Seeing Your Proposal Through the Reviewer's Eyes

By Roger Munger, PhD

Have you ever thought about what happens to your grant proposal after you submit it to a funding source? If you haven't, you're probably not maximizing your chances of getting funded. After being sorted and distributed to reviewers, stacks of proposals, often consisting of thousands of pages of information, must be read and evaluated. With limited time and funds, reviewers are forced to quickly make hard decisions—not every deserving project can be funded. Frequently the difference between winning and losing efforts is how well the writer of a proposal meets the needs of its reviewers. This article will help you understand the proposal process from the perspective of the people who review your proposal materials. You will also learn how to apply this knowledge to your next proposal.

1. Reviewers Have a Limited Amount of Time and Patience

Imagine it's Friday afternoon and you have a stack of 20 proposals, each over 30 pages long. Before you can go home, you have to complete a six-page review form for each proposal and then rank the proposals from best to worst. You flip through a few proposals. Some use tiny type printed with an old ink cartridge. Others use blurred diagrams obviously photocopied from texts. One proposal has a single paragraph four pages long. "This is going to be a long afternoon," you think as your eyes begin to glaze over.

For most people, reviewing proposals is just a small part of their already busy jobs. For some, evaluating proposals is a volunteer activity. That means many proposals are reviewed in the evenings, on weekends or after a reviewer's regular job duties are under control. While proposal reviewers try to give proposals a careful review, time constraints force them to limit how long they spend reading each one. One proposal that tested the patience of reviewers, for instance, stated that a detailed management plan was created using an obscure (at least to the reviewers) software application and could be found on an enclosed disk. Not a single reviewer even tried to access the information.

Evaluation Criterion: Statement of Need

A) Significance of problem or opportunity to be addressed by project

Strengths:

Weaknesses:

B) The extent to which the magnitude of problem or opportunity is supported by both qualitative and quantitative evidence, including local and national data

Strengths:

Weaknesses:

Figure 1: Sample page from a proposal-review form

Advice: Ask yourself, "Would I want to read 20–50 proposals like mine?" If your answer is no, then the reviewers probably won't want to read yours either. The time you spend making your proposal more reviewer-friendly is time well spent.

2. Proposals Not Following Guidelines Are Not Read

Proposals arriving late, exceeding page limits, omitting required information or generally not following submission guidelines are often not read. Reviewers will quickly discard proposals that do not follow the rules. One discarded proposal reached its 20-page limit and then started numbering pages 20A, 20B, 20C, 20D, etc. Reviewers also do not appreciate writers who use eight-point single-spaced text with quarter-inch margins to meet a page limit.

Table 1: Typical Proposal Sections Requested by Funding Sources

1. State the **need** for your project
2. Include your **objectives**
3. Explain your **methods**
4. Describe the **adequacy of resources**
5. Include the **costs**
6. List the **benefits**
7. Describe **methods of evaluation**

In addition to following basic submission rules, your most important task is to give reviewers the information requested in the guidelines—in the order in which it is requested (see *Table 1*). I frequently hear reviewers groan, "I couldn't even find the information." Others lament, "The information was all mixed up in different sections. It took me forever to figure it out." Following the organizational pattern established in the guidelines is critical since reviewers typically use a proposal-review form when evaluating proposals (see *Figure 1*). If reviewers have to hunt for information or flip back and forth

between sections while completing their review forms, you decrease your chances of getting funded.

Advice: Read and follow the instructions exactly. Make it easy for your reviewers to find the information they want by labeling the sections of your proposal to correspond to the information requested in the guidelines. If you have questions, contact the funding source and ask for clarification. Guessing may result in your hard work ending up at the bottom of a trash can.

