

Writing Proposals: Remembering the Reader

by

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“How can I know what I think until I read what I say?”

(Attributed to Wallas, 1926; Forster, 1927, and several other writers)

In the Psychology Department at Indiana University Bloomington, all of the first year students eligible for external fellowships submit applications. It is no small feat, given all of the other activities that consume the initial semesters of graduate school. It takes sustained effort to capture and manage important thoughts about research at any point but may be especially difficult during a period of social and intellectual transition. Much of my effort in advising the applicants is geared toward providing a context to let students see their thoughts, and once the thoughts are in view, to help them organize the material in a way that I think fits the demands of the reader. My goal here is to talk about that part of the process—writing for the intended reader.

Once students have an idea about the topic and have begun to organize the material in the ways suggested elsewhere in this booklet, I begin to focus on the reader’s perspective—who will read the proposal? It is all too easy to think only of oneself as the audience and to write prose that fulfills some personal need. Such an approach will not work. It pays to take some time to learn about the characteristics and task demands of the readers/reviewers of the proposal. Keep in mind, in the actual competition, that some human being, not unlike yourself, is probably going to have to tell some other human being about your work—you need to help them. You are engaged in a competitive game of “gossip” and unless you take care, your message will not arrive at its final destination in a clear form. Assume your readers are drawn from the ranks of faculty (if that is in fact the case, as it is for my students). Picture that person reading what you have written and picture what they can easily take away from it. If you have indulged in too much academic jargon, the person may become uncomfortable, unless they happen to speak the same dialect (don’t bet on it). Moreover, even if they do, they still need to explain your proposal to the other reviewers who most certainly will represent a polyglot of academic languages. Remember your goal is to make the reviewer want to tell their colleagues about your work and enable them to find a few memorable lines to capture your intentions.

All of this means that your writing should be very simple in style—yes, you are being judged on your ability to write, but, in general, the writing abilities most appreciated in grant applications are mastery of grammar, non-creative punctuation, error-free spelling, and a lack of trickery with respect to the size of the typeface or width of the margins. As a psychologist, I should emphasize that reading is an effortful perceptual activity. Thus, you need to show respect for reviewers’ eyes, as well as their minds. As a reviewer myself, and as a journal editor, I know that careless and sloppy writing can come to be viewed as an almost criminal act when reading the fiftieth or hundredth paper. Reviewers are typically instructed to find not only “winning” proposals but “losing” ones too—bending or breaking the rules allows a reviewer to put you in

the latter category with alacrity and downright enthusiasm.

Next to clarity, you need to aim for memorability. I do not mean that the reviewers will retain your material for all time, only for the several frenzied days of reviewing. Assume that during such a time, the mental competition for reviewers' neurons takes on truly Darwinian proportions. The major suggestion I give is to use a "primacy" and "recency" effect. For non-psychologists, this means to write something easy to remember at the beginning and at the end of the proposal. Why? Because we know that some people read from the beginning to end and some from the end to the beginning (have you ever started with the last page of a book?). We also know that when people are learning verbal material, they tend to remember what they saw or heard first and last as opposed to items in the middle. Thus, I tell my students to plan to present essentially the same material in the first and last paragraphs. Do not use the same words but make sure each "end" affords the necessary information to identify the nature of your research question and its significance. In my class and in individual meetings, we often try reversing the first and last paragraphs and judging which sounds better. In such an exercise, trust your ear, not your eye. Someone is going to have to talk about your work, as well as reduce it to a few sentences. My sense is that the first task is the harder one and hence my emphasis on making the proposal easy to talk about. (The easiest way to see if your essay passes the initial audience test is to give it to a colleague engaged in the same task—can they, after reading what you have written, tell you why the proposed research is important? If they cannot, start again.)

