How to Write a Proposal

Prepared for the
Economic Development Officers of Nunavut

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INTRODUCTION

In a basic sense, a proposal tells a perspective funding organization:

> ▶ what your project is about
> ▶ why it should exist
> ▶ why your organization should be the one to implement or establish it
> ▶ how much funding you need

Although some proposals are rejected because they are really bad ideas, most proposals are rejected because they were good ideas that were poorly written. To often, the proposals don=t convey the idea or they focus on their own need for funds instead of matching their projects with the funding organization=s priorities. Remember, the intent of any proposal is to persuade the reader to fund or buy into the project or program that you would like to launch or implement.

The following process is not a formula that needs to be rigidly adhered to. It is a suggested approach and should be adapted to meet the various needs of your perspective funding. In addition, if the funder gives a suggested format, follow the prescribed format.

GETTING STARTED

A successful proposal is one that is well prepared, carefully planned and concisely packaged. So, before you begin writing your proposal, you need to get organized, and carefully plan out your strategy to get the funding to address your problem, need or issue.

Once you have determined your potential funder, you will need to gather as much information as possible about the program you are applying to. Get a copy of their program criteria, guidelines and application forms, and once you get them, read them. Before you even think about sitting down to write your proposal, it is important that you have thoroughly reviewed and understand all of the potential funder=s program material. Read it over at least three to five times, and become aware of:

> ▶ the program=s goals and objectives
> ▶ eligibility criteria
> ▶ evaluation criteria
> ▶ eligible costs
> ▶ deadlines

Once you have reviewed the funding organization=s material, you may find that you have some questions about the program. If you have any questions, contact the funding organization and

speak to someone about your questions and your project. In some instances, the funding organization will require you to complete a pre-proposal paper to assist them in determining whether your project meets the eligibility criteria and guidelines of the their program. The pre-proposal paper is discussed in further detail in the next section.

If all your questions are answered and you have thoroughly reviewed all the program material, the next task you are required to do is to gather all the documentation to support your project. Although this step may appear to be time consuming, in the long run, it will actually make your job of writing a proposal easier. Since your mission in writing a proposal is to make a case for your problem, need or issue, it is important to collect as much information as possible. Prior to writing, you should collect:

> ▶ background data on your organization
> ▶ background information on the nature and history of your project
> ▶ statistical information supporting the need for your project
> ▶ anticipated outcomes
> ▶ expenses associated with the project
> ▶ staffing requirements
> ▶ previous studies to support your document

In some instances, you may also want to conduct a literature review, and pull facts or statistical information from studies that support your project.

Λ   Key Questions

Does the project fall within the funding agency's priorities?
What is the current budget of the funder=s program?
What is the maximum amount of funding allotted per project/organization?
Are awards for funding made on the basis of special criteria?
Any there any hidden agendas in the funding organizations programs?
Does the program provide only one-time support or will it permit other funding opportunities?
Are there any unannounced funds that would support the project?
What is the history of your project=s problem, issue or need?
Are there any studies available which support the need for this project?
Are there any statistics that can validate the need for this project?
What facts best support your project?
What are my organization=s goals and objectives?
Who should review my proposal prior to submitting it to the funding organization?

N   Writing Tips

As you begin gathering your data and information, keep an Aideas book@ handy. Throughout the course of your research, jot down your ideas for future reference. Review the book on a

regular basis.

It is sometimes advisable to find someone within your organization who will take the time to review your proposal at different stages of writing to ensure it is concise and understandable.

PRE-PROPOSAL PAPER

Usually only two to four pages long, the pre-proposal is a conceptual shell outlining what you are proposing to do. Written in letter format on company letterhead, the pre-proposal includes the following headings:

> ▶ Summary
> ▶ Sponsor Appeal
> ▶ Problem
> ▶ Solution
> ▶ Capabilities
> ▶ Budget
> ▶ Conclusion

Under each of the headings, your objective is to write brief statements that will provide the reader with the most amount of information about your project. To aid you in the development process, each heading has been discussed separately below.

> ▶ **Summary**

In one sentence summarize the entire proposal and its benefits. Also include short sentences about how much money you want, and the uniqueness of your organization to deliver a project of this nature.

