3 | Strategic Planning for Proposals and Grants

Overview

This chapter will show you how to begin planning a project and developing the content of a proposal or grant. The chapter will meet the following learning objectives:

1. Define what is meant by *strategic planning*.
2. Discuss subject, purpose, readers, and contexts of proposals.
3. Show how to analyze readers.
4. Show how to analyze contexts.
5. Discuss how understanding the rhetorical situation can be used to focus proposal writing teams.

Elements of Strategic Planning

Strategic planning is a process of setting objectives and developing a project plan for meeting those objectives. When writing a proposal, including grant proposals, you need to identify (a) what you are trying to achieve, (b) why you want to achieve it, and (c) who can help you achieve your objectives. Effective strategic planning can save you a great amount of time when writing a proposal. Of course, we are all tempted to just jump in, drafting the proposal from beginning to end. Time devoted to good planning, however, will focus your writing efforts, thus saving you time later and helping you avoid dead ends.

In this chapter, you will learn how to use strategic planning to clarify what you want your proposal to achieve. You will learn how to set objectives, clarify your purpose, and develop useful profiles of your readers. With this information in place, you will find that drafting the proposal or grant will be much easier and more efficient.

Setting Objectives

When planning out a proposal or grant, your first step should be to set some objectives for the project you are proposing:

1. *List all your project's objectives, including the most and least significant goals.* If the project you are proposing is small or simple, you might have only a

few items on your list. If your project is complex, you might fill the whole page. Keep in mind that you can always remove items from your list, so put down anything that comes to mind.

2. *Rank your project's objectives from most important to least important.* If you are writing your proposal with a team, this activity of ranking objectives offers an excellent opportunity to discuss the complexities and issues involved.

3. *Identify the project's top rank objective (TRO).* The top rank objective is the paramount goal of your project. It is the one goal you and your team most want to achieve.

Your top rank objective will be used to guide your project and the proposal-writing process. It might look something like the following statements:

- To develop a prototype of a hybrid vehicle that runs on ethanol
- To develop a nonhazardous decontaminating foam that neutralizes chemical and biological agents on humans
- To study the effects of depression on teenagers who are the children of alcoholics
- To implement a Radio Frequency Identification (RFID) system that allows our company to track inventory

To clarify, your top rank objective is not something like, "We want to raise $3.2 million for our project." The funding for your project is only the means to achieving the top rank objective; it is not the main objective of your proposal.

The Rhetorical Situation

Now that you have identified your top rank objective, you are ready to start researching the *rhetorical situation* in which your proposal will be used. The rhetorical situation includes all the elements that will influence how your readers interpret your proposal.

There are several approaches and analytical tools available to help you define the rhetorical situation. One of the most flexible of these analytical tools is the following list, which will prompt you to consider four issues:

- **Subject** What is my proposal about? What is it not about?
- **Purpose** What is my proposal supposed to achieve?
- **Readers** Who will read my proposal?
- **Context** Where will my proposal be read, and how does that context shape the reading?

When preparing to write a proposal, you should answer these questions up front to fully understand the situations in which the proposal will be used. Let us look at these four issues in more depth.

Subject

Essentially, the *subject* is what your proposal or grant is about. In Chapter 2, you learned how to determine the stasis of a problem or opportunity. Answers to the four stasis questions (i.e., Is there a problem? What exactly is the problem? How serious is the problem? and What type of problem is it?) will already provide you with a large amount of insight into the subject of your proposal.

Now that you have a good idea of the problem you are trying to solve, you should start thinking about the boundaries of that problem. Specifically, ask yourself two questions:

- What do my readers "need to know" to make a decision about my proposal?
- What information, no matter how interesting to me, is *not* needed to make a decision about my proposal?

These questions are important because readers tend to evaluate proposals from a "need-to-know" perspective. In other words, they only want to spend time processing information that will help them make an informed decision. Writers, on the other hand, often approach a text from a "want-to-tell" point of view. That is, after spending weeks, perhaps months, collecting information on the subject, writers very much want to tell the readers everything they collected, no matter how insignificant.

