A style guide to increase your chance at funding success

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STYLE TIPS FOR BID WRITING

- A bid for funding is a blend of highly technical writing and an advertisement for you and your research.
- It is in your interest to use every skill you have to make your application stand out from the rest.
- Excellent writing which is fit for purpose and follows application rules is the most powerful tool you can use in the competitive bid process.
WHO IS READING MY PROPOSAL?

- Many reviewers will have no experience with your specific field so explain clearly what you intend to do, avoiding jargon.

- Even if your bid is assessed by scientists, what is obvious to you may not be obvious to them. Ask a colleague from a different group to look over your abstract and introduction and highlight anything that isn’t fully explained.

- A good rule:

  "It is not enough to make a document easy to read, it should also be difficult to misunderstand."

- Play “Devils Advocate” and try to misread your work!
JARGON AND TECHNICAL TERMS

- In style guides, tips and instructions from funding bodies one piece of advice that crops up every time is to avoid jargon.

- It is essential to spell out acronyms and define technical terms the first time they are used.

- Reviewers are educated but will not necessarily be expert in your field. Even if they are, they can only judge the bid by what is on the page.

- “We understand the challenge it can be to strike a balance between being too scientific and too colloquial which may lead to misinterpretations of the research value. However, a great idea expressed in a manner understood by an educated audience will speak for itself.” NIH advice
USING STYLE TO INCREASE SUCCESS

While many rules of grammar have been updated for modern usage, some reviewers have strong feelings regarding conventions e.g.

- Beginning a sentence with “And” or “But”
- The Oxford (serial) Comma – following a comma with “and”
- Mixing up nouns and verbs, for example saying “he authored..”
- Using superlatives like “best” or intensifiers like “real” in technical descriptions.

Avoiding these can help you keep reviewers interested in your idea!

You don’t know who will read your proposal so it is best to use presentation that is universally agreed to be correct.

If a reviewer finds your grammar sloppy, they might assume your work will be.
Plain language is grammatically correct language that includes complete sentence structure and accurate word usage. Plain language is *not* unprofessional writing or a method of "dumbing down" or "talking down" to the reader. Writing that is clear and to the point helps improve communication and takes less time to read and understand. Clear writing tells the reader exactly what the reader needs to know without using unnecessary words or expressions. Communicating clearly is its own reward and saves time and money. It also improves reader response to messages. Using plain language avoids creating barriers that set us apart from the people with whom we are communicating.

**NIH: Plain Language**

- Keep your writing concise and easy to read. Make one point per paragraph.
- Sentences should be simple and clear, a maximum of 20 words.
- It is much easier to test readability by reading out loud than in your head. Do this yourself or ask a colleague to read it to you.
- Most funders ask for a lay summary suitable for a general reader, this should be crafted at least as carefully as the technical summary.
- **A research council will not fund a project they can’t explain to non specialists**
“View every application as a competition

Many bids fail simply because they're not as compelling as others submitted during the same round. Make no mistake – this is a sales pitch! Your evidence of research needs to be complete and compelling; your engagement with your target audience well documented, showing clear demand for your work. Your outcomes must be clear and measurable; your management and financial models shown to be robust. In short, you must show your organisation to be capable, credible and visionary, with definite aims and objectives.”

Emma Jacques in The Guardian
KNOW YOUR SELLING POINTS

You can see your application as an attempt to “sell” your idea, so know your selling points and make sure they stand out

- If you can’t identify the selling points of your idea, is it the right idea?
- Most funding bodies will list the things they are looking to fund and shortlist bids according to how well they match up.
- Make scoring and selecting your bid easier by explaining clearly how it meets the funders priorities and criteria.
- Reviewers read tens or hundreds of bids and can easily spot when an idea has been forced to fit their criteria for the sake of an application, only apply when your idea fits the call.
- Like in advertising, it is a good idea to outline the positive and good things about your plan. Be careful not to underplay risks and challenges but don’t make your proposal all about them.
RULES AND REJECTION

- Read the guidance carefully. The same rules apply to all applicants and **there are no special cases**.

- Where stated, page, word and character limits are absolute. Failing to stay within them will mean your application is rejected. Use “Word” to check that counts remain accurate after any edits.

- Complete every section of an application, incomplete applications will not be accepted.

- Some funders have a restriction on resubmitting the same proposal, so once it has been rejected you won’t be able to submit to the same funder again.
USEFUL RESOURCES

- English usage in technical writing:
  http://www.icsharpcode.net/tecnobies/technicalwriting20020325.pdf
  http://www.rbs0.com/tw.htm

- Plain Language
  http://www.nih.gov/clearcommunication/plainlanguage.htm
  http://grants.nih.gov/grants/plain_language_examples.htm

- Funding Bid Writing
  http://www.jiscrsc.ac.uk/media/106046/good_bid_writing.pdf

- Review and Criteria
  http://grants.nih.gov/grants/peer_review_process.htm This NIH page gives very thorough information about how a bid is read, scored and selected.