> ▶ **Sponsor Appeal**

Why are you approaching this sponsor?

> ▶ **Problem**

Summarize the current problem, need or issue that your project will focus on, and demonstrate how funding your project can assist the funder in achieving their own goals and missions.

> ▶ **Solution**

What is the approach you will use to deal with your identified problem, need, or issue? What are you going to do to help close the gap of what needs to be done.

> ▶ **Capabilities**

What are your credentials to do the project? Why can your organization solve the

problem, need or issue you are addressing?

> ► **Budget**

Request the specific amount of funding and why.

> ► **Conclusion**

Your conclusion should identify the desired action you want the funder to take. In addition, identify someone who has knowledge about the project as a contact person.

In some instances, with private sponsors and foundations, the pre-proposal paper is all that is needed and is accepted as a proposal. In any case, during your data gathering stage it is a good idea to draft a pre-proposal to guide you through the full proposal process.

Λ   **Key Questions**

What is going to be done?
Why is it important to do it?
How will it be done and by whom?
How much money is required and for what general purposes?

N   **Writing Tips**

Have the letter signed by someone in a position of authority in your organization.

Keep it short, simple and to the point.

COMPONENTS OF A FULL PROPOSAL

You have collected all your documentation, background information and have contacted the potential funder to clarify any questions you may have. You have submitted your pre-proposal, and you have been requested to submit a full proposal. It is now time to sit down and begin writing your proposal.

Generally, a standard proposal usually includes the following headings:

- ▶ Title Page
- ▶ The Cover Letter
- ▶ The Proposal Summary
- ▶ Introduction
- ▶ Statement of the Problem
- ▶ Project Goals and Objectives
- ▶ Project Methodology and Design
- ▶ Project Personnel
- ▶ Work Plan and Activities
- ▶ Anticipated Outcomes
- ▶ Funding
- ▶ Budget
- ▶ Evaluation Plan
- ▶ Appendices

Although these are the standard headings, it is a good idea to review the Request for Proposals (RFP) or the funder=s guidelines and criteria for their proposed and accepted format. If there is no proposed format cited, the above headings are a good starting point.

Under each of the headings, your objective is to provide the reader with detailed information about your project. To aid you in the development of your proposal, each heading has been discussed separately below.

Title Page

The title page is the first thing your reviewer will see. The page should include the title of your project, your organization and the funder=s addresses and the proposal date. For the title of the project, it is important to keep it simple and short. Less than a sentence is ideal. It should be clear and unambiguous, and must reflect the focus of your proposal.

Λ **Key Questions**

What exactly is your project about?

N   **Writing Tips**

When drafting the title for your project you may want to pretend that you are describing it to someone outside your organization. Use the phrase, AMy proposal is about...@ and allow yourself thirty words to describe your project. After you have described it in thirty words, try describing it in twenty words. Now, try ten words. Continue until you have the title down to five to seven words.

The Cover Letter

Written on your organization=s letterhead your cover letter introduces your organization and your project. It is a short letter that accompanies your proposal. It briefly discusses the type of request, summarizes your organization=s mission and your project. It also identifies the contact person for the project.

Some proposal writers also attach to the cover letter, a cover sheet. This is just an added feature to a proposal and does not necessarily mean you have to create one for every proposal. The cover sheet is usually done in chart form, and consists of the following headings:

- ▶ Organization Name
- ▶ Year Organization was founded
- ▶ Date of Application
- ▶ Address
- ▶ Telephone
- ▶ Fax
- ▶ E-mail
- ▶ Director
- ▶ Contact Person and Title
- ▶ Grant Request
- ▶ Period Grant Will Cover
- ▶ Type of Request
- ▶ Project Title
- ▶ Total Project Budget
- ▶ Total Organizational Budget
- ▶ Summary of Organization=s Mission
- ▶ Summary of Project

N   **Writing Tips**

Keep your cover letter short, direct and to the point. Your aim is to get them to read your proposal.

