS TO AVOID:**

- Methods do not reflect the most up-to-date knowledge in the field or are not research-based
- Activities are not linked to objectives
- Activities are not presented in a well-organized manner that describes who, what, why, where, and when
- Timelines are missing, unrealistic, or inconsistent with those set by the funding agency
- Roles and qualifications of key staff (including those to be hired) are not defined

## **Evaluation plan:**

**The evaluation section describes how the applicant will measure to what degree project methods were followed and objectives were met.**

Because of the emphasis on accountability and results, project evaluation is becoming an increasingly important factor in the proposal review process. Funding agencies want to know what benefits have come from their grant making efforts. A sound evaluation plan not only demonstrates to funders that an applicant is committed to achieving its project objectives, but it also will produce information that lets funders know how well their grant money was spent. Furthermore, the evaluation provides information that can be shared with the funding agency and other agencies to maximize the impact of the grant program. The scope of the evaluation should be appropriate to the scope of the project.

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**THE EVALUATION SHOULD DESCRIBE:**

- How program activities and processes will be monitored and modified over the course of the program so that continuous improvements can be made (formative evaluation)
- How the accomplishment of program objectives will be objectively evaluated (summative evaluation)
- What criteria will be used to determine the project's success (should be based on objectives)
- How data will be collected and what instruments will be used (tests, surveys, questionnaires, interviews)
- How data will be analyzed
- Who will conduct the evaluation and their qualifications
- What evaluation reports will be produced, when they will be produced, and who will receive them
- How processes, results, and findings will be disseminated, if appropriate

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**COMMON PITFALLS TO AVOID:**

- The evaluation plan is not linked directly to the objectives and activities of the project
- The type of data to be collected, or the process of analysis, are not specified

- The criteria for success is not specified
- There is no timeline for evaluation activities
- There is no description of who will conduct the evaluation
- There is no validity to the evaluation methods

## **Budget:**

**The budget summarizes and itemizes the total costs associated with carrying out the project, including those to be paid through the grant and those to be paid by other sources, and explains the rationale for each.**

The itemized budget and justification explain how each figure was derived, how they are important to the project, and how they are related to the overall proposal. The budget summary provides totals for each budget category and is often presented on a form that has been provided by the funding agency with the grant application.

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### **THE BUDGET SHOULD:**

- Relate directly to the objectives and methods described in the proposal narrative
- Be organized by categories as specified in the grant application (if no guidelines are provided by the funding agency, typical categories include salaries, fringe benefits, travel, equipment, supplies, contractual, and other)
- Be organized by the source of funds (i.e., items to be paid by the grant and items to be paid through cash or in-kind matching contributions from the applicant or partners)
- Include fringe benefits for all salaries being requested
- Include all costs necessary to conduct the proposed project
- Include indirect costs for all federally funded grants, if allowed by the agency
- Estimate costs as they will be incurred at the time of funding (which may be later than at the time of proposal writing)
- Be reviewed by the school's or department's bookkeeper

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### **COMMON PITFALLS TO AVOID:**

- The budget does not follow the instructions specified in the grant application
- The grant request exceeds the maximum award amount specified in the grant guidelines
- The budget does not meet the minimum in-kind or cash match requirement
- The costs do not relate to the activities/methods outlined in the proposal narrative
- Costs are "pulled out of thin air" and not based on the actual costs of the agency, the most currently available rates or prices, or if rates are unavailable, expenses for other similar programs