Why Academics Have a Hard Time Writing Good Grant Proposals

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Author's Note

This paper was presented as part of the 2006 Symposium at the annual October meeting of the Society of Research Administrators International in Quebec City, where it was awarded Best Paper of the Year.

Abstract

This paper discusses the contrasting perspectives of academic prose versus grant writing, and lists strategies grant specialists can use to help researchers break old habits and replace them with techniques better suited to the world of competitive grant proposals.

Introduction

When they are new to the grant game, even scholars with fine publishing records can struggle with proposal writing. Many are surprised to find that the writing style that made them successful as academics is not well suited to crafting a winning proposal. To succeed at grant writing, most researchers need to learn a new set of writing skills.

Academic Writing

For purposes of this discussion "academic writing" is defined as that style commonly adopted for scholarly papers, essays, and journal articles. The following is a typical example:

> Taken together with the findings from the present study that (a) workplace aggression in the primary job was more closely associated with negative work experiences and (b) both situational and individual characteristics played a role in aggression in the secondary job, future research might benefit from a greater focus on the subjective salience of the job as a moderator of the relationship between workplace experiences and supervisor-targeted aggression. Indeed, despite the differential effects of situational and individual difference factors on aggression, it is notable that the individual difference factors exerted a consistent but relatively low-level effect on aggression across contexts, whereas the more salient situational experiences exerted context-specific effects. (Inness, Barling, and Turner, 2005)

Look at the Difference

To start, glance at the first pages in any sampling of winning grant proposals. The first thing you notice is that they look different from pages in typical academic journals. Sentences are shorter, with key phrases underlined or bolded to make them stand out. Lists are printed bullet style. Graphs, tables and drawings abound. Now read the pages more carefully. The writing is more energetic, direct and concise. The subject matter is easy to understand, as there are fewer highly technical terms. Each time you learn something about a subject entirely new to you. You are intrigued by exciting new ideas that have a good

chance for success. In short, you quickly agree that the review panels made the right choices in funding these proposals.

The lesson here is a hard one for beginners: Success in grant writing is a matter of style and format as much as content. Make no mistake—the best written proposal will not win money for a weak idea. But it is also true that many good ideas are not funded because the proposal is poorly written (New & Quick, 1998; Steiner, 1988). Sometimes the failure is due to a weak or missing component that is key to a good proposal. The research plan may be flawed or incomplete. The evaluation methods might be inadequate. The researchers may not be qualified to carry out the work. But all too often, the core problem in a failed proposal lies in the writing itself, which bears too many characteristics of academic prose. (A baffled professor once came to my office bearing the written critiques he had received from reviewers of a failed proposal. One of them included this killer remark: "Reads like a journal article.")

Contrasting Perspectives

To understand the dimensions of the overall problem, consider the contrasting perspectives of academic writing versus grant writing:

Table 1

Academic Writing versus Grant Writing: Contrasting Perspectives

Academic Writing	Grant Writing
Scholarly pursuit:	**Sponsor goals:**
Individual passion	*Service attitude*
Past oriented:	**Future oriented:**
Work that has been done	*Work that should be done*
Theme-centered:	**Project-centered:**
Theory and thesis	*Objectives and activities*
Expository rhetoric:	**Persuasive rhetoric:**
Explaining to reader	*"Selling" the reader*
Impersonal tone:	**Personal tone:**
Objective, dispassionate	*Conveys excitement*
Individualistic:	**Team-focused:**
Primarily a solo activity	*Feedback needed*
Few length constraints:	**Strict length constraints:**
Verbosity rewarded	*Brevity rewarded*
Specialized terminology:	**Accessible language:**
"Insider jargon"	*Easily understood*

Scholarly Pursuit versus Sponsor Goals

Driven to make unique contributions to their chosen fields, scholars habitually pursue their individual interests, often with a good deal of passion. When seeking financial support for these endeavors, however, many find that potential sponsors simply do not share their enthusiasm. "A sound concept, but it does not fit our current funding priorities," or similar phrases, are commonly found in letters that deny funding. With the exception of a few career development programs, funding agencies have little interest in advancing the careers of ambitious academics. Sponsors will, however, fund projects that have

a good chance of achieving *their* goals. This is why seasoned grant writers devote a good deal of time parsing grant program announcements, highlighting passages that express what the sponsors want to accomplish, and what kind of projects they will pay for. Then the writers adopt a service attitude, finding ways to adapt their expertise to match the sponsor's objectives. Finally, they test their ideas with grant program officers before deciding to write a proposal. As one of our university's consistently successful grant writers put it: "My epiphany came when I realized that grant programs do not exist to make me successful, but rather my job is to make those programs successful."

Past versus Future Orientation

In academic writing, the researcher is describing work that has already been done: Literature has been reviewed, an issue examined, a thesis presented, a discovery made, a conclusion drawn. Grant writers, by contrast, describe in detail work that they wish to do. For some disciplines, good grant writing can be viewed as science fiction, i.e., it must be grounded in solid science, but the research design itself is a set of logical yet imagined activities that have yet to take place. This in itself is a major shift in perspective that seasoned scholars find difficult when starting to write proposals.

