A Brief on Writing Project Proposals

Defining a Project Proposal

A proposal is a written document to a sponsor or donor. Donors could either be public, private or part of the international development community.

Many donors and funding agencies have their own format for project proposals. Some require a short concept note, giving an overview of the main elements of the project, prior to submitting a full proposal. If the response is favourable, resources, time and effort can be committed to preparing comprehensive documentation. Overviews of topics that are usually addressed in a proposal are presented below.

- Fundamental research (returns expected in 25 years – outcome uncertain)
- Applied research (returns expected in 15 years – outcome predictable)
- Development (returns expected in 5 years – outcome expected)
- Practical execution of a task (returns expected on project completion)

Applied Research, Development Projects and Practical Implementations are usually funded as a contract with delivery obligations.

All proposals must include certain basic information. These basics include:

- Why are you doing this project or why do you want to do this project?
- What will you be doing?
- How will you be doing it?
- Who will be doing it?
- Where will it be done?
- How long will it take?
- How much will it cost?

The narrative of the proposal must satisfy the following questions:

- What do we want?
- What concern will be addressed and why it is important?
- Who will benefit and how?
- What specific objectives can be accomplished and how?
- How will results be measured?
- How does this funding request relate to the funder's purpose, objectives, and priorities?

- Who are we (organization) and how do we qualify to meet this need?

Proposal Headings

	Summary	
Section 1	Introduction: brief overview of document	
Section 2	Background: context of project, process of project identification	
Section 3	Project Rationale: justification for project, project goal and purpose, logical framework	
Section 4	Project Design: project activities and outputs	
Section 5	Beneficiaries and Other Stakeholders: characteristics	
Section 6	Sustainability and Risks: external risks, assumptions, events after project life	
Section 7	Project Implementation: institutional information, work plan, personnel, other resources, monitoring and evaluation	
Section 8	Project Costs and Funding: budget	
Appendices	Technical, Financial, Economic, Social, Gender, Institutional, Environmental Appraisals	

When preparing a proposal it is important to be aware of any eligibility criteria. Funding agencies may refuse funding for specific types of organizations (for example, government and profit making businesses) and certain types of expenditures (overhead costs, unless they are directly related to a project).

Key Elements of a Project Proposal

- Introduction/Background
- Purpose and Objectives
- Relationship to Your Organization's Strategic Plan
- Membership Segments/External Audiences Reached
- Project Deliverables e.g. Value/Benefits/Messages
- Project Scope and Methodology
- Timelines
- Budget/Resources
- Measurement/Evaluation (Accomplishment of Objectives)
- Possible Complications/Challenges
- Responsibilities and Coordination
- Supporting Materials/ Appendices

Introduction/Background:
- Briefly describes the project and how it developed

This is often considered the most important part of the proposal because it is the reviewer's first impression. Even though it appears first, write it last because it is a summary of the proposal. This section should be concise and cover the description of the project covering objectives, need, and methodology. It should identify the expected outcomes of the project. It should also describe the format for the rest of the proposal.

Purpose and Objectives:
- What will the project accomplish?
- What are the objectives and are they measurable?
- Why are we considering it?

This section should include a well-documented description of the problem to be addressed and why it is important. Use support information, statistics and/or succinct statements to make your point. This section should describe the significance, timeliness, and importance of the project. Make a compelling case for it. Why should the sponsor/donor give you funding?

Indicate the expected outcomes of the project, preferably in measurable terms. This shows what you will do, for whom, by how much, and by when. When the project is completed, you will be able to evaluate it and determine whether the project succeeded or not in achieving its objectives. Identify short-term and long-term objectives.

Relationship to Your Organization's Strategic Plan:
- How does it relate to the mission and key strategies?
- Is it a new development?
- Is it a crisis?

In this section, include a short description about your organization - past, present, and projected operations. It should also include the following:

- **Contact information**
- **Vision and mission of the company/organization**
- **Recent achievements (if applicable)**
- **Short background of the community that will benefit from the project**
- **Background of the management team**
- **Number of staff**
- **Past projects that were previously funded (if applicable) – cite how the funds were used and its impact to the served community.**

The proposed project should be evaluated against the overall strategies of the organization to ensure that it is properly aligned with your strategic goals.

