Writing Persuasive Proposals

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Proposal writing is different from other types of academic writing.

Stating the facts is not enough; you must persuade your reader.
## Academic Writing vs. Grant Writing

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Academic Writing</th>
<th>Grant Writing</th>
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</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Scholarly pursuit</td>
<td>Sponsor goals</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Individual Passion</td>
<td>Service attitude</td>
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<tr>
<td>Past oriented</td>
<td>Future oriented</td>
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<tr>
<td>Work that has been done</td>
<td>Work that should be done</td>
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<tr>
<td>Theme-centered</td>
<td>Project-centered</td>
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<tr>
<td>Theory and thesis</td>
<td>Objectives and activities</td>
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<tr>
<td>Expository rhetoric</td>
<td>Persuasive rhetoric</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Explaining to reader</td>
<td>&quot;Selling&quot; the reader</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Impersonal tone</td>
<td>Personal tone</td>
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<tr>
<td>Objective, dispassionate</td>
<td>Conveys excitement</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Individualistic</td>
<td>Team-focused</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Primarily or solo activity</td>
<td>Feedback needed</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Few length constraints</td>
<td>Strict length constraints</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Verbosity rewarded</td>
<td>Brevity rewarded</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Specialized terminology</td>
<td>Accessible language</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Insider jargon</td>
<td>Easily understood</td>
</tr>
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</table>
Strong proposals demonstrate enthusiasm.

Language like this would be considered inappropriate for a journal.

- Our aim with this innovative curriculum is to improve the supply of exceptionally skilled paramedics with National Registry certification.
- This project will provide your grant program with a powerful combination of cutting edge nanoscale science and frontier research in applied geochemistry.
- Though we launched this large and ambitious program just two years ago, we are gratified by the regional and national awards it has garnered.
The good news…

Grant proposal writing is a skill that can be learned.

The more you write the sharper your skills become.
The bad news...

Panacea
Greek Goddess of Universal Remedy
Solution to all problems; Cure-all
Writing persuasive proposals involves:

- Time
- “Homework”
- Organization
- Strategy
- Human Resources
It takes time.
A 2015 study examined faculty effort on grant writing in two fields, psychology and astronomy, and found that writing the average federal grant proposal requires 116 ‘PI hours’ and 55 ‘Co-I hours.’

von Hippel and von Hippel, To Apply or Not to Apply: A Survey Analysis of Grant Writing Costs and Benefits, PLOS One, March 2015, https://doi.org/10.1371/journal.pone.0118494

Even if you believe deadline pressure helps you, the work of writing must be spread out. Most grants are too complex to write in a burst of last-minute effort.

Allow time.
You write to discover what you want to say. You rewrite to make it clear to other people.

Donald Murray

Recognize that your proposal will become better with each iteration and plan accordingly.
Do your homework.
Fit is critical.

Make sure your goals align with those of the funder.

How do you know what the funder’s goals are?
Explore the funder’s website.

What does the funder emphasize about its work?
An agency or funder’s website usually has an “About Us” or “Who We Are” page that includes their overall mission.
Who will review your proposal?

Get to know your audience.
Get Ready to Write:

Read the solicitation. Every word.
Get Ready to Write:

Conduct a Literature Search.

New research is constantly being published.
Contact the Program Officer.

Listen to their perspective and take their advice.
Get organized.
Get Ready to Write:

The Basics

1. Start with a thorough understanding of the problem.

2. Understand your audience.

3. Use the right data to build your case.

4. Organize your narrative in a logical way that will be easy for your reader to follow.
Use an Organized Approach to Writing:

- Develop your Project Timeline FIRST.
- Write the Abstract or Project Summary LAST.
- Use section headers provided by the funder and organize them in the order given in the Solicitation/ Guidelines.
- Check the criteria and make sure you address each fully in the appropriate section(s).
- Get someone else to read your grant – choose someone representative of the proposal audience if possible.
Be strategic in your argument.
Strong Proposals are:

- Clear
- Correct
- Concise
- Complete

“Agreed. We’ll only fund the proposals we can understand.”
After a thorough and complete analysis of the type of writing that is actually persuasive to the reader, it becomes clear that there is, in fact, no panacea that will guarantee success. Writing grants is an activity that demands that the proposal writer approach the project, not only with an intriguing research idea and the content knowledge that is necessary to be credible but also with an organized framework in order to be convincing.