The Proposal Summary

Sometimes called the Executive Summary or Project Overview this section paints the overall picture for your reader of what your project is about. It is the last written and first read section of your proposal. It is a very important component of your proposal, since in it is the part of the document that is going to convince the funder whether or not your project should be considered for support. It is written as a summary of your project, and only highlights the key areas of your proposal. Make sure you include the following:

> ▶ a brief statement of the problem, need or issue you are addressing
> ▶ a short description of your project outlining your objectives, the solution you propose, how you are going to do it, and how many people will benefit from the project
> ▶ funding requirements
> ▶ your organization=s name, history, purpose and activities

Λ   **Key Questions**

Have you adequately explained your project?
Have you highlighted all the important sections of your proposal?
Does the project summary provide a clear understanding of the project?

N   **Writing Tips**

The proposal summary is usually completed after you have written your proposal.

The major headings used throughout your proposal can also be used when writing your proposal summary.

Introduction

Your introduction introduces and describes your organization=s background and qualifications for establishing or implementing the proposed project. This section should also include brief descriptions of your organization=s history, and current programs and activities. What you are attempting to do is establish who you are, and describe how this project links both the goals of the funding agent and your organization.

Λ   **Key Questions**

What does your organization do?

What has your organization done that would make it a good candidate to fund?
What are the goals of your organization? What are the goals of the proposed program?
How do your organization=s goals link with the goals of the funder?

N   **Writing Tips**

Keep your descriptions as brief as possible, and only include information that relates to your proposal. Be specific about the community you represent, and how they will benefit from the project you are proposing.

Statement of the Problem

Even if the problem is obvious, you must clearly state it for your reviewers. This section represents the reason behind your proposal. It should be clear, concise and well supported with evidence such as statistical data or evidence drawn by experience. Your documentation could reflect:

> ▶ the purpose for developing the proposal
> ▶ how your organization came to realize this problem, need or issue
> ▶ how many people will benefit from this project
> ▶ social and economic costs to be affected
> ▶ what solutions can be achieved through your project

It is important in this section that you summarize the problem and demonstrate to the funding agency that your organization is familiar with the project. If you want to supply supplementary details, references and information requiring in-depth analysis include these in your appendices. Do not include them in the proposal. Although these types of information may be important, if included in the body of the proposal it could detract from its readability.

Λ   **Key Questions**

What problem, need, or issue does your project address?
How do you know this problem, need or issue is important?
What happens if this problem, need, or issue is not dealt with?
Why is this project important?
What experience does your organization have in addressing the problem, need, or issue?
Why is this project important?
Why should you receive funding for this project?
How does this problem relate to your organizational goals?
How does this project assist the potential funding agency in fulfilling their mandate?
What statistical evidence do you have to support the need for this project?
Who does this problem, need, or issue affect?

Λ   Writing Tips

Don=t exaggerate the problem and make sure you include data (statistics, reports, literature reviews, needs assessments) to support your request.   Beware of the excessive use of statistics. They can hinder your proposal and confuse your reader.

Project Goals and Objectives

Project goals and objectives refer to the specific activities within the project you are proposing. Usually you have one to two goals, and three to six objectives. Your goals are usually broad statements that define the big picture of what you want to do. Your objectives are statements about how you are going to achieve your goal. They are measurable, and are related to the outcome of your project. They are your end result, and serve as the basis for the evaluation of your project. For this reason, it is important to keep them simple, attainable and verifiable. Exaggerate your objectives, and you will have trouble during your evaluation. Remember your stated objectives will probably be used to evaluate your project. Be realistic.   Each of your objectives should be SMART:

> **S** – Specific-does the objective state precisely what is to be achieved
> **M**- Measurable-id the objective defined in terms that can actually be measured-number of users jobs created, number of businesses that will be created
> **A**-Appropriate-does this objective actually fall within our overall mission and goals
> **R**-Realistic-given the resources that you have is the objective achievable
> **T**-Timed-is a time limit set on the achievement of the objective by date or by duration

Λ   Key Questions

What exactly are you trying to change with this project?
How long will it take to make the change?
How will your objectives demonstrate that you have achieved your desired outcome?
Are your objectives measurable?
Are your objectives realistic?
Are your objectives factual?
What would demonstrate that your project is a success?

Ν   **Writing Tips**

When writing out your objectives always place them in order of importance with the most important being first.

