

The Rhetoric of Proposals

Purpose and Audience

Proposals are fundamentally persuasive documents. In a proposal, you request support from your company, or from a client, or from the government, or from a granting agency. For some kind of support (usually money, but also perhaps materials, personnel, and other resources), you are proposing to conduct some work, to do some research, to build a prototype, or to provide a service that will address some need for the client (the reader). Sometimes your proposal is in competition with other bidders for the same project. Other times, your proposal stands on its own merits.

Fundamentally, your proposal is persuasive if it can convince the reader:

- that there is a significant problem or need (and that you understand it)
- that you have a method and a plan for addressing that problem or need (you have technical know-how that will help address the problem or need)
- that you have the ability to manage the project successfully (you have management know-how)
- that you are qualified to do the work (you have particular expertise or prior skill, or you can assemble the necessary personnel)
- that the cost of the project is justified in terms of its likely results.

The main goal in the proposal is to convince some audience of the value, significance, and worth of what you are doing. Your proposal has to answer the "so what?" question: Why does this project matter? How will it help—and WHO will it help? Why is it worth the money and time, energy, and resources? In any proposal situation, you assume (a) that the audience has a vested interest in supporting your project, but also (b) that the audience needs to be convinced of the value of the project. So your proposal must address **the interested but skeptical reader**. Your proposal assumes that the reader cares and is interested in the project—but it also assumes that they are skeptical and need adequate evidence that the project is worthwhile.

Credibility. A proposal is one of those professional documents, like a job letter or resume, where you can't afford to make mistakes or look sloppy. A good deal of your credibility is established (or destroyed) through the proposal document itself—by how professional it looks, by how carefully it is proofread, and by how much care and thought goes into its production. The proposal has to look good—and if it does, it reflects positively on your professionalism. It shows that you can produce a high-quality product.

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Proposals

Types and Contexts of Proposals

Types and Contexts

Solicited vs. unsolicited proposal. The first step in writing an effective proposal is identifying a need or problem that currently exists. In a solicited proposal situation, a company or client has already identified a certain problem or need—it has a job to be done—and it typically describes that need in an RFP ("request for proposal"). The company collects proposals and makes a judgment about which contractor provides the best response to the RFP. In a solicited proposal, you don't have to persuade the reader of the significance of the problem or need so much as you have to convince the reader that you (or your team) have the best plan for solving the problem—meaning, your budget is reasonable, you have expertise in the area, you have a solid plan for addressing the problem. A solicited proposal focuses on the proposed solution to the problem and on the plan for developing and implementing the solution.

In an unsolicited proposal, a company or organization does not necessarily recognize a need or problem—or at least, the company or organization needs to be convinced that the need or problem merits support. In an unsolicited proposal situation, you are not in competition with other bidders, but rather your proposal stands or falls on its own merits. In this kind of proposal, you have to provide more in-depth analysis of the problem or need, demonstrating that the need/problem is serious and significant and demands attention. An unsolicited proposal focuses on the need or problem.

Formal vs. informal proposal A formal proposal is typically formatted like a long formal report: that is, it could include a letter of transmittal, title page, abstract, and even a table of contents. Long formal proposals for large Department of Defense contracts could be hundreds, even thousands of pages long.

At the other extreme are highly informal proposals, which could be simple e-mail messages:

Dorothy ... Ohio State University is offering a workshop on patent writing in September. Can I have travel support to attend the conference? John

This two-sentence e-mail is a proposal, yes—albeit a highly informal one where the writer obviously knows his supervisor and expects she will approve the request without his having to provide details about the value of the conference. He is assuming that the reader making the decision already KNOWS the value of this conference and already respects his judgments about what is important—and so it's unnecessary to provide an extensive rationale. (Unfortunately, most proposal writing is not this easy!)

Most proposals fall somewhere between the highly formal Department of Defense proposal and the simple e-mail request. An informal proposal is typically formatted like a long memo or a short report—that is, it uses a memo template (To, From, Date, Re); and is anywhere from two to 10 pages of text and appendix material. It makes a case for support of a project (providing information and discussion of the points discussed under Content and Organization below).

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Content and Organization

Proposals come in many different shapes and sizes. There is no "typical proposal," nor is there one single template for all proposals. Your first step as a proposal writer is to find out the guidelines and expectations for your proposal. Does the RFP provide you with details about the expected form and content? For many government and foundation proposals, it is vital that you follow the template guidelines EXACTLY. (Non-compliant proposals get tossed.) Use the exact headings and order of information that the RFP calls for. In an unsolicited proposal situation, you have more discretion over content and organization. You might be able to tailor your headings somewhat to suit your project. But even in an unsolicited proposal situation, it's smart to talk to your reader(s) to find out what they expect to see in the proposal.

Main body of proposal vs. appendix. The two main rules for organizing information in a proposal are these: (1) Do what the audience requests and/or expects. And (2) Use the main body of the proposal (sometimes called "the proposal narrative") to make the argument for your project, and put supporting details in an appendix. You don't want your narrative to get too cluttered with details and long lists. In the narrative, make the main argument and provide the overall rationale. Your narrative should also include representative evidence and visuals. The appendix is where you put supporting detail: for instance, long lists of supplies, detailed information about personnel, bibliography references, etc. You want your narrative to be fairly short and very tightly focused on the reasons for, and worth of, the project.

Evidence. You must provide data in support of your arguments. In an unsolicited proposal, you have to demonstrate (prove) that there is a significant problem. You can't just say, "There's a problem, take my word for it, it's bad." You need to provide some hard data to back up your claim. These data could take statistical form: that is, you provide numbers that show increased customer complaints or loss of money. Or, you provide a detailed description that shows a problem in a technical product or process. Or, you back up your claims with some form of testimony (other personnel in a company have registered complaints, previous reports have documented the problem, etc.). To provide evidence of personnel qualifications, you typically attach personnel resumes to a proposal—and perhaps also include reference clients from previous projects.