No panacea guarantees grant proposal success. Persuasive grant proposals require an intriguing research idea, the foundational content knowledge, and an organized framework.
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Strong Proposals are Compelling
Use active verbs in your writing. Avoid mixing tenses.

Don’t be afraid to use adjectives. If your research involves a truly novel interdisciplinary approach, say so.

Avoid using gerunds – a noun formed by adding “ing” to a verb:

Using gerunds can weaken writing.

vs.

Gerunds can weaken writing.
The “Magic of 3” refers to the pervasive use of the number three in stories, famous quotes and many other kinds of writing.

Our brains look for patterns, and three is the smallest number of elements needed to create a pattern. Using three bullet points is one of the most effective ways to harness this apparent magic. If you can use the “Rule of 3” to convey content, you will make that information easier for the reader to process and remember.
Giving reasons why is critical to convincing your reader.

Most of us don't like to be told to accept something without explanation, and this may be even more true for people with higher levels of education. When you want someone to be receptive to your argument, make sure to give reasons why.

Research supports this. A well-known study showed that people are more likely to comply with a request if you simply give them a reason why... even if the reason doesn't make sense.
Be careful with “Because”

Beware of circular reasoning…

For example, the argument “You should let me turn my paper in a day late because I deserve to have more time to work on it” is circular in nature.

This type of flawed reasoning can sound convincing and even be difficult to detect, but it won’t persuade someone who doesn’t already believe in the validity of your argument. Use data to illustrate benefits of, obstacles to, and urgency of carrying out your research.
Specificity

Being specific is another important characteristic of persuasive content. The more specific you are, the more credible your points, arguments or pitch...
Consistency in thoughts and actions is a valued social trait that’s associated with integrity and rational behavior.

You can use this in your writing by getting the reader to agree with something up front that most people would agree is true. Make your case with plenty of supporting evidence, and relate your ultimate point back to the opening framework that has already been accepted.
Classic examples of social proof include endorsements, testimonials and outside referrals. It’s what makes social media so powerful and it’s what makes many commercials effective.

You’re using social proof in your writing when you align with experts in your field. You absolutely should be “name dropping” in your Literature Review.
Make good use of your human resources.
We know what we *meant* to say…

This makes it very difficult to proof-read our own writing.
Ask someone else to read your final draft!

We can all benefit from having a second set of eyes read our work.
ODU’s Office of Research offers free proposal support to tenured and tenure-track faculty members.
There is no great writing, only great rewriting.

— Louis D. Brandeis —
Keys to writing good grants:

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- Read other people’s funded grants and study them to learn what makes them persuasive.
Keys to writing good grants:

- It is also important to polish your draft in order to eliminate any problems with spelling or grammar that may be distracting to your reader, thus ensuring that when your mentor or another faculty member reviews your draft proposal, they will be able to make comments that are focused on your ideas, which will subsequently allow you to become better at improving grant-writing elements.
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- Ensure your mentor’s review can focus on your ideas and grant-writing. Eliminate distracting spelling and grammar problems before you share your draft.
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- Seek out hard criticism from experienced grant writers.
What if your proposal isn’t funded?

This **will** happen, so keep it in perspective.

Allow yourself time to be disappointed, then **focus on what you can learn** from the experience.

Consider any feedback and talk with the program officer about whether to re-apply or re-submit.

“Our grant didn’t get funded, but they want us to teach persuasive proposal writing.”
Questions?

GOOD LUCK!