Make sure there is overlap between the objectives and goals of your proposal, and the objectives of the funding organization. It is important that you demonstrate that your project is in line with the funding organization=s goals and objectives. If you do not demonstrate that there is a link your chances of getting funding diminish significantly.

Project Methodology and Design

In this section, you will describe in detail what methods you will employ to implement your project. In it, you will describe what activities you will undertake to achieve your defined objectives. It is important to be specific in your writing, and to demonstrate how in fulfilling your objectives you will be dealing with the problem, need or issue identified in your proposal. Information should be placed in sequential order, and should be detailed. Try to ensure that you demonstrate that your project is unique and innovative.

Λ   **Key Questions**

How do you propose to do your project?
To achieve your objectives, what are you going to do?
Where will the project take place?
What data will be collected?
How will the data be collected? (surveys, workshops, literature reviews)
What analytical methods will be used to analyze the data?
Are there any partnerships that will be developed because of this project?
Who is the target audience for this project and how will you include/involve them?

Ν   **Writing Tips**

If you are having difficulty writing this section use the "What if@ scenario... "If I had the money for the project what would I do?"

Project Personnel

Sometimes called the project team or staff, this section details who will carry out your project. It details the roles of the key team members. If you are unsure of who will do the work, explain how you will select the person(s) once you have been approved for funding. Detailed job descriptions can be included in the appendices. You can also include a short paragraph on each individual in the body of the proposal and attach their resumes for further reference by your reader.

Λ   **Key Questions**

How is this position important to the project?
What are the responsibilities associated with this position?
What is the process that will be used to hire the personnel for this project?
Is there an advisory committee to oversee the project?
What is the advisory committee=s role and function?
What positions are going to be paid from the grant?

N   **Writing Tips**

Make sure you clarify how important each of the positions are to the success of the project, and clearly relate the positions to the activities described in the methods section.

Work Plan and Activities

Usually in chart form, the work plan and activities section uses the information from your objectives and methodology sections. It highlights the key activities, and details the order in which they will be completed. In addition, it is usually advisable to include a column that describes the expected outcomes from each of the activities, and a column for a completion date of these activities.

Λ   **Key Questions**

What are all the key activities of your project?
For each activity, what do you hope to achieve?
How long will it take to do each activity?
Who is going to do the work?
Where will the project take place?

N   **Writing Tips**

Keep your statements short, and highlight only the pertinent points.

Anticipated Outcomes

Although difficult to define at times, you will need to describe what impact your project will have on your particular problem, need, or issue.

Λ	**Key Questions**

As a result of your project, what will change about the situation?
What impact will your project have on your target audience?
What will you produce?

N	**Writing Tips**

Many outcomes may be ambiguous, difficult to quantify, and prove that a particular impact was the cause of a particular project. Nevertheless, you will need to do the best job you can in defining your anticipated outcomes.

Funding

In this section, you need to outline how your project is going to be financed. It is important to include in-kind donations and expenses on the part of your organization, and if there are any other organizations which are supporting your project. Another area which must be addressed is how your project will be supported in the future.

Λ	**Key Questions**

What other funding organizations are supporting your project?
Are there any partnerships developed with outside organizations for this project?
What is your future vision for this project?
How will it become self-sufficient?

Budget

Overstating your budget can mean instant rejection for your proposal. When calculating your budget be realistic, and recognize you can=t go back to the funder to ask for more money because you forgot something. There is no guessing. If you are unsure about the cost of something call someone and ask for rough estimates. When laying out your budget, it is sometimes useful to set your budget up in two columns. One for project expenses, and one for identifying what portions of the project you are seeking funding.

It is also important to thoroughly review the funding organization=s fine print on eligible costs. Some funding agents do not allow for indirect costs, while others will provide you with a flat percentage that can be used. Each funding organization is different. It is important to know what expenses are covered by the funding organization.
If there is no specified format made by the funding agent, the following categories can be

considered:

- ▶ Personnel (salary and benefits)
- ▶ Consultants (salary)
- ▶ Instruction
- ▶ Equipment
- ▶ Supplies
- ▶ Communication (telephone/postage)
- ▶ Materials preparation
- ▶ Travel
- ▶ Rental of facilities
- ▶ Evaluation
- ▶ Other Expenses
- ▶ Indirect Costs (usually administration and overhead fees for your organization)

Your budget is more than an accounting of what you will need. In many ways, it is a reflection of your credibility. Plan it wisely, and make sure your calculations are as clear as possible. When in doubt include a budget narrative following your budget to explain or justify any unusual expenditure items.