Theme-Centered versus Project-Centered

Scholarly writers are prone to dwell on theme, thesis and theory. Essays and books can be devoted to the authors' original thinking, contributions of past and present scholars, or the evolution of entire schools of thought. They draw us into the realm of ideas. Grant writers, however, draw us into a world of action. They start by sketching out an important problem, then they move quickly to describing a creative approach to addressing that problem with a set of activities that will accomplish specific goals and objectives. The overall project is designed to make a significant contribution to a discipline or to a society as a whole.

Academic writers often seek funding to "study," "examine," or "explore" some theme or issue. But this can be deadly, as sponsors rarely spend money on intellectual exploration. They will, however, consider funding *activities* to accomplish goals that are important to them. It is the project that interests them, not just the thinking of the investigator. Finally, academic essays end with their authors' final conclusions, while grant proposals end with their projects' expected outcomes.

Expository versus Persuasive Rhetoric

The academic writer uses language to explain ideas, issues and events to the reader. The aim is to build a logical progression of thought, helping the reader to share the writer's intellectual journey and to agree with the core themes of the piece. But the language in a grant has to be stronger; it must sell a nonexistent project to the reader. The writer has to convince the reviewer that the proposed research is uniquely deserving. The whole effort is geared toward building a winning argument, a compelling case that scarce dollars should be spent on a truly exceptional idea that has an excellent chance for success. Grant reviewers are a notoriously skeptical lot who reject a majority of proposals, so writers must use language strong enough to win their reluctant support. In effect, a good proposal is an elegant sales pitch.

Impersonal versus Personal Tone

From their undergraduate term papers to their doctoral dissertations and numerous papers that followed, scholars have been conditioned to generate prose in proper academic style—cautious, objective and dispassionate, exclusively focused on the topic, with all evidence of the writer's persona hidden from view. Grant writers, however, seek the reviewers' enthusiastic endorsement; they want readers to be excited about their exemplary projects, so they strive to convey their own excitement. They do this by using active voice, strong, energetic phrasing, and direct references to themselves in the first person. Here are some examples:

> 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.

Sentences like these violate editorial rules of many scholarly journals.

Solo Scholarship versus Teamwork

With the exception of co-authored work, academic writing is mostly a solo activity. Perched at a desk, in the library or at home in the den, the solitary scholar fills page after page with stolid academic prose. When the paper or book chapter is completed, it may be passed to one or two readers for final proofing, but the overall endeavor is highly individualistic. Good grant writing, however, requires teamwork from the outset. Because their ultimate success depends upon nearly unanimous approval from a sizeable group of reviewers, grant writers place high value on feedback at every phase of proposal writing. Before the first draft, a thumbnail sketch of the basic concept will be sounded out with colleagues before sending it on to a grant program officer to test whether the idea is a good fit. Large multi-investigator proposals are typically broken into sections to be written and rewritten by several researchers, then compiled and edited by the lead writer. Many large proposals are submitted to a "red team" for internal review before sending them out to the funding agencies. Even single investigator proposals have been combed over repeatedly as the documents move from first draft to the final product. Proposals that bypass this essential process have a much greater chance of failure.

Length versus Brevity

Verbosity is rewarded in academe. From extended lectures to journals without page limits, academics are encouraged to expound at great length. A quick scan of any issue of *The Chronicle of Higher Education* reveals the degree to which simple ideas can be expanded to multiple pages. A common technique is to stretch sentences and paragraphs to extreme lengths. Consider the following example, which won a Bad Writing Contest sponsored by the journal *Philosophy and Literature:*

> The move from a structuralist account in which capital is understood to structure social relations in relatively homologous ways to a view of hegemony in which power relations are subject to repetition, convergence, and rearticulation brought the question of temporality into the thinking of structure, and marked a shift from a form of althusserian theory that takes structural totalities as theoretical objects to one in which the insights into the contingent possibility of structure inaugurate a renewed conception of hegemony as bound up with the contingent sites and strategies of the rearticulation of power. (Butler, 1997)

An extreme example perhaps, but its characteristics can be seen in many scholarly essays.

Grant reviewers are impatient readers. Busy people with limited time, they look for any excuse to stop reading. They are quickly annoyed if they must struggle to understand the writer or learn what the project is all about. Worse, if the proposal does not intrigue them by the very first page, they will not read any further (unless they must submit a written critique, in which case they immediately start looking for reasons to justify why the proposal should not be funded). When asked to describe the characteristics of good grant writing, senior reviewers put qualities such as "clear" and "concise" at the top of the list (Porter, 2005). Brevity is not only the soul of wit; it is the essence of grantsmanship. Or, to

cite Mies van der Rohe's famous dictum about modern architecture: "Less is more."