As anyone who has struggled to read a bloated proposal or grant will agree, readers quickly grow frustrated with all the tidbits of want-to-tell information. The seemingly endless string of details can distract the readers from the more important need-to-know issues in the proposal. As a result, a thirty-page proposal that includes want-to-tell information is much less effective than a leaner fifteen-page proposal that is limited to need-to-know information, because the leaner proposal highlights the crucial points for the readers. The bloated proposal, meanwhile, blurs the crucial points by hiding them among noncrucial details.

To help you sort out the need-to-know from the want-to-tell information, you should pay close attention to the boundaries of your proposal's subject. First, ask yourself what is *inside* the subject (i.e., what do the readers need to know?). Then, ask yourself what is *outside* the subject (i.e., what don't the readers need to know?). In some cases, this second question can be most useful for defining the boundaries of the subject. By consciously deciding what topics will *not* be discussed in the proposal, you can better define what information should be included.

Purpose

The purpose of the proposal is what you want the proposal or grant to achieve. More than likely, your purpose will be similar to the top rank objective you developed earlier:

- The purpose of this proposal is to offer a plan for developing a nonhazardous decontaminating foam that neutralizes chemical and biological agents on humans.
- Our aim is to secure funding from the National Institutes of Health to study the effects of depression on teenagers who are the children of alcoholics.

One of the most common reasons why reviewers reject proposals is that the writers were not absolutely clear about their purpose.

Of course, proposal writers usually have a good grasp of what they are trying to achieve. But, when they are asked to state their purpose, they sometimes ramble for a couple minutes with a laundry list of items: "Well, it should do this, this, and this . . . and, oh yes, it should do that, too." This kind of shotgun approach to the purpose almost guarantees that the proposal will sound unfocused and vague to the readers. After all, if the writer cannot articulate the purpose of the proposal succinctly, the readers certainly will not be able to articulate the purpose, either.

The secret to writing a good purpose statement is to limit yourself to expressing the purpose in one sentence: "The purpose of this proposal is to. . . ." If you cannot squeeze your purpose into one sentence, then your proposal might not be focused enough for the readers.

Fortunately, once you have hammered down your proposals' purpose into a one-sentence statement, you will have set a cornerstone for the entire proposal. As you write, you can look back at your statement of purpose to see if your proposal is indeed achieving what you set out to do. Meanwhile, you can use that purpose statement to help you carve away all the distracting, non-crucial information that tends to creep into the writing of larger documents. A good purpose statement acts like a knife to help you cut away the fat.

Readers

Experienced proposal and grant writers will tell you that developing a complete understanding of the readers is the most important part of the proposal-writing process. In fact, some professional proposal writers and development officers collect whole dossiers of information on their readers, trying to find out what motivates them to say yes to a proposal or grant. The methods offered here are a bit less thorough, but they will provide you with great insights into your readers' thought processes.

When analyzing your readers, you should first recognize that there are different levels of readers who will pick up your proposal: primary readers, or decision makers; secondary readers, or advisors; tertiary readers, or evaluators; and gatekeepers, or supervisors.

Primary Readers (Decision Makers)

The primary reader is the person or persons to whom the proposal is addressed. In most cases, the primary readers are the people who can actually say yes to your proposal. They are the *decision makers* in the proposal process, because they are most responsible for assessing the merits of your ideas. If you are unsure who your primary readers are, ask yourself who actually has the power to accept your proposal. Who can say yes?

Secondary Readers (Advisors)

There are also numerous secondary readers who will influence the acceptance or rejection of your proposal. Think of secondary readers as the people to whom

your primary readers might turn for advice. They could be supervisors, experts, accountants, or lawyers who check over the methods, facts, and figures of the proposal or grant. Compared to the primary readers, these secondary readers often have different motives for reading the proposal. As experts, they are usually looking for more specialized information than the primary readers. For example, as an advisor, the senior engineer at a company could significantly influence whether a proposal is accepted, because he will study the technical feasibility of your ideas. As you write the proposal, you should keep that senior engineer in mind, even though he may not be the person who can say yes to your ideas.

Tertiary Readers (Evaluators)

Tertiary readers are the people who you do not expect to read your proposal but who would have a stake in what you are proposing. For example, tertiary readers could include reporters, hostile lawyers, program assessors, historians, politicians, the public, or your competition. At first, it might seem odd to keep the interests of these distant readers in mind, but tertiary readers often prove to be people who can unexpectedly sabotage (or support) your plans. You should always identify these potential readers to make sure that you are not writing something that would make you or your organization vulnerable to their challenges.

