Proposal Style Guide – Quick Reference

CFP/RFPs – Start your writing process by examining the call or request for proposals (CFP/RFP); this will tell you *who* your readers are (funding agency, reviewers), *what* they want (types of projects/research they are soliciting and have funded in the past), *where* they want it (where must projects/research be conducted), and *when* they want it by (deadlines). The funding agency also has goals and needs, the reasons *why* it has issued the CFP. It is important to demonstrate how the goals of your project or research match the goals of the funding agency (See 1.1). Several sources can help you determine the goals and needs of the funding agency:

- Look at the agency's website to see what kinds of projects and research have been funded in the past. This will give you an idea of the agency's interests, priorities, and goals.
- Look at evaluation criteria in the CFP. CFPs often ask for very specific information, or that you address specific issues. Provide all information, address all evaluation criteria, and answer all questions in the CFP.
- Get in touch with the point of contact listed in the CFP and as him or her questions.

No matter how strong or worthwhile your proposal, reviewers will look for any reason to eliminate proposals or give them a low score. Make sure you respond to all evaluation criteria in the CFP, and format your proposal exactly as the CFP describes. Otherwise, small mistakes like incorrect font sizes or an unanswered section will likely eliminate your proposal.

Audience – Learn as much as you can about the background and level of knowledge of your audience (from the CFP, agency's website, colleagues, etc.). This will determine what information you include (and exclude), how you organize your information, the level of technical detail presented, your tone, and your style. Unless otherwise required, all internal NMSU proposals should be written to an educated lay audience (See 1.2).

Establish a need for your project or research – Your proposal should establish dissonance between the current situation and the ideal situation. Establishing a good dissonance creates a *need* for a solution, a way to get from the current situation to the ideal situation (See 1.3.2). Once you have established a need, you can lay out the plan for your project or research (See 1.3.3). To be effective, your proposal must establish a problem, create a need for a solution, and outline a viable solution.

Grammar and style – Proposals are documents that increase awareness and promote action and change; your writing must be clear and persuasive. Establish your authority by being clear and assertive when possible, and by hedging your certainty when necessary (See 1.4.1). Use clear topic sentences, support sentences, and transitions from old to new information and between paragraphs (See 1.3, 1.4.2.1). Avoid excessive use of passive verb construction (See 1.4.2). Make sure the subject or topic of each sentence is easy to identify (See 1.4.2, 1.4.3). Put important actions in verbs, make the subject the "doer" of these important actions, and avoid changing verbs into nouns (See 1.4.2, 1.4.3).

Formatting – Complete all sections described in the CFP; follow *all* formatting guidelines in CFP. Use headers effectively (See 2.4). Be consistent with formatting choices (See 2.8).

Contents

1. Proposal Style

1.1 Calls/Requests for Proposals (CFP/RFP) – All proposals start with a careful examination of the CFP or RFP. CFPs are issued because funding agencies have a problem that needs solving or an issue that needs closer examination. The CFP will provide a lot of information: *who* are your readers (funding agency, reviewers), *what* do they want (types of projects/research they are soliciting and have funded in the past), *where* do they want it (where must projects/research be conducted), and *when* do they want it by (deadlines). It is up to the proposal writer to answer the remaining two questions: *why* do they want it and *how* do they want it done? The "how" question is the easiest to answer: your project or research is essentially a how-to plan for meeting the funding agency's needs. The "why" question is more difficult to answer; it will require a close examination or research of the problem or issue that the funding agency is trying to address, as well as an examination of the funding agency's goals and needs. If you are lucky, the agency will print its goals, needs, and priorities in the CFP; if not, you will have to do some research. Several sources can help you determine the goals and needs of the funding agency:

- Look at the agency's website to see what kinds of projects and research have been funded in the past. This will give you an idea of the agency's interests, priorities, and goals.
- Look at evaluation criteria in the CFP. CFPs often ask for very specific information, or that you address specific issues.
- Get in touch with the point of contact listed in the CFP and ask him or her questions. Consult with colleagues who have worked with the agency in the past.

No matter how strong or worthwhile your proposal, reviewers will look for any reason to eliminate proposals or give them a low score. CFPs have very specific guidelines and evaluation criteria. Make sure you respond to all evaluation criteria in the CFP, answer all questions, complete all required sections and/or forms, and format your proposal exactly as the CFP describes. Otherwise, small mistakes like incorrect font sizes or an unanswered section will likely eliminate your proposal.

1.2 Audience – The audience for your proposal will guide most of your writing decisions; understanding your audience (their background, goals, and needs) is probably the most important part of writing a proposal. Your audience will determine what information you include (and exclude), how you organize your information, your tone, your style, and a whole host of other writing issues. You can find information about your audience in a variety of places: on the funding agency's website, from colleagues who have worked with your audience before, and in the CFP.

