

10 TIPS FOR WRITING EFFECTIVE PROPOSALS



- 1. Find the right funder.** There are many funding sources; some post daily requests for proposals (RFPs). Choose one or more funders that fit your organization's vision, mandate, and capacity. Identify requests that, at first glance, seem like a good fit.
- 2. Decide whether or not to respond.** Before investing time in further research or beginning to write, make a strategic "[bid / no bid](#)" decision. Carefully review the evaluation criteria; ask questions, if necessary, and monitor addenda that may be released. If the request isn't a good fit, you are missing some "must haves," or you don't have a clear competitive advantage, it likely isn't worth proceeding. Even if the request seems perfect for you, the timing may be off (e.g., you don't have capacity at the moment to write a compelling proposal or the anticipated project dates don't mesh with other work). Not responding may be a better business decision than submitting a poor proposal or taking resources away from other time-sensitive projects.
- 3. Build a team.** Many talents are needed to write a strong proposal – research, [writing](#), finance, graphic design, editing, and knowledge of organizational history as well as subject-matter expertise. The team will also need a coordinator or project manager – writing a proposal is similar to completing a small project. In small teams, or if you're responding as an individual, multiple roles may be played by one person; however, the full range of expertise is required to create a competitive proposal.
- 4. Compile components.** Organizations that respond to many RFPs sometimes develop a "library" of proposal components that can quickly be plugged in to new proposals, with minor customization to match the specific request(s). Others begin by using a previous proposal as a template – updating each section with current information. Still others take a fresh approach to each new proposal. Whatever your approach, compiling the right components takes time.
- 5. Be clear, concise, and compelling.** Your proposal is a [sales tool](#) – it must demonstrate convincing evidence of requested competencies and experience. Use "[Plain Language](#)" that can be understood by a non-expert in your field, but will also convince those with subject-matter expertise of your capacity to do the project. Use specific examples and ensure you address every item in the RFP. However, especially if you've recycled a previous proposal, do apply the "who cares?" filter; in each section, ask yourself if every word is relevant and necessary.
- 6. Be creative . . . within constraints.** It's essential to follow RFP instructions carefully, adhere to page restrictions, and include all requested information; in some cases, templates or guides will be provided. On the other hand, your proposal is a sales tool – it needs to set you apart from other competitors, attract the decision-maker's attention, and, ideally, add value beyond what was requested. Clearly align your organization's philosophy with the funder's, demonstrating what a great partner you'll make. If you are offering to contribute existing materials to the project, be sure to clearly identify expectations about ownership of intellectual property.
- 7. Do the Math.** Your proposal forms the basis of a contract. Present a realistic and competitive timeline and budget; don't promise something you can't deliver.
- 8. Edit, edit, edit.** Allow sufficient time to [proofread and edit](#) carefully, especially ensuring that details in various parts of the proposal align with each other. Consider printing your final copy in draft and reviewing it on paper – it's amazing what details are missed on the computer screen.
- 9. Leave wiggle room.** Proposal deadlines have been missed for a variety of reasons including getting stuck in traffic enroute to the courier, couriers delivering to the wrong address, ferries or flights being cancelled in storms, print shops collating last-minute copies incorrectly, or in-house paper jams or running out of toner. Leave at least 24 additional hours for circumstances beyond your control and confirm that your proposal has been delivered on time.
- 10. Follow-up.** After submitting your proposal, debrief lessons learned amongst your team. Whether or not your proposal is accepted, request feedback from the funder. Writing effective proposals is a skill that can be continuously improved; learn from each experience.

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