

Do's and don'ts when writing a research proposal

Do's

1. Start early

Writing a research proposal is a gradual process in which you transform a an idea into a well defined and structured proposal. It is a time consuming process of thinking, drafting, discussing and rewriting.

2. Use colleagues and external experts to read your draft proposal and to provide feedback

A considerable pitfall when writing a research proposal is that you are too absorbed in the writing process to see certain mistakes or logical errors that may occur in the process of thinking and writing. Outsiders have a certain distance and objectivity to detect possible errors or deletions.

3. Convince the funding body

Although scientists often have an innate aversion to “selling their research idea”, it is of crucial importance to convince the funding body that the money will be well-spent.

A funding body can be convinced by:

- Providing clear and direct benefits
- Making clear the problem is urgent and/or significant
- Formulate clear deliverables / research output that can be measured by the funding body
- Justify the problem you will handle using hard facts

4. Develop a logical chain of reasoning for your proposal

A proposal needs a logical flow with as main elements: problem - causes - solutions – approach -arguments.

A well-developed chain of reasoning makes a proposal logical and convincing.

5. Apply a funnel approach in your problem definition

Start with a broad problem statement and narrow it down to a specific problem and direction. Make sure your proposal has a clear focus. Narrow down the possible approaches and explain why you opt for a specific methodology. Proposals without a clear focus are often regarded as not feasible.

6. Find a balance between being concise and providing details

Although it is a difficult task, it is important to find a good balance between being concise on the one hand and providing sufficient details on the other hand. Detailed information is only necessary and relevant when it justifies a chosen methodology or when it enhances the credibility of the proposal or the applicant.

7. Project summary or abstract is the most important part

The abstract of your proposal, which is usually limited to a specific number of words, is the core element of your proposal, since evaluators do not always take the time to read your entire application. Therefore your abstract should be clear, well-structured and should contain the vital project information, namely the problem definition, the research question and the envisaged outcome. Your abstract is your entrée ticket. It should be appealing and inviting to the evaluators to read more.

8. Write about the state-of-the art

An important part of a research proposal is describing the novelty. A clear description of the state-of-the art helps in justifying the novelty of the research and it also proves that the applicant has the proper know-how.

9. Check if all evaluation criteria of the funding body are reflected in your proposal

Most funding schemes have well defined and clear evaluation criteria. When you have finished writing your first draft, read the criteria again and check if your proposal meets all of them and refers to them when relevant. It helps to use the exact wording of a specific evaluation criterion in your own proposal to point out to the evaluators that you have taken the criterion into account

10. Describe the chosen methodology

A common mistake in research proposals is that the application describes what needs to be achieved, but does not explain how the research team will come to the envisaged results. Describe the methodology you choose and also explain why this is the best methodology available to obtain your results. The research question formulated will determine your methodology. If you will hold interviews for instance, be explicit on how you will select your target group and how you will compose your questionnaire. Your methodology should convince that you will be able to obtain the envisaged results.

11. Pay attention to visual lay-out

Evaluators do not like to read applications with huge chunks of text and long sentences which do not seem to end. You can increase the readability of your proposal by using clear short sentences. Make use of bullet points or numbering, when relevant and use a timetable to give an idea how long work packages or subprojects will last. When you alternate paragraphs of text with a relevant graph or table, evaluators will find it easier to go through your proposal. Try also to avoid negative connotations such as “problems” and make use of positive statements such as “challenges”.

12. Choose a catching title

Take enough time to choose a catching title for your proposal. Make sure it reflects the core of your research. If you are asked to provide a project acronym, make sure the acronym is not a simple merger of the first letters of your title and make sure it can be pronounced in English.



Don'ts

1. Write for specialists only

Many research proposals are evaluated by a multidisciplinary team consisting of members from different scientific disciplines. Be aware that your proposal needs to be understood by people who are no expert in your field. Explain specific terminology or elaborate on complex abstract notions, when needed. If the problem you want to deal with is very complex, give a striking example to clarify the complexity of your concept.

2. Don't be too modest

When writing your CV or describing your scientific career so far, don't be modest. You have to convince evaluators to you belong to the top 10% of your peer group. You have to demonstrate that you are ambitious and talented. Mention prizes and awards you won and refer to exchange programmes or short stays abroad. Do not forget to mention scientific conferences to which you have been invited as keynote speaker.

3. A proposal is not an essay

A research proposal is very different from a scientific essay. Instead of raising questions and elaborate on various thoughts, options and hypotheses, it is crucial to formulate clear and well-defined research questions and to determine a research methodology that will help you in finding the proper answers to your research questions. References to current literature should serve a specific purpose and you should focus on research output rather than depicting a scientific debate.