Science proposals often contain a lot of specialized and technical information; it can be difficult to determine things that can be described technically and things that need a lay explanation based on your reader's knowledge level. Unless otherwise noted, all internal grants and proposals at NMSU should be written to an educated, but not specialized or technical, lay audience. Audiences outside of NMSU will need a closer examination. For example, all scientists have the same basic knowledge, but a biologist's knowledge is not the same as that of a physicist or a chemist.

Some questions to ask yourself when considering your audience:

- Is my audience an individual or a group of individuals?
- What is the background of my audience? If my audience is in the same area of specialization (science, humanities, etc.) as me, are they also in my discipline (e.g., physics vs. biology)?
- What are my readers like personally?
- What are my audience's goals, needs, and values?
- What types of projects has my audience funded in the past?
- Does my audience need any specific information in order to better understand my proposal?
- Is my audience the government, a private corporation, a non-profit organization?

1.3 Proposal sections – Most proposals include the same basic sections: introduction; background or problem statement; solution, project plan, or proposed research; budget; personnel; and conclusion. Sometimes reviewers will look at a single section by itself; each proposal section should be able to stand alone under individual review. For longer sections (problem statement and solution section) consider including an opening sentence or short paragraph that recaps relevant information, transitions from the previous section, and introduces and outlines the current section.

The most important information in your proposal is the problem, the need for a solution, and your proposed solution. This information should be addressed in the first section(s) of your proposal and should be stated explicitly. Do not imply or make your readers guess what your project is or why it is important; tell them outright what the problem is, why a solution is needed, what your solution is and how you plan to do it. Do not bury this information at the end of a paragraph or the bottom of a page.

1.3.1 Introduction – The introduction will likely be the first thing your reader looks at, so it is important to have a strong introduction that does a lot of work in a short space. It is a good idea to write the introduction *after* you have completed most or all of the rest of your proposal. That way, you will have a better understanding of your proposal's content and structure before you write the introduction. Introductions typically include the subject of your proposal, your purpose for writing the proposal, the main point that you will argue, and will forecast the organization of the rest of your proposal.

1.3.2 Background or Problem Statement – Why does the world need your project or research, and why should an agency give you money? These questions should be addressed in the *background* or *problem statement* of your proposal.

The purpose of the problem statement is to establish dissonance between the current situation (things are currently like this) and the ideal situation (but they should be like that). Discussing the problem or current situation normally involves a review of recent literature and research, as well as recent events and trends. A discussion of the ideal situation may touch on the goals of the funding agency, look at literature and research that support the ideal situation, or talk about the benefits of the ideal situation.

Establishing a good dissonance creates a *need* for a solution, a way to get from the current situation to the ideal situation. If you can establish a need for your project or research, you will have a better chance of receiving funding – assuming, of course, that you also have a good solution!

1.3.3 Solution, Project Plan, or Proposed Research – Once you have set up the problem and a need for a solution, you must tell your readers what your solution is, how you plan to do it, and why you intend to do it. The solution section will outline your solution in major and minor steps and will include the goals of your solution; the solution section should also stress how your solution meets the goals of the funding agency. For each major and minor step in your plan, discuss how you will carry out the step and why it is important to your overall solution, your solution's goals, and the goals of the funding agency.

Your solution section should include a list of *deliverables*, tangible results of your project or research. Deliverables can be anything from a research report to a reduction of some statistic (e.g., drunk driving) to a new kind of technology; deliverables are important because they are measurable results of your project or research. You never know what results your research will produce, so how do you come up with deliverables for a research-based proposal? Discuss how your research will fill gaps in current knowledge and contribute to the field or discipline; research reports and new data are examples of deliverables for research-based proposals.

It is also a good idea to include a project timeline, even if the funding agency does not require a timeline or project management plan. It need not include exact dates, just a general plan for your major and minor steps, as well as deadlines for deliverables and other important parts of the project or research. A timeline should also include your short- and long-term goals.

1.3.4 Budget – Always include a budget *and* a justification for each budget item. Budget justification should demonstrate a clear need for requested items and funds, and be clearly linked to the goals of the project or research. If you are receiving any fund matching, mention this in the budget (or even earlier in the proposal). When an agency gives you money it shows that they have confidence in your proposed project.

1.3.5 Personnel – The personnel section includes either biographical sketches or curriculum vitas for each Primary Investigator (PI) and Co-Primary Investigator (Co-PI), as well as other key personnel. However, it is a good idea to highlight relevant experience in the body of the proposal (e.g., solution section) to show why the investigators are the best people to carry out the project. Do not wait until the personnel section to address relevant experience.

If you are partnering with other agencies or individuals, have them write a letter of support and include these letters in your proposal. This shows that other people and agencies have confidence in your proposed project and are committed to working with you.

