

CRAFTING THE COMPELLING STORY

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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 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, 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:

Write Like A Grant Writer

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. Write logically and with organization. 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 or Overview)
 - 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)

Subsections within your narrative such as the Project Design or the Management Plan or the Evaluation Plan should also be organized in this fashion. (It is interesting to note that #3a-c above is essentially the same organizational schema as we describe for the paragraph structure in #2 above.)

Remember Four Key Elements

We believe the most important aspects of a grant proposal that reads as a “compelling story” are built upon the following four mainstays:

1. Align with the funding agency's purpose. Demonstrate a significant problem and/or set of needs and their impact on humans. The problem and need statement should closely align with the purpose of the funding agency. Somewhere in the RFP, the funding agency will typically identify the purpose of their grant program. Your problem and needs should be developed with this purpose in mind. And remember to substantiate your needs with data.
2. Be innovative in your approach. Show that your approach is an innovative solution to redressing these common needs (e.g., a new solution to an old problem). Most problems that funding agencies describe have been with us for a long time and will likely continue to be with us unless we can develop new and better ways of addressing the problems. Ergo, funding agencies are generally interested in innovative solutions, and will often say as much in their RFP.
3. Be grounded in the research literature and evidence base. While your approach should be innovative, show that it is grounded in research and/or evidence-based strategies or best practices. You want the funding agency to appreciate that your solution to the problem, often described in the narrative as the project design, is not an off-the-wall idea that you woke up with one morning, but is actually grounded in, modeled upon, or adapted from another approach that has been shown to work with at least a modicum of success, albeit maybe not in your context or with your population. And so, you will adapt this evidence-based approach to fit your context or your population.
4. Dissemination and replication. Seeking new solutions to old problems, funding agencies want to share the results of successful programs. Presuming that you will be successful with achieving your goals, objectives, and outcomes in your grant project, make the case that your approach is scalable and can be replicated in other locales and/or with other populations. And, explain how you will disseminate information about your project to a wide audience.

Consider the Power of Plot and Story

Generally speaking, grant writing is nonfiction. When we conduct grant writing training programs, we indicate there is little tolerance for creative writing. Grant reviewers, having many proposals to review, want to know if you're following the organization of the RFP, responding to the questions and issues indicated in the RFP, and proposing a rational approach to a difficult problem. Still, grant reviewers need a reason to engage with your proposal on an emotional level; you want the reviewer to be excited about your proposal, and we believe there is some room in the narrative to be creative. Accordingly, we offer here some thoughts on plot and storylines.

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." (Read Roberto Montenegro's discussion of plot at http://literalno4.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. (Read other six-word stories at <http://www.sixwordstories.net/2008/12/for-sale-baby-shoes-never-used-ernest-hemmingway/>.)

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. While there is a danger in grant writing of becoming too "fictional" and appealing *too* much to the emotions, there is usually a central conflict—between what is and is not. Between what is and what should be, or could be. Along those lines, your narrative might provide examples of distress if the problem is not addressed (or examples of success when the problem *is* addressed).

Grant proposals typically have lots of smaller stories within the larger story, and you'll have opportunities to develop these stories in sequence to create a 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 each contributes to the whole. The story of your organization should be a story of resolving the problem(s) and 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. A final caution: In fiction, 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.