Tables, visuals, and graphics. Visuals are a high-impact way to include evidence in your proposal. Your proposal should have plenty of visual support, especially in table form. Almost every proposal must have a budget (formatted like a table), but in addition to that you should provide diagrams, charts, tables, and graphs to support your argument. In an unsolicited proposal, where you have to make a strong case for the significance of the problem, you should provide at least one visual in the problem section—perhaps a graph showing declining sales or increased calls to a technical help line, or a diagram showing a design flaw in a current product. Tables and visuals should be clearly labeled and numbered.

Also think in terms of graphic emphasis. You can highlight key points by using talking heads or callouts (pieces of highlighted text that receive special emphasis). Don't forget about the value of using bulleted lists to organize and emphasize information. Boxing certain forms of information and labeling it as a figure can also help to call attention to key points.

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The content and organization of an informal proposal

proposal section	what the section should do
heading	Head your report using a memo template—with To, From, Date, and Re clearly identified.
overview	<p>The overview should be a mini-version of your entire proposal in which you establish very clearly what you are proposing to do and why. You have to say very, very clearly: (1) what you are asking for, and (2) what you will provide in exchange—in other words, the quid pro quo. What product, service, or result will emerge from this project? What is the concrete deliverable here? a report? a prototype? a plan?</p> <p>For an informal proposal, your overview might be 2-3 paragraphs—and you should certainly try to fit it on the first page of your document. It might have two or three different subsections, but it should include the following points:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> (a) brief statement of problem or need (b) brief summary of proposal objective (what are you proposing to do?) (c) brief summary of request (what are you asking for?) (d) brief summary of expected results and outcomes (deliverables)
background	What background information, context, or history is necessary in order to understand this project? Does the project have a history that needs to be related? (This section is an optional one.)
detailed analysis of problem or need	Articulate precisely and carefully the problem or need that this proposal addresses. Provide evidence of the problem or need (either analysis, data, or testimony). In an unsolicited proposal, you have to spend more time developing this section—and in fact, you might have several subsections, and you might have to provide fairly significant detail and discussion in the narrative.
plan —methods —procedures for testing and	The "plan" section is usually the longest and most thoroughly developed section—and it should certainly include subheadings (and perhaps even sub-subheadings) to organize its sections. This section, sometimes called the "technical proposal" is where you demonstrate that you have the

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<p>evaluation</p> <p>—timetable</p> <p>—limitations, contingencies, possible obstacles</p>	<p>technical know-how and research skills to do the project.</p> <p>The other sections mentioned to the left are sometimes subsections under "plan"—or sometimes they are separate sections. (How they are organized in your proposal outline depends on what the RFP calls for—or on how you want to organize the argument for your particular project.) These sections address the following questions:</p> <p>How are you going to proceed in addressing the problem or need? What methods are you going to use— and why are these methods appropriate? What work are you going to perform, and in what order will you complete the substages of the project? What research will you conduct—or collect, if you are providing information.</p> <p>How will you test the results of the project? What methods of evaluation will you apply? Will you be soliciting feedback and response at some stage in the project?</p> <p>What is your general timetable for the completion of the project? What are the various deliverables at different stages? (Put a detailed schedule in an appendix.)</p> <p>Do you foresee any problems or obstacles that will slow the project or prevent its successful completion? (Though this section might appear to be undercutting the persuasiveness of your proposal, admitting possible problems can actually strengthen your argument, because it shows you are realistic and pragmatic and that you are also willing to be honest about things. EVERY project has possible obstacles.)</p>
<p>supplies, materials, and equipment</p> <p>—currently available</p> <p>—new resources needed</p>	<p>In the main body of the proposal, provide an overview statement of the resources currently available and the new resources needed. Be especially sure to provide a rationale for new resources needed. (If you have a lengthy list of needed supplies, materials, and equipment, put that in an appendix.)</p>
<p>personnel</p> <p>—list of personnel and qualifications</p> <p>—justification for personnel</p>	<p>In the narrative, make the overall case for your own qualifications and the qualifications of your team (and of its individual members). You should summarize qualifications in this section (as would a job letter), but include detailed information about personnel (e.g., resumes) in the appendix.</p>
<p>expected results and benefits</p>	<p>Conclude by identifying the expected results of the project. You have to make the case that the project is worthwhile, but you also have to show costs vs. benefits: that the cost of doing the project is significantly outweighed by the benefits</p>

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	<p>to be gained. You might also have to show a significant benefit, and you might have to argue that expected results outweigh risks.</p> <p>In a final paragraph, thank the reader for considering the proposal, provide contact information, and express a willingness to answer additional questions about the proposal.</p>
<p>budget —budget items (laid out in table form) —budget justification</p>	<p>Sometimes the budget is its own separate section and not part of the main body of the report. Sometimes the budget is the first appendix section.</p>
<p>appendices —resumes of personnel —bibliography/references —detailed data —detailed schedule (Gantt chart) —detailed charts and diagrams —relevant reports and articles —glossary defining technical terms —letters of endorsement</p>	<p>The appendix is where you include supporting information. You make your main case in the proposal narrative (the sections above). In the appendix, you provide supporting details and documentation. You provide more depth and evidence. The appendix material should be carefully ordered and labeled, and it should be paginated continuously as part of the overall proposal.</p> <p>Provide an appendix table of contents—that is a page (or section on your final narrative page) where you list the separate appendices and their titles.</p> <p>Don't just pile up a lot of extraneous supplements in the appendix. Rather, be selective in organizing those additional materials that will help you make your case. If you are responding to an RFP, be sure to provide exactly what is required.</p>