3. A Well-Documented Need Makes Up For Other Weaknesses

In many cases, otherwise-weak proposals that do an outstanding job of convincing reviewers that a significant problem exists get funded. Reviewers want grant money to have an *impact.* If you can quickly persuade reviewers that your project addresses specific gaps in services, weaknesses in infrastructure, lapses in training or opportunities in the community, then many are willing to overlook flaws in other sections of your proposal. On the other hand, a proposal that has a brief statement of need and takes a "We have a problem here, believe us!" approach faces an uphill battle to persuade reviewers to fund the project.

Advice: Prove to your reviewers that a need exists. Start by using recent data kept by your agency (e.g., call types, response times, etc.). Since some reviewers feel that an agency's data may be biased, include as well supporting data from nearby organizations, your state, respected publications and national sources (see *Figure 2*). Give reviewers an idea of the magnitude or severity of your need. Describe the factors that gave rise to the problem, its effects on your organization and attempted solutions. Also, consider including quotes from credible people (your medical director, a state EMS official, etc.) and narratives about recent events that illustrate your specific need.

4. Sloppy Budgets Quickly Sink Proposals

Reviewers carefully scrutinize your proposal budgets. Any appearance of impropriety in your budget calls into question the credibility of your entire project and organization. A sloppy budget often results in a reviewer remarking, "If they can't get this budget right, they probably can't keep track of the money we give them." Reviewers may calculate the cost per person of your proposal (i.e., divide your total budget request by the number of people directly benefiting from your project). It may not be appropriate to spend $15,000 per person to train them in swiftwater rescue. Likewise, a 12% cost-of-living increase each year for the project's supervisor exceeds industry standards. Reviewers want *value* for their money.

According to the American Cancer Society, one woman in eight will develop breast cancer in her lifetime, and two-thirds of those women will be over 50. Although women themselves discover most lumps, only 35% practice monthly breast self-exams (BSE). However, if the cancer is detected early (i.e., localized), the five-year survival rate is 96%, compared to 75% if the cancer has spread regionally. Therefore, there is a need to educate and encourage the high-risk group (women over 50) to perform monthly BSE. According to Avon's Breast Cancer Awareness Crusade survey, more than half of the women surveyed said they would be more motivated to get mammograms and clinical breast exams if encouraged by people close to them, and 40% named volunteers from health programs among the group of motivators.

Figure 2: Part of a statement of need from an outreach project that uses data from credible sources to establish a need

In addition, reviewers are suspicious of budget items not adequately justified elsewhere. One budget, for instance, included $40,000 for computer equipment without explaining why such items were critical to the project's success. Reviewers can also quickly spot budgets that grossly underestimate the cost of the project. Such a budget causes reviewers to question whether the proposal writer completely understands the problem and is qualified to undertake the project.

Advice: Design a realistic budget that reflects project activities. Include in your budget the funds necessary to successfully complete your project and nothing more. Double-check your math. Finally, don't hesitate to get help from someone who deals with budgets and numbers for a living, such as an accountant.

5. A Graphic Is Worth a Thousand Dollars

The cliché "a picture is worth a thousand words" is true. However, in proposal writing, the effective use of graphics such as tables, charts, graphs and diagrams translates into funding dollars. Graphics are often more effective at communicating complex information (see *Figure 3*). A well-designed table, for example, can quickly summarize your entire project in a small amount of space (see *Figure 4* on page 84). Graphics will save you space, communicate your ideas more efficiently, make your proposal more interesting to read and provide your reviewers with much-needed breaks from long paragraphs.

If you want to...	Then use a...
Show appearance of an object or add realism	Drawing or photo
Compare numeric values	Bar graph
Display a large amount of text or numbers in a small space	Table
Describe steps in a process	Flow chart
Demonstrate or predict trends	Line graph
Show parts of an organization	Organizational chart
Show schedule of tasks and completion dates	Gantt chart

Figure 3: Match your purpose with the correct type of graphic

Advice: Identify points in your proposal that might be made clearer by the addition of graphics. Simplify graphics so that only information pertinent to your project is displayed. Have other people review your graphics to make sure the graphics are clear and can be understood in a glance. Finally, remember to label graphics, provide captions and reference them in your proposal text.