Gatekeepers (Supervisors)

Gatekeepers are the readers who have the most direct influence over you. They could include your supervisor, the CEO of your company, an accountant, or your company's legal counsel. They might include the board of directors of your organization. Gatekeepers are the readers who need to endorse your proposal before it is sent to the primary readers. Again, it might seem strange to keep the needs of these readers in mind as you invent your ideas. But if your proposal or grant is not acceptable to your boss or the legal department, then the primary readers will never have the chance to say yes. You need to make sure you understand what these gatekeepers want to see in the proposal before you start writing it. Otherwise, the proposal may end up in an endless loop of revisions as various gatekeepers ask for further changes.

If you haven't noticed already, these four classes of readers represent a variety individuals who will influence the development of the proposal. How can you identify all these different people and their interests? One way is to use a *writer-centered worksheet* to help you identify and sort out all these different readers (Figure 3.1).*
    Here is how the worksheet is used:

1. Place yourself and/or your organization in the half-circle labeled *Writer*.
2. In the arch labeled *Primary*, write down the primary readers, preferably by name, who will be directly responsible for making a decision on your

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*The audience worksheets in Figures 3.1 and 3.2 are similar to those provided by J. C. Mathes and Dwight Stevenson in their book *Designing Technical Reports* (pp. 15–23). The worksheets used here, however, are designed differently to focus on the audience issues that are important to proposals.

FIGURE 3.1
Writer-centered Worksheet
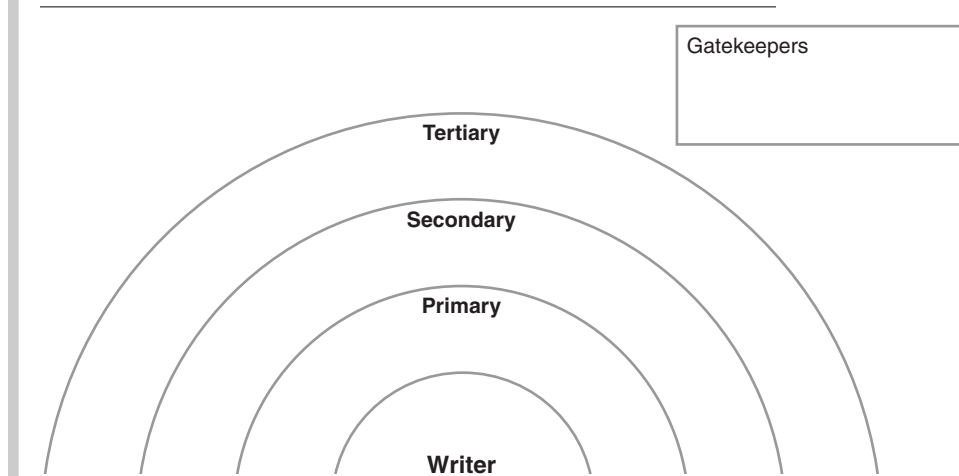
proposal. You should list only one or two primary readers, because only a few people will have the power to say yes or no to your proposal.

3. In the *Secondary* arch, write down all the readers who might serve as advisors to the primary readers. Think about the people to whom the primary readers might turn for information or advice. In most cases, you will find that there are many more secondary readers than primary readers.
4. In the *Tertiary* arch, try to imagine anyone else, no matter how remote, who might have a stake in your proposal. Write down the people who might use your proposal, even if you never intended for them to possess a copy.
5. In the *Gatekeepers* box, list your supervisors. As you think about gatekeepers, write down people who need to approve your proposal before it is sent to the primary readers.

The writer-centered worksheet helps you visualize your potential readers by spatially viewing their relationship to you. Your primary readers are usually the most important part of your audience, so they occupy the circle closest to you. The secondary and tertiary readers occupy places a bit further away. The gatekeepers are off to the side because they are not really the intended readers of the proposal, but they will supervise your work.

What about the readers of grant proposals? The process is the same. You may not know the names of the readers, but you can make some guesses about the types of people who will be reading the proposal. Put your best guesses in the writer-centered chart. That said, at many foundations you should be able to find out the names and backgrounds of the people who will review your grant proposal. Once you identify who will be reading the proposal, you can use the Internet to find out more information about them.