Relationship to Funder's Mandate:
- How does the project relate to the goals and mandate of the funding organization?

In this section, include a short description about how the project will support the mandate of the funder, specifically the areas of focus that are specified for the grant programme.

Membership Segments/External Audiences Reached:
- What membership segments will it reach?
- What external audiences will be reached? (Primary, Secondary, Tertiary etc.)

Project Deliverables e.g. Value/Benefits/Messages:
- What are the projects deliverables? In other words what will be project produce
- What values and benefits will members derive?
- What are the messages?
- What is its relevance to members?
- What is its relevance to customers or clients?

In this section you will want to describe in relative detail the features of each of the project's products/deliverables. You may wish to separate deliverables into phases and indicate optional components given time.

Project Scope and Methodology:
- How broad is the project?
- What possible execution opportunities are there?
- What approach/methodology would be used to execute the project?
- How feasible is it?
- Is it related to a current or past program?
- How will be deliverables/accomplishments be institutionalized?

The critical part of the proposal and is the longest part. It is a plan of action for how the objectives will be achieved. This section usually starts with a description of the overall approach, its relevance, effectiveness, and innovativeness. Then it gives details on methodology, the population being addressed, and how anticipated problems will be managed.

Timelines:
- What are the timelines e.g. one quarter, one year, multiple years?

Describe how long (days, months) specific tasks or components of the project will take. If possible, include a milestone chart in this section.

Budget/Resources:
- What is the budget?
- What is the financial impact?
- How is the project to be resourced? (Staff, Engage consultants, partnership, etc.)
- What are the estimates of time and money?

Budgets are cost projections. They show the annual and overall cost of the project. A detailed budget should be divided into categories such as salaries, development of training materials, capacity building activities, purchase of equipment, fringe benefits, travel, supplies, equipment, etc. Indirect costs should also be shown. Sub-categories should provide a line item detailed breakdown of the funds requested. This should be accompanied with a budget narrative to clarify and justify the figures. If matching funds are to be provided by the grantee, identify the amount and budget category.

Budgets also represent a window into how projects will be implemented and managed. Well-planned budgets reflect carefully thought-out projects. Be sure to only include those things the funder is willing to support.

Funders use the following factors to assess budgets:

- Can the job be accomplished with this budget?
- Are costs reasonable for the market - or too high or low?
- Is the budget consistent with proposed activities?
- Is there sufficient budget detail and explanation?
- Many funders provide mandatory budget forms that must be submitted with the proposal.

Don't forget to list in-kind support and matching revenue, where appropriate. Be flexible about your budget in case the funder chooses to negotiate costs.

A sample budget is provided below.

Deliverable	Level of Effort (days)	Cost (USD)	Variable Costs	Total Costs
1. Preparation of Detailed Work Plan	2.5	1,312.50		1,312.50
2. Design and Development of Survey Instrument	6	3,150.00		3,150.00
3. Administration of Survey Instrument	6.5	3,412.50	2,500.00	5,912.50
4. Analysis of Survey Instrument (Preliminary Results)	12	6,300.00		6,300.00
5. Preparation of 1st Draft of **Report**	10	5,250.00		5,250.00
6. Stakeholder Consultation on 1st draft	2	1,000.00	1,500.00	2,500.00
7. Preparation of Final Report	8	4,200.00		4,250.00
Sub- Totals	**52**	**24,625.00**	**4,000.00**	
TOTALS				**28,625.00**

These variable costs include workshop costs, travel costs etc.

Measurement/Evaluation (Accomplishment of Objectives):
- What tangible evaluation of accomplishments are there?
- What are member/customer/client satisfaction measures?

Describes the means by which the grantee and funding agency will know if the project has accomplished its objectives. It may also describe plans for collecting additional information to improve the project. What is the purpose of the evaluation, what data will be collected, how will it be analyzed, and how will the results be reported? Plans for disseminating products and findings to the sponsor and to the community at large can also be described in this section. How will the results of this program be disseminated?