1.3.6 Conclusion – Conclusions "should be positive and forward-looking" (Johnson-Sheehan, 2002). Do not restate the problem; instead, state the costs of your plan – the "bottom line" – in a positive way (e.g., stress the affordability of your plan) and emphasize the benefits of

your proposed solution. Benefits of your plan will include "hard benefits" such as deliverables, results, and data, and "soft benefits" such as new working relationships with other organizations or hands-on training for students. The conclusion should begin with a clear transition that signals the proposal's approaching end.

1.4 Grammar and writing style

1.4.1 Establishing authority – Certain words help your reader to better understand your message. These words can tell us the writer's intentions (*explain, show, argue, suggest*), tell us the writer's confidence (*perhaps, it seems, certainly, may*), give directions to the reader (*note, consider, as you can see*), or illustrate the structure of the text (*first, second, finally, therefore, however*) (Williams, 2006). Such words are necessary in all writing, and terms that indicate structure and guide your readers are the most useful. However, it is easy to overuse or misuse language that points to your intentions and confidence. The most commonly overused forms are *hedges* and *intensifiers*; these words constrain and boost your certainty and assertiveness, and therefore your authority with your readers.

1.4.1.1 Hedges are words and phrases that *put limits* on your certainty and assertiveness. Consider the following statement with italicized hedges:

> The data would *tend to suggest* that, *to a certain extent*, *many* dinosaurs *may have been* mean-spirited.

Writers of scientific and research-based texts often use hedging because they are careful and even tentative when drawing conclusions from data and forming judgments, and do not want to appear over-confident. Some portions of a proposal will need little hedging: introduction, problem statement, proposed solution, and budget justification. Avoiding excess hedging in these sections will make you appear more confident and should give you more authority.

1.4.1.2 Intensifiers are words and phrases that *increase and amplify* your level of certainty; when used often, they can create an aggressive style. An absence of a hedge can be an intensifier in some cases (e.g., *many* Americans believe vs. Americans believe). Consider the following statement with italicized intensifiers:

> Your car was *clearly* parked *very* close to mine and, *as you can see*, this caused me *quite* some difficulty.

Intensifiers should be used sparingly because an overuse (and a perceived over-confidence) can actually diminish your authority. It is difficult to establish your certainty and authority while trying not to appear over-confident. You will likely use hedges more than intensifiers, but be careful of overusing either.

1.4.2 Avoid excessive and unnecessary use of passive verb construction – Consider the following sentence:

> My cousin borrowed the car.

This sentence has an *active* verb construction; the subject of the sentence (cousin) is performing the action (borrowed). The subject and the verb are right next to each other, and there is a clear link between the person doing the action and the thing he or she is doing it to. Now consider the same sentence written with a *passive* verb construction:

> The car was borrowed by my cousin.

The transition from an active to a passive verb construction has three steps:
1. The direct object (car) becomes the subject
2. A form of the verb *be* is added (in this case *was*)
3. The agent (the doer of the action) becomes the object of the preposition *by* (by my
   cousin), or the agent is dropped entirely

With a passive verb construction the subject and verb are separated, and it can sometimes be difficult to tell who is doing what to whom. Passive verb construction removes the agent, creating an impersonal style and the illusion of objectivity. For example, you might see the following sentence in a research report (the passive construction has been italicized): 5 mL of H_2SO_4 *were added*. However, you would be less likely to see the following example, which contains an active verb phrase: *We added* 5 mL of H_2SO_4.

1.4.2.1 How to choose between active and passive construction - Passive verb construction has become widespread enough in scientific writing that it is accepted as "scientific style." However, many parts of your proposal are not scientific documents; rather, they are documents that must raise awareness and promote action. Passive construction has its place, and good writing contains both active and passive verb construction. Unfortunately, it is easy for writers accustomed to scientific style to consistently use passive verb constructions. How does one choose between passive and active construction? Williams (2002) recommends asking the following questions:

1. Must your readers know who is responsible for the action? In scientific writing, it is often not appropriate to say who did the action because doing so would involve using the first person (e.g., *I added* 5 mL of H_2SO_4). In your proposal, especially when setting up the problem, it is important to create links between actions and actors and between cause and effect.

2. Would the active or passive verb help your readers move more smoothly from one sentence to the next? A sentence is confusing when it starts with new or unexpected information. Because the passive construction allows you to move the parts of a sentence around, it can be used to increase the clarity of your writing. For example:

> We must decide whether to build a new highway or to repair the old one. *The cost of materials, time to complete the project, and voter attitude* will influence our decision.

Here, the new information (italics) has been presented at the beginning of the sentence; readers must wade through the new information before they come to the familiar subject (our decision). If we were to re-write the sentence with a passive verb construction, we could place the familiar subject at the start of the sentence and then discuss new, complex information:

We must decide whether to build a new highway or to repair the old one. Our decision *will be influenced by* the cost of materials, time to complete the project, and voter attitude.