6. Appendices Are Ignored

Realizing that his 30-page limit was quickly approaching, one not-so-clever proposal writer wrote only a few sentences for the final two sections and put "See appendix for more details." The writer then included another *80 pages* of text in an appendix. Placing material in the appendix is not an effective way to avoid page limits. Page limits help ensure that applicants have equal opportunities to make their arguments and that reviewers can evaluate submissions in a timely manner. In fact, many reviewers are not required to read everything in a proposal's appendix. If it's not in the body of the proposal, it's not read.

Advice: If information is critical to understanding your project and you want to ensure reviewers read it, place the information in the body

of your proposal. Reserve for your appendices *supporting* information requested by the funding source (otherwise don't bother including it at all), such as letters of support (see No. 7 below), organizational charts, proof of nonprofit status and annual operating budgets.

7. Boiler Plate Shows You Do Not Care

Boiler plate is generic phrases and chunks of information that you cut and paste from another proposal or document. An appropriate piece of boiler plate to use is the description of your agency. You probably have a stock paragraph in a brochure or on your website that describes your organization. There is no sense in rewriting an already-useful piece of information. However, proposal writers get into trouble when they use goals, objectives, budgets and evaluation plans from completely different projects without first updating and revising them.

Another place that boiler plate is used inappropriately is in letters of support. Often requested by funding sources, letters of support are written by people outside your organization (e.g., regional medical director, town mayor, local business collaborating on the project, etc.) and usually attest to the qualifications of your organization and describe what support (money, equipment, labor, etc.), if any, they will provide if your project is funded. Effective letters of support (often a full page) reference your specific project, comment on its significance and describe in specific terms what support is promised. Weak letters of support are short (a paragraph or so) and use only general phrases: "I support this effort," "Please consider this innovative and important enhancement to the area." Such phrases without supporting details cause reviewers to question whether the letter writer cared enough to even read the proposal.

Advice: Write your proposal materials for a specific project and funding source. You may be thinking, "Well, duh!" However, in my experience, people get rushed for time, get a tad lazy or just don't know any better. When this happens, reviewers sit around a table making statements such as: "Why did they submit this proposal to us?" "This proposal reads like it was written for the Department of Health, not for us," and "This letter of support could refer to any project."

8. Careless Editing Errors Distract Reviewers

One otherwise good proposal substituted *pedestrian* for every instance of *pediatrician*. This error repeated through 30 pages made for some humorous reading, but rather than focusing on the proposal's content, reviewers were focusing on its mistakes. While the reviewers understood how this mistake could happen using a spell-check function, such carelessness lowered their overall evaluation of the proposal. One or two editing errors will not hurt your funding chances. However, proposals with repeated errors that require reviewers to reread sentences or cause them to scratch their heads in bewilderment are rarely funded.

Advice: Recruit people outside your immediate organization to proofread your proposal before submission. Since outside readers do not have special knowledge of your specific organization, they are more likely to offer critical comments similar to those of your proposal's reviewer. Have readers not only check your grammar and spelling but also the accuracy of your table of contents, page numbers and references to graphics.

9. Reviewers Come to Different Conclusions

It is not uncommon for two reviewers to carefully read the same proposal and evaluate it completely differently. Because each reviewer brings different principles, experiences and knowledge to the review task, he or she may focus on different features of a proposal

Goal 1: Modern learning technologies (e.g., PowerPoint, Web-based training modules, etc.) will be integrated into the EMT-Basic curriculum, and EMT instructors will demonstrate effective instructional strategies for each type of technology		
Objectives	**Timeline**	**Indicators/Measures**
1.1 Skyview Regional EMS Association (SREA), the state EMS Office and Med-Link will collaborate in the development of technology-infused curriculum materials.	Year 1	1. Review curriculum created by partners. 2. Track use of course materials by instructors. 3. Measure impact on course participants using NREMT test scores.
1.2 Train SREA's 12 EMT-Basic instructors in the skills to deliver a technology-infused curriculum.	Year 1	1. Track completion of training for all instructors necessary over first 12 months of project. 2. Determine whether technology is integrated into at least half of course lessons. 3. Measure change in instructors' instructional technology proficiency using pre- and post-tests.