Λ   **Key Questions**

Are my budget figures realistic?
How much will the project cost?
What portions of the budget are you seeking funding for?
Are there sufficient resources to carry out your project?
Have you made notes to justify ambiguous budget categories?
Have you clarified how various budget items were calculated?
Have you described what is covered in the indirect costs?
Is there a financing plan for future support of this project?
What is your organization contributing to the project?
How well does your proposed activities fit to your budget?

N   **Writing Tips**

Include the expenses for all the people working on the project. If some of the personnel are employees of your organization show their title, annual rate pay and the portion of time to be dedicated to the project (number of months, full-time, part-time). To calculate an employee=s contribution to a project, take the annual rate pay and multiple it by the percentage of time devoted to the project times the duration of the project. For example, an Executive Director making $40,000 per year contributes 5% of their time to the project over 8 months. On this project the Executive Director=s salary expense would be $1,333. ($40,000 x 5% x 8 months).

Evaluation Plan

The evaluation plan may not be a category that is used in a proposal developed for a RFP. It is important to read the RFP to determine if it is included, and respond according. In general though, your proposal must demonstrate to the potential funder that you have a plan for deciding whether or not your project has been successful. Your evaluation plan does not have to be elaborate but it should make reference to your objectives and to the types of evaluation tools:

- ▶ surveys
- ▶ questionnaires
- ▶ data collection instruments
- ▶ data analysis forms you will use to demonstrate the credibility of your project

In addition, you should determine whether your evaluation will be qualitative, quantitative or a combination of both.

Λ   Key Questions

What exactly are you evaluating?
What data collection instruments can be used to get the information you need?
Who will be involved in evaluating the success of your project?
What do you need to learn from the evaluation?
What are your project objectives?
What methods will be used to evaluate each of the objectives?
What type of information will show the success of the project?
How should the data be interpreted?
How will the evaluation results be used?

N   Writing Tips

If you plan to use a survey instrument to assist you in evaluating the success of your project include a draft of your survey in the appendices.

Appendices

Your appendices should include information, which will be of secondary interest to your reader. Here are some possible items you may want to include in the appendices:

► **Dissemination Plan**

This plan demonstrates how you are going to distribute information on or about the project.

► **Letters of Support**

In many instances letters of support are an asset to your proposal. Many potential funders like to know that others feel strongly enough to write a letter supporting your project.

► **Job Descriptions**

Keep these brief and only include key positions within your project.

► **Evaluation Instruments**

These should clearly be marked draft, and should look as real as possible.

► **Organizational Information**

You may want to include a brochure, financial statements or an annual report of your organization.

Λ **Key Questions**

Have you included only information that strengthens your proposal?

N **Writing Tips**

After you have finished writing your proposal, reread it and include anything that strengthens your proposal in your appendices. Make sure you reference anything in your appendices within the body of your proposal.

ADDITIONAL CONSIDERATIONS

► **Multiple Submissions**

As you are waiting for a response from your first funder, it is a good idea to submit your proposal to other key funders. It is a common practice, and won=t jeopardize the likelihood of getting your proposal funded. Be aware, however, that you are ethically obligated to tell a potential sponsor that you have submitted a proposal to another funder.

► Proposal Appearance

You have spent a lot of time working on the content of your proposal and you are finally finished. The same amount of attention now has to be paid to the appearance of your proposal. Initial impressions are important. Make sure the font size and style, layout, white space and headers look professional. Have it proofread for typos and mistakes.

► Unsolicited and Requests for Proposals (RFPs)

To begin with, there are basically two types of proposals you may be required to write.

1.   Unsolicited Proposals
These are proposals that you submit to an identified funding organization to request funding for your problem, need or issue.

2.   Requests for Proposals (RFP)
RFPs are proposals that are specifically requested by an organization to complete a particular job or project. They usually involve a tender process in which you will be bidding for the project or funding with other competitors. You will be given a statement of work that outlines exactly what the organization wants. You write your proposal to match their statement of work.