Possible Complications/Challenges:
- What are the potential challenges and complications?

Any identifiable obstacles and risks (threats) that might prevent the successful attainment of the project goals must be considered. Each risk must be analyzed, quantified, and prioritized as much as possible with the information available at this stage. Risk responses, including mitigations, risk sharing, risk avoidance, and risk tolerances should be described in this portion of the project proposal.

Responsibilities and Coordination:
- Who does what, when and how?

Supporting Materials/ Appendices:
- Should you include any supporting materials?
- What appendices may be necessary?

Supporting materials are often arranged in an appendix. These materials may endorse the project and the applicant, provide certifications, add information about project personnel and consultants, exhibit tables and charts, etc. For projects that include collaborations or partnerships, include endorsements from the partnering agencies.

Policies about the inclusion of supporting materials differ widely among funders. Whether to allow them usually depends upon how materials contribute to a proposal's evaluation. Restrictions are often based on excess volume, the element of bias, and relevance.

Find out if supporting materials are desired or even allowed. Be prepared to invest the time to collect resources, produce a tape, document capability, update a resume, collect letters, include reference reports or whatever is needed.

Key Concepts and Definitions

Deliverables

A deliverable is a tangible, verifiable work product such as a feasibility study, a detail design, or a working prototype.

A deliverable is something tangible and measurable.

A milestone and a deliverable are two different concepts. A milestone has a symbolic purpose and is not a physical creation (and therefore can represent things that are not tangible, such as hitting the three month mark of the project). A deliverable, on the other hand, defines the class of tangible (i.e. physical) products that the project produces on its path towards achieving its ultimate goal. As a result, a project will have significantly fewer milestones than deliverables.

However, a milestone can also be a deliverable. For example, an agreed-upon and accepted milestones is three months in the future, and represents the recruiting of a Project Management Assistant (remember that milestones are not activities in themselves, but simply represent special activities in the project). This hiring of a Project Assistant is also a deliverable: at the three month mark, the project activities have led to the production of a tangible product: the Project Management Assistant.

This means that many milestones will in fact be deliverables, but many deliverables will not be milestones. Milestones are used to flag key events.

Project Goals

Goals are high-level statements that provide the overall context for what the project is trying to accomplish. One of the goals of a project might be to ***"increase the overall satisfaction levels for clients calling to the company helpdesk with support needs".*** Because the goal is at a high-level, it may take more than one project to achieve.

Project Objectives

Objectives are concrete statements describing what the project is trying to achieve. The objective should be written at a lower level, so that it can be evaluated at the conclusion of a project to see whether it was achieved or not. Goal statements are designed to be vague. Objectives should not be vague. A well-worded objective will be Specific, Measurable, Attainable/Achievable, Realistic and Time-bound (SMART).

An example of an objective statement might be to "upgrade the helpdesk telephone system by December 31 to achieve average client wait times of no more than two minutes". Note that the objective is much more concrete and specific than the goal statement. The objective is measurable in terms of the average client wait times the new phone system is trying to achieve. We must assume that the objective is achievable and realistic. The objective is time-bound, and should be completed by December 31. Objectives should refer to the deliverables of the project. In this case, it refers to the upgrade of the telephone system. If you cannot determine what deliverables are being created to achieve the objective, then the objective may be written at too high a level. On the other hand, if an objective describes the characteristics of the

deliverables, they are written at too low a level. If they describe the features and functions, they are requirements, not objectives.

General Proposal Writing Dos and Don'ts

Do	- add interesting technology components to proven ideas - know how to fit into past and current projects - involve a team in the development of a proposal - proofread the submission thoroughly
Don't	- say little is known or done - think you know everything - confuse objectives with actions - define objectives you do not wish to achieve - use abbreviations - focus on the "cutting edge" - request funding for basic operations

Follow-Up on a Proposal

Contact the funding source about the status, evaluation, and outcome of your proposal. It is important to request feedback about a proposal's strengths and weaknesses, although this information may be unavailable with a very large volume of submissions.

Reference information may also be useful if you choose to approach the same or different funder again with your idea.