For the applications that many of my students write, they are asked to write one or two "brief" essays—each typically two single-spaced typed pages. I advise students to think in paragraph units and to plan on eight paragraphs an essay. The first and last paragraphs are already explained—they contain the problem and a statement of its significance for the particular field of study. The remaining six paragraphs depend greatly on the topic but in general, you want to hold the reader's hand and take him or her from the hall of great thoughts presented in the first paragraph and lead them into the laboratory, library, archaeological dig site—whatever is appropriate—and then lead them back out. The journey into the site of the work usually takes one of two of the paragraphs as you also need to supply some familiar landmarks and familiar names to tell reviewers who else is or has been engaged in the same or similar work. And so, in either the second or third paragraph, you need to provide a brief historical rationale. It is probably a safe assumption that the reviewers are older than you. It is also probably still a safe assumption that many of them "remember the days" when a library search for references actually meant going to the library. Thus, although computer searches are amazing and valuable tools, take care that you know the work that appears in journals or books not yet in the on-line catalogue or on the library's CD ROM volumes. In most academic fields, it is still important to know who the first person was to study a certain phenomenon or to propose a now well-developed theory. Many reviewers want to know that you have a sense of history (and also may want to know that you know that some of them are part of that history!).

After supplying some background and introducing the first research context, explain the tools or measures you will use. This is also the place to assure the reviewer that you have access to the equipment/facilities needed to do the proposed work. Many proposals are hard to judge on the question of feasibility. You do not need to spend too much time on this point (those writ-

ing for you can also supply such details) but put the reviewer's mind at ease quickly with respect to this issue. If you know you will need some course work or special training to employ the needed techniques, say so—this is a great reason for needing a fellowship and reviewers are looking for all the good reasons they can find.

Most proposals are for a multi-year period. After you have explained the structure of the initial study, plan to write in the remaining paragraphs about how you will interpret and extend your findings. Give evidence that you can plan more than a semester at a time. The reviewer may need to know what you think you will be doing three years from now. Do not devote too many (if any) words issuing the obvious caveats about needing to know how the first study turns out to propose the second. This is a research proposal, not a final report. Explain to the reviewers what you think the most likely directions will be and what the most important directions will be. This is the time to think big. Perhaps your research would be able to advance more quickly or gain more validity if you traveled to a new site or developed a new measure—OK, say so—that is what a fellowship is for and it gives the reviewer another concrete reason to explain why you, and not the person the other reviewer is favoring, would profit more from the fellowship.

For many research competitions, grants officers ask reviewers to rank the proposals into several categories including the "must fund" candidates and the "fund if money is available" candidates. Many of you have some kind of guaranteed support (I know it is not enough and so do the reviewers). What you need to make clear is why your research efforts would be transformed by the kind of support offered. Don't focus on the obvious personal benefit (e.g., a higher stipend). Tell the reviewer how your discipline will benefit. Tell them how you plan to advance your field of study. Often students must defer some research goals as predoctoral students because of time and teaching constraints. They hope those deferred goals can be achieved through postdoctoral work. If you can make a credible case that the fellowship will achieve that longer term goal sooner, say so. So too, if the fellowship will allow you to seek additional training in other areas, say so. Extramural agencies may see that training you *now* will save them training you later.

Finally, do not forget that to reviewers and to grants officers, you are a national resource. Your future research might affect their lives and will most certainly influence their children's lives and education. I mention this perspective because the reviewers would not subject themselves to the rigors of reviewing for any reason other than their interest in furthering knowledge. Reviewers are rarely paid, although their expenses are usually reimbursed. The currency of value to them is the chance to learn the latest developments in the field and a sense of influence over the directions and diversity of academic achievements. The more help you give them in estimating your future value, the more they will help you.

Having said all of this, I know that many students suspect they will probably not be the winner in a monetary or even an honorific sense. And so, I remind you that the final reason to put yourself through the rigors of such writing is contained in the opening quotation. Grants and fellowships give you money and time—they do not give you ideas. If writing the proposal achieves that goal, you have already won.