Now it is time to consider the psychology of the people you identified in the writer-centered worksheet. It is time to get inside their minds to figure out why they might say yes or no to your proposal. To begin, keep in mind that readers of proposals and grants react positively or negatively on four levels: motives, values, attitudes, and emotions.

Motives

Readers are motivated to take action when they think a plan will improve their personal, professional, or organizational lives. For example, perhaps a particular reader is motivated by a higher profit margin. A successful business proposal would address that motivation by stressing the enhanced profit margin created by the proposed project. Another reader might be motivated to fight poverty, so a successful grant proposal written to this reader might show how the project will lift people out of poverty. In our culture, the word *motives* has a slightly negative undertone, as though people with motives have hidden reasons for behaving a particular way. Here, we are using the word to suggest that people always have motives for taking action. When you identify someone's motives, you will know what moves them to act.

Values

Readers often react positively or negatively because an idea or plan touches their personal, professional, or organizational values. Usually, it is not hard to find out your readers' values. Often, companies and funding sources publish documents like mission statements, policy statements, and ethics policies that spell out the values that the organization publicly holds. An individual reader's professional or personal values can often be found in biographical statements, speeches they have made, or their past actions. The Internet is a great place to figure out your readers' values, because people often reveal more in their corporate and personal websites than they would be in person.

Attitudes

Readers typically start out with a positive or negative attitude toward a given proposal. In some cases, they are looking forward to moving into new markets or solving a long-standing problem in society. In other cases, however, readers will approach a proposal with a negative attitude, because the proposal resulted from a personal or organizational failure. For example, the in-house experts at a client company might have a negative attitude toward your proposal because they think their managers' decision to solicit proposals implies a lack of faith in the experts' ability to solve the problem themselves. Of course, readers' attitudes are always hard to judge, but you should pay close attention to what the readers say and how they say it. Sometimes the readers' language or tone can tell you a great amount about their attitude toward you, the project, and your proposal.

Emotions

Readers also react to proposals in emotional ways that go beyond the simple logic or costs of your proposal. For instance, if you are proposing to renovate a landmark building, the readers may have strong positive or negative emotions. They

may feel joy, frustration, pride, or even anger. You should always take these emotions into account as you write the proposal. Positive emotions can be used to energize your proposal, while negative emotions should be addressed by stressing the benefits of taking action.

Again, a worksheet can help us sort out all the complex motives, values, attitudes, and emotions of the various readers. By listing the different readers in a *reader analysis worksheet* (Figure 3.2), you can start anticipating the psychological factors that will affect their reactions.

Using the reader analysis worksheet is a simple process. First, in the left-hand column, list the readers you identified in the writer-centered chart. Then, working from left to right, fill in what you know about each reader's motives, values, attitudes, and emotions. If you do not know something about the readers, just put a question mark in that space. Question marks signal places where you need to do more research on your readers. Of course, you cannot know everything about your readers, but eventually you should be able to put notes of some kind inside each of the spaces in this worksheet.

Some writers may mistakenly believe that all this reader analysis is not necessary for writing a proposal. And perhaps, for smaller proposals and grants, such detailed analysis might be too much. However, as proposals and grants grow larger and more complex, the stakes start to grow higher and the competition more intense. The more important the proposal, the more critical it is that you develop a high awareness of how and why your readers react in specific ways. Try using the writer-centered worksheet and reader analysis worksheet, and you will almost certainly feel more able to shape your proposal specifically to the needs of the readers. In most cases, your deeper understanding of the readers will increase your chances of winning the contract or funding.

Context

Analysis of the context is strongly related to your analysis of the readers, because context involves the physical, economic, ethical, and political environments in which the readers will evaluate your proposal or grant. If, for example, you know that the decision on a contract will be made by a large committee that will receive several other fifty-page proposals, you might want to find a way to use executive summaries, lists, and graphs to highlight your main points. After all, you can safely predict that committee members will first scan all the proposals and choose only a few to study in greater depth. By recognizing the readers' physical context, you can highlight your main points, thereby increasing the odds that your proposal or grant will make it into the "keep" pile and away from the "reject" pile.

