

CRAFTING THE COMPELLING STORY

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December 2011

Writing a grant proposal is an exercise in logic....The main reason proposals fail is that they don't make sense. They are poorly conceived, are not supported by documented needs, and do not have a sound logic backing the request.¹

What does it take to develop the “compelling story” that will make the reviewers of your grant proposal want to read the proposal from top to bottom, pay careful attention to your ideas, and give serious consideration to your request for funding? Is there a secret formula that only a select few people know, or does a possible answer lie in the quote above, to write logically?

At GrantProse, we believe that writing logically is critical if you want your proposal to be strong; thus we place a lot of emphasis on logic modeling. However, we also believe that reviewers must be “entertained” by your proposal, if only in the sense that what you have to say interests them and “compels” them to read your proposal a bit more carefully than they may read other proposals.

It is necessary to start with the understanding that proposal writing is nonfiction writing. One must also appreciate that grant reviewers typically have many proposals to read, compare, and contrast. So, as you work to develop your compelling story, be careful about straying too far away from standard grant writing principles. While there is a genre known as “creative nonfiction” with numerous websites devoted to its discussion, there is a risk in becoming too creative in your proposal—you do not want reviewers to feel that you are appealing to the emotional while overlooking the rational. Most funding agencies provide very detailed guidelines for how you must write their proposal. First and foremost, you will need to adhere strictly to these guidelines. With this understanding, here are a few suggestions for crafting the compelling story:

Suggestions for Crafting the Compelling Story

1. Strictly adhere to the request for proposal (RFP). Respond to all questions raised in the RFP, follow the organization of the RFP in your response, and make good use of white space, graphics, pictures, charts, etc., to break up the tedium for the reviewer of reading lots of text. Also, do not make spelling errors.² The proposal should be pleasing to read.
2. Write well. Recall what you learned in middle school about paragraph structure. What is the function of the first sentence in a paragraph? What is the function of the middle

¹ Ward, D. (2006). *Writing grant proposals that win* (3rd ed.). Sudbury, MA: Jones and Bartlett Publishers.

² We know that “speling” should be spelled “spelling”. We just want to see if the “speling” error bothers you!

sentences? What is the function of the ending sentence? (HINT: The ending sentence has two functions.) Develop your paragraphs in this fashion and organize them so that they follow logically.

3. Similar to how you construct your paragraphs, organize your entire narrative to:
 - a. Tell them what you're going to tell them (e.g., the Introduction)
 - b. Tell them (e.g., the body of your narrative)
 - c. Tell them what you told them (e.g., the conclusion or possibly your sustainability statement)
4. Use the Introduction to hook the reader. The Introduction is the best place for you to exercise your creativity and, in the manner of "Tell them what you're going to tell them," provides the opportunity to interest the reviewers in reading your proposal. This may be where you place a picture showing consumers who will be impacted by your program; or where you create the story of how one individual or family will be impacted; or where you develop the "hook" (Google "creative hooks" for a start) to draw the reader in. And, see Rita's comments below about what contributes to a good story.
5. We also believe the most important aspects of a grant proposal that reads as a "compelling story" are built upon the following four mainstays:
 - a. Demonstrate a significant need and its impact on humans;
 - b. Show that your approach is an innovative solution to redressing these common needs (e.g., a new solution to an old problem);
 - c. While your approach will be innovative, show that it is grounded in research and/or evidence-based strategies or best practices; and
 - d. Make the case that your approach is scalable and can be replicated in other locales and/or with other populations.

Rita Lewis, GrantProse Associate, with thoughts on plot and stories:

Rita notes that EM Forster articulates the difference between plot and narrative. Narrative is, "The king died, and the queen died." We have a plot if we change it to "The king died, and the queen died of grief." The first is a story, but the second is a compelling story—it hints at the "why." http://litera1no4.tripod.com/plot_frame.html

Hemingway provides an example of a short as well as compelling story: "For sale: baby shoes, never worn." These six words create an "anticipatory set" in the reader's mind, drawing the reader in and creating a desire to read further to understand why the shoes were never worn. The six words hint at the "why," at momentous and tragic events.

<http://www.sixwordstories.net/2008/12/for-sale-baby-shoes-never-used-ernest-hemmingway/>

Rita explains that stories are often made of good, meaty tragedy. No one wants to read about Pollyanna over and over again. We want drama, conflict, characters, motives. We want plot. We want suspense and tension. Generally, stories are about conflict. There's usually a central conflict. In grant proposals, a conflict could be between what is and is not. Between what is and what should be, or could be.

Also, grant proposals typically have lots of smaller stories within the larger story, and there will be opportunities to develop these stories in sequence so as to create the complete picture.

Story of the organization

Story of the need

Story of the solution

Story of the benefit to society

As you develop these separate stories, be careful to show how they each contribute to the whole. The story of your organization should be a story of resolving the need(s) you describe in your proposal, a story of finding solutions to difficult problems, and a story of serving the greater good in society. In nonfiction, storytelling can slip and slide into bypaths—you do not want this for your grant proposal. At the end of the day, you will need to write with logic.