

Notes on Writing your Proposal Narrative

Different kinds of grants—internal and external; individual, collaborative, and institutional—make similar kinds of demands on proposal narratives. Budgets figure more heavily in the latter.

Most grant application guidelines ask for a statement that includes most or all of the following:

- The purpose, or objectives of your research/project;
- Its significance, or contribution;
- Its methods, or methodology;
- Your timeline, or workplan;
- Your projected outcomes, or dissemination plan.

Some grant applications will ask for this information in a series of structured prompts. For others, the guidelines are more general and flexible. Most will ask for this information “in language clear to a non-specialist.”

Audience and Genre

The proposal narrative is just one of many academic and professional genres. Understanding its conventions will support your communication with and persuasion of reviewers who are reading many, many applications, often from diverse fields. Understanding the needs of the reader helps you understand the genre, and gives you some freedom within a basic structure.

The **VOLUME** of applications that reviewers are evaluating—dozens—places a premium on clarity and focus. You don't have a lot of time to establish this. Don't bury your lead.

The audience's **DIVERSITY** (in terms of discipline) means you need to generalize your claims about your research. We often learn to write our dissertations as a justification within the field, its internal arguments and debates, etc. But the proposal genre requires you to (1) explain the field to those outside the field (or better, justify its methods, questions, and assumptions) (2) claim the significance of this for those outside the field.

TIPS:

- Your first paragraph may be the same as your abstract. In each you want to create a succinct compelling statement that frames the project.
- A good title helps.
- The genre of the proposal supports meta-cognitive work: step back from your research imaginatively to frame it, and do the interpretive work for your readers.

Proposal Narrative Worksheet

Read your proposal aloud to a partner. The listening partner should read along, with an ear and an eye to the following questions.

- **Purposes/Objectives [WHAT?]**

Can you (help) identify the research question, thesis, and/or argument?

Follow-up discussion: How might this be clarified or foregrounded?

- **Significance** (to the scholarship in and outside the field) [**WHY? WHO—or to whom?**]

What claim do is being made want, to whom, and why does it matter?

Follow-up discussion: How might this be clarified and/or enlarged?

- **Methods** (also, Archives, and Evidence) [**HOW?**]

What is the approach to this inquiry? What evidence is being materialized?

Follow-up discussion: does this need clarification or amplification?