Specialized Terminology versus Accessible Language

Every discipline uses specialized terminology, much of it dictated by the need to convey precise meaning. But there reaches a point where specialized words become needlessly complex and the reader becomes lost in a tangle of dense verbiage. As Henson (2004) points out, a spell comes over us when we know our writing will be evaluated, either by editors or by grant reviewers: We want our work to appear scholarly, so we habitually inflate our prose with large words and complicated sentences to achieve the effect of serious thinking. Unfortunately, such tactics have the opposite effect on readers. Alley (1996) shows how too many big words and convoluted expressions can result in muddled jargon:

> The objective of this study is to develop an effective commercialization strategy for solar energy systems by analyzing the factors that are impeding commercial projects and by prioritizing the potential government and industry actions that can facilitate the viability of the projects.

A sentence like this could kill a grant proposal on the first page. Grant writers cannot afford to lose even one reviewer in a barrage of obtuse phrasing. They must use language that can be understood by a diverse group of readers, some of whom may be as highly specialized as the writer, but most will be generalists. Reworking the cumbersome structure above, Alley comes up with simpler, more accessible language:

> This study will consider why current solar energy systems have not yet reached the commercial stage and will evaluate the steps that industry and government can take to make these systems commercial.

Fewer words with greater clarity—a tradeoff that will improve the score of any grant proposal. But how can one consistently strike a balance between scholarly precision and meaning that is clear to a mixed audience? One NIH web site on grant writing advises writers to study articles published in *Scientific American* (National Institute of Allergy and Infectious Diseases [NIAID], 2006). Here world class scientists use accessible language to teach a general readership about complex subjects while simultaneously informing them of cutting edge developments. Good proposals do the same. The following excerpt is from a recent *Scientific American* article on stem cells and cancer research:

> Conventional wisdom has long held that any tumor cell remaining in the body could potentially reignite the disease. Current treatments therefore, focus on killing the greatest number of cancer cells. Successes with this approach are still very much hit-or-miss, however, and for patients with advanced cases of the most common solid tumor malignancies, the prognosis remains poor. (Clarke & Becker, 2006)

Clinically accurate yet easily understandable, this would be a fine introduction to a grant proposal.

Remedial strategies

Given the contrasting perspectives listed above, what can the university research office do to help academics adapt to the unfamiliar standards of grant writing? First, recognize that no one likes to be told they do not write well, especially highly educated folk who are justly proud of their intellectual achievements. Nevertheless, proactive and tactful research administrators can do much to help instill good proposal writing habits. Here are five remedial strategies that instruct without offending.

1. Home-Grown Workshops

For young investigators, grant writing workshops are an effective way to learn good writing techniques. Home-grown workshops, taught by any combination of research office personnel and grant-savvy faculty, can yield positive returns at a very low cost. Beginning workshops on basic grant writing skills should be offered on a

regular basis, supplemented periodically by those focusing on specific funding agencies. Especially popular are presentations by successful grant writers and copies of winning proposals (Porter, 2004).

2. Reading Successful Proposals

Winning grants teach by example. By perusing several, the new grant writer will note some common differences from accepted academic style, and can be encouraged to mimic them. Successful proposals from one's own institution can be put online, with access limited to internal researchers. Copies of winning proposals can also be purchased from The Grant Center at reasonable rates: www.tgcigrantproposals.com. Finally, successful proposals can be obtained directly from federal agencies under the Freedom of Information Act, but be prepared to wait several months for the documents to arrive, with sensitive information deleted.

3. Editing by a Grants Specialist

While no amount of editorial polishing can save a weak idea, a seasoned grant writer can add value to a sound concept by judicious editing. This is labor intensive at first but once the writer catches on to the simpler, livelier style of grant writing, the need for personal attention drops off rapidly.

4. Red Team Reviews

Writing a strong proposal for a major multidisciplinary grant is a challenging project all by itself, one that can overwhelm the researchers, for whom grant writing is often an additional chore on top of full workloads. One effective tool is to form an internal review team consisting of experienced senior colleagues. If carefully selected for their expertise and reputations, their written comments can have great impact. Be warned, however: A considerable degree of gentle but persistent nagging is required for the writers to have the document ready for internal review with sufficient lead time before the sponsor's deadline.

5. Writing Tips

Finally, the research office should post a set of simple writing tips on its web site. These are most helpful if examples of bad writing are contrasted with effective revisions. Seeing them side by side, readers will quickly spot which bad characteristics are their own, and will note how they can craft better versions. Alley's work, in particular, is peppered with numerous examples of weak composition contrasted with more effective phrasing. A truly time tested source is Strunk and White's familiar Elements of Style (2000). Versions of this concise, lively handbook have been popular for nearly half a century, and its instructions for crisp and vigorous writing will give heart to academics who are trying to break old habits.

Conclusions

As competition intensifies for limited research dollars, proposal success rates for most agencies are declining. To be successful in this environment, proposals must be written in a strong, persuasive style, and academic writers accustomed to a different style need help to develop more effective writing habits. Such leadership can be provided by a proactive research office that is sensitive to this pervasive need.

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