

LETTER PROPOSALS

A letter proposal is a short grant proposal, usually two to four pages long. Written in letter form, it is primarily targeted to private sponsors, such as foundations and corporations, though it can be viewed as a pre-proposal for federal sponsors. Most federal program officers like to receive a letter proposal because it presents them with a "concept paper," or a "conceptual shell" of what you propose. With many private sponsors, the letter proposal is all that is required; they make funding decisions on the basis of your brief letter, whether you are asking for \$100 or \$1 million. However, some private sponsors use the letter proposal as a screening device and request an expanded proposal if your idea captures their interest. In either case, you face the challenge of clear, concise writing.

In certain respects, a short proposal is more challenging to write than a long proposal. In seven brief sections, you must anticipate and answer the major questions that the sponsor will be asking as your letter proposal is read. Each sentence must carry a heavy load of information. To aid in the writing process, the components of a letter proposal are identified and discussed below.

Part One: Summary

Your objective is to summarize the entire proposal in one sentence. The critical elements of the sentence include: (1) self-identification (your organizational name); (2) uniqueness (your claim to fame); (3) sponsor expectation (what you want them to do); (4) budget request (how much money you want); and (5) project benefit (major project outcomes).

Part Two: Sponsor Appeal

Your objective is to explain why you are approaching this sponsor. Conduct background research on the sponsor to determine prior funding patterns, usually available in annual reports and on websites. Identify values that the sponsor seems to cherish as evidenced by their funding patterns, e.g., high-risk projects not normally funded by the government, cutting-edge research, demonstration projects with a national impact, or low cost/high benefit projects.

Part Three: Problem

Your objective is to briefly summarize the current problem. Focus the problem or need statement from the sponsor's perspective, not yours. Funding your project is not their end goal. You must show how funding your project can be a means for them to reach their end goal--their mission. Remember that a need is really a gap between what is and what ought to be. Document that gap with statistics, quotations, reasoning, or surveys and express it in human terms. Limit your documentation to brief but clear statements. Beware of the excessive use of statistics, which only confuses the reader.

Part Four: Solution

Your objective is to describe your approach to the problem. Summarize the objectives that you will meet with your approach. Convey confidence that you can close the gap between what is and what ought to be. You can detail your precise methodology in a one-page attachment by use of a time-and-task chart. Do not include extensive methodological detail in the letter proposal.

Part Five: Capabilities

Your objective is to establish your credentials to do the project. More precisely, your job is to establish three types of credibility: you have a (1) credible organization proposing a (2) credible idea to be directed by a (3) credible project director. You must demonstrate what is unique about your group in order to show that you can solve this problem.

Part Six: Budget

Your objective is to request a specific dollar amount in the proposal. Ask for a precise amount. Base your request on the review of past awards or other giving references so you are asking for a reasonable amount as viewed by the sponsor. Express your request in meaningful units, e.g., hours of instruction, numbers of students or healthy patients. If you plan to submit this or a similar proposal to other sponsors as well, mention this.

Part Seven: Conclusion

Your objective is to identify the desired action you wish the sponsor to take. Avoid the "We'd be happy to talk with you further about this. Please call if you want more information." Identify a contact person for more details if requested. Have a "heavyweight" sign the letter.