Figure 4: This table provides a succinct overview of the project's first-year goal

and value such features differently from other reviewers. Sometimes this results in a proposal being ranked as "one of the best" by some reviewers and as "one of the worst" by others. Usually such discrepancies are cleared up when a panel of reviewers meets and discusses each proposal in detail. However, sometimes they are not. The truth is, evaluating proposals is an inexact science. Even when reviewers use a detailed scoring guide, receive training on how to evaluate proposals for a specific program and carefully read each proposal, discrepancies do occur.

Persuade reviewers by establishing your credibility, presenting logical arguments supported by evidence and appealing to their values and beliefs.

Advice: Don't become discouraged when your proposal is at first not funded. Begin by reading the reviewers' feedback. Don't be shocked if some of the feedback is contradictory (e.g., "clear statement of need" vs. "poorly developed statement of need"). Rather, look for trends in the feedback. That is, if three of four reviewers said your budget was vague, then you probably need to develop a more detailed budget. Based on your reviewers' feedback, revise your proposal and resubmit it during the next funding cycle.

10. People Give Money to People

The process used to determine who gets funded can seem impersonal. Part of this impersonal approach is for a good reason: Funding sources try to fund the best projects, not just projects submitted by people they like. However, writers sometimes forget that real people will read their proposal. Remember that you are not writing your proposal to, for example, the Department of Health, but rather *people working* for the Department of Health. In the end, a single person or group of people will decide whether your proposal is funded.

Advice: Try to see your proposal through the reviewer's eyes. The more you know about these decision-makers, the better your chances of persuading them to fund your project. Persuade reviewers by establishing your credibility, presenting logical arguments supported by evidence and appealing to their values and beliefs.

Winning proposals not only focus on significant needs or opportunities but also present material in a manner that makes it easy for reviewers to read and understand. In short, writers of funded proposals understand the needs of the people reading their proposals. In the field, you are taught to focus on your patients. When writing proposals, focus on your proposal's reviewers. ■

Roger Munger has been writing and reviewing proposals for over six years. He teaches technical communication at Boise State University in Idaho. You can reach him at rmunger@boisestate.edu.

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"The hotline was started about a year ago and is supported in part by a start-up grant from the government's Substance Abuse Mental Health Services Administration," says Lee Judy, MSW, executive director of Life Crisis Services in St. Louis. "Calls are sorted by area code and are answered at a local qualified crisis center by staff who are experienced in working with people in crisis. Our approach to working with this population is that we first try to find out if there is a health danger involved and, if that's the case, get them some help by getting them to a hospital or calling an ambulance. Then, we help them talk about what got them to this place and try to open up options to them. Finally, we get them to a referral source of some kind—psychiatry, geriatric assessment—whatever is appropriate. If they're willing to give us a telephone number, we follow up to see how they're doing."

Just developing an appreciation for the unique problems of geriatric patients is a step in the right direction, says Bob Nixon.

"In general, we have a young group of people out there providing care, and it's very difficult for a 20-something-year-old EMT to understand the emotional status of a person who's 80," he says. "We need to be empathetic and sympathetic. You hear all the time, 'God, it's an old person.' We have a baby-boomer population that is rapidly aging, but we don't emphasize taking care of the seniors. By training our EMTs and paramedics to understand what is going on in the body and mind, and some hazards older people are facing, they'll have a better understanding of what they're dealing with." ■

Reference

❒ 1. http://www.nimh.nih.gov/research/suifact.

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