In the second example a passive verb construction (italics) has been used in order to place the familiar subject at the beginning of the sentence. Because the second example introduces familiar information *before* new information, it is much clearer and easier to understand. Always try to place familiar information ahead of new, complex information.

3. Would the active or passive give your readers a more consistent point of view?
Active and passive construction changes the location of the *subject* or topic of the sentence, and it is normally easy to identify the subject location in any given sentence. Having the same person or thing in the subject location in each of your sentences will make your writing more cohesive; you can change the subject of a sentence by choosing either active or passive verb construction (as in Question 2). Make sure the subject or topic of each sentence is easily identifiable, and that the subject comes at the beginning of the sentence (where readers will be looking for it).

1.4.3 Avoid changing verbs into nouns – When you use the passive construction, you often have to change verbs (actions) into nouns; the result is called a nominalization. For example, the verb *evaluate* becomes *evaluation*. Changing too many verbs into nouns can be confusing and can force writers to include more words than necessary. For example: *we evaluated* vs. *we conducted an evaluation*. To avoid nominalizations, important actions must be placed in verbs, and the subject of the sentence must be the "doer" of the important action. By placing important actions in verbs, your writing will be more concise, and the relationships between subjects and verbs will be much clearer.

1.5 Ethical considerations – If accepted, your proposal becomes a sort of contract, and you are held responsible for everything that is promised in the proposal. Be careful of stretching yourself too thin, promising more work than you can handle, or promising things that are outside the scope of your abilities. Do not provide false or misleading information. When writing your budget, make sure that all personnel, items, and services are appropriate for your proposal; some CFPs put restrictions on the types of budget items that can be requested.

2. Formatting and Document Design

2.1 Complete *all sections* and include all documents described in the CFP; follow *all* formatting instructions in CFP – CFPs have strict guidelines for formatting your proposal. It is important to follow these guidelines exactly. Often times, reviewers will be looking for any reason to throw out your proposal, and incorrect margins or font sizes are the sorts of reasons that can prevent your proposal from making it past the first round of review.

2.2 Define specialized terms and write out abbreviations and acronyms – The terms you need to define will depend on the knowledge level and background of your audience. When

using abbreviations or acronyms, always write out the term/agency before abbreviating it (unless the term is widespread, like NASA or USDA).

2.3 Use headings – Headings are very useful because they present information concisely, create structure, and guide your reader through your document. They should be short, descriptive, and as precise as possible. If you choose to use sub-headings, consider using different fonts and font sizes or some form of numbering system (e.g., nesting) to distinguish between headings and sub-headings. Be consistent no matter how you choose to format your headings.

2.4 Include page numbers

2.5 Avoid widows and orphans – A widow is a last line of a paragraph that is carried over to the top of the next page, away from the rest of the paragraph. An orphan is the first line of a paragraph that remains at the bottom of the page, while the rest of the paragraph appears on the next page.

2.6 Include a table of contents – For longer proposals, or for proposals with many sections, consider including a table of contents (unless prohibited by the call for proposals). A table of contents will be helpful to proposal reviewers who may need to quickly find and examine certain sections of your proposal.

2.7 Be consistent with formatting – No matter how you choose to format your proposal, be consistent. It is always a good idea to print out a copy of your proposal to see how it will look on the printed page. Formatting errors and problems (widows, orphans, excess white space, etc.) are much easier to spot on the page than on the screen.

2.8 Use APA style for in-text citations and bibliography – Unless otherwise noted in the CFP, use APA style for citations. A good online APA style guide can be found at the Online Writing Lab at Purdue University: http://owl.english.purdue.edu/owl/resource/560/01/

References and suggestions for further reading

Kolln, M. (2007). *Rhetorical Grammar*. New York: Pearson Longman.

Johnson-Sheehan, J. (2002). *Writing Proposals: Rhetoric for managing change*. New York: Pearson Longman

Williams, J.M. (2006). *Style: The basics of clarity and grace*. New York: Pearson Longman.

Online proposal writing resources

NSF – Proposal writing guide for National Science Foundation grants: http://www.nsf.gov/pubs/2004/nsf04016/start.htm

NIH National Institute of Allergy and Infectious Disease – Very detailed guide with a focus on NIH grants: http://www.niaid.nih.gov/ncn/grants/

Corporation for Public Broadcasting – Good general overview of proposal writing process; focus on non-federal proposals: http://www.cpb.org/grants/grantwriting.html

LearnerAssociates.net – Excellent checklist of tips: http://learnerassociates.net/proposal/hintsone.pdf

Georgia Perimeter College – Good tips for writing style, as well as proposal writing: http://www.gpc.edu/~ebrown/infobr3.htm