The basic format for each type of proposal is similar, however, in the case of unsolicited proposals the homework you are required to complete prior to writing your proposal differs slightly. Essentially, in an unsolicited proposal, you will be required to find a prospective funder for your project.

► Missing a Deadline

Miss a deadline, you miss a potential funder. There are no second chances. Most funders have stringent rules about deadlines. Try to finish your proposal about five days before the deadline to allow for signatures, copying, binding and courier services.

► Be Careful with Language

The person who reviews your proposal may have no idea about your situation. Avoid using jargon and trendy words. They can confuse a reader.

► Length of Your Proposal

There is no standard length to a proposal. It is dependent upon numerous variables such as how much money you are requesting, and how much information the funding organization requests.   When writing your proposal, the quality of information is more important than the quantity of information. Proposals are funded on the information they

contain not on the amount.

TEMPLATES

In an effort to assist you further a proposal template listing the key questions for each section of a full proposal has been attached.

Full Proposal Template

    ▶ **Title Page**

What exactly is your project about?

    ▶ **The Cover Letter**

    ▶ **The Proposal Summary**

Have you adequately explained your project?
Have you highlighted all the important sections in your proposals?
Does the project summary provide a clear understanding of the project?

    ▶ **Introduction**

What does your organization do?
What has your organization done that would make it a good candidate to fund?
What are the goals of your organization? What are the goals of the proposed program?
How do your organization=s goals link with the goals of the funder?

    ▶ **Statement of the Problem**

What problem, need, or issue does your project address?
How do you know this problem, need or issue is important?
What happens if this problem, need, or issue is not dealt with?
Why is this project important?
What experience does your organization have in addressing the problem, need or issue?
Why is this project important?
Why should you receive funding for this project?
How does this problem relate to your organizational goals?
How does this project assist the potential funding agency in fulfilling their mandate?
What statistical evidence do you have to support the need for this project?
Who does this problem, need or issue affect?

    ▶ **Project Goals and Objectives**

What exactly are you trying to change with this project?
How long will it take to make the change?
How will your objectives demonstrate that you have achieved your desired outcome?
Are your objectives measurable?
Are your objectives realistic?
Are your objectives factual?
What would demonstrate that your project is a success?

▶ Project Methodology and Design

How do you propose to do your project?
To achieve your objectives, what are you going to do?
Where will the project take place?
What data will be collected?
How will the data be collected? (survey, workshops, literature reviews)
What analytical methods will be used to analyze the data?
Are there any partnerships that will be developed because of this project?
Who is the target audience for this project and how will you include/involve them?

▶ Project Personnel

How is this position important to the project?
What are the responsibilities associated with this position?
What is the process that will be used to hire the personnel for this project?
Is there an advisory committee to oversee the project?
What is the advisory committee=s role and function?
What positions are going to be paid from the grant?

▶ Work Plan and Activities

What are all the key activities of your project?
For each activity, what do you hope to achieve?
How long will it take to do each activity?
Who is going to do the work?
Where will the project take place?

▶ Anticipated Outcomes

As a result of your project, what will change about the situation?
What impact will your project have on your target audience?
What will you produce?

▶ Funding

What other funding organizations are supporting your project?
Are there any partnerships developed with outside organizations for this project?
What is your future vision for this project?
How will it become self-sufficient?

> ▶ **Budget**

Are my budget figures realistic?
How much will the project cost?
What portions of the budget are you seeking funding for?
Are there sufficient resources to carry out your project?
Have you made notes to justify ambiguous budget categories?
Have you clarified how various budget items were calculated?
Have you described what is covered in the indirect costs?
Is there a financing plan for future support of this project?
What is your organization contributing to the project?
How well does your proposed activities fit to your budget?

> ▶ **Evaluation Plan**

What exactly are you evaluating?
What data collection instruments can be used to get the information you need?
Who will be involved in evaluating the success of your project?
What do you need to learn from the evaluation?
What are your project objectives?
What methods will be used to evaluate each of the objectives?
What type of information will show the success of the project?
How should the data be interpreted?
How will the evaluation results be used?

> ▶ **Appendices**

Have you included only information that strengthens your proposal?