But there are also more complex contextual factors to consider when writing a proposal or grant. In addition to physical constraints, you should also consider the economic, ethical, and political issues that shape the reading of your proposal.

Physical Context

Professional proposal writers and grant writers will often try to visualize the physical context in which their document might be used. Do the readers expect a

FIGURE 3.2
Reader Analysis Worksheet

Readers	Motives	Values	Attitudes	Emotions
Primary Readers				
Secondary Readers				
Tertiary Readers				
Gatekeepers				

large document or a smaller document with appendices? Will they be reading many proposals at the same time? How will the proposals be discussed? Will the proposal be read in a large meeting or at someone's desk? These elements of the physical context will influence how you organize and design your proposal.

Economic Context

Of course, the bottom line *is* the bottom line for any proposal. You should always consider the economic status of the client or funding source. In some cases, an expensive plan might solve all of their problems, but the client or funding source is only able to afford something modest. On a larger scale, the economic context might involve studying forecasts for the client's industry or developing an understanding of the health of the current market for the client's products or services. In a grant proposal, you should find out how much money the funding source has given to similar projects in the past. Overall, you should always pay close attention to the money issues in a proposal. You can be certain that your readers will.

Ethical Context

Clients often shy away from proposals that sound ethically questionable. In an increasingly litigious society, the ethics of any project are critically important. Therefore, you need to be mindful of plans that might leave the readers facing ethical pitfalls, harming their image or leaving them open to liability lawsuits. Moreover, short-term gains at the expense of the environment or society might sound tempting, but these ethical transgressions have a way of returning later to hurt the client and yourself. As a result, proposals should always evaluate the risks of litigation and public condemnation. As you analyze the context, try to identify any potential ethical problems, even the most obscure.

Political Context

In proposals, political issues come into play on two levels. First, as corporate citizens, most company executives and boards of directors are well aware of the national, local, and industrial political issues that might affect their business or organization. Proposal writers should be well aware of the politics in a particular industry and how they play out in the local, state, and federal sectors. Grant writers should consider how the project they are proposing will affect the political status quo. The second level of politics involves the office politics that influence the review of proposals. It is important to recognize that proposals are usually treading on someone's turf or offering ideas that other people in the company believe they could have provided. In some cases, the good-old-boy or good-old-gal network might give one proposal an edge over others. These office political issues are unavoidable, but you should be aware of them so you can better plan your proposal-writing strategy.

Figure 3.3 shows a *context analysis worksheet* that can be used to help you sort out all these complex contextual issues. It is divided into three different levels, primary readers, industry/community, and writers, to represent the various levels on which these contextual issues tend to influence the readers. The *primary reader* level is for your notes about the different contexts that face your primary readers. As you think about this level, imagine any outside influences that will impact

Context Analysis Worksheet

	Physical	**Economic**	**Ethical**	**Political**
Primary Readers				
Industry/ Community				
Writers				

how your readers make their decision about your ideas. The *industry/ community* level is for observations about current trends in the readers' industry or community. This part of the chart might also include the concerns of the secondary or tertiary readers described in the reader analysis worksheet. And finally, the *writer* level concerns your company's or organization's context. It is important not to forget that many of the same contextual factors that are influencing your readers and their industry/community are also the factors that influence your company or organization. You may need to modify your proposal to fit your own contextual-based interests.

Put question marks in spaces where you do not know enough about the readers' context. These question marks signal places where you may need to do more research on your readers.

The Situation at Overture Designs

In the last chapter, we saw how Lisa Miller used stasis techniques to identify the who, what, where, and when of the RFP sent out by Overture Designs. We also saw how she used the three stasis questions to isolate Overture's problem. Lisa was now ready to list the project objectives and start developing a deeper understanding of the rhetorical situation in which her proposal would be used.

Objectives

Lisa began by listing all the objectives she could gather from Overture's request for proposals and her visit to the firm's offices. She then ranked them, allowing her to identify the top rank objective.

Objectives	Objectives When Ranked
• Stay among the top ten architecture firms	1. **Create more space in the office (TRO)**
• Manage growth of design operations	2. Manage growth of design operations
• Create more space in the office	3. Make more room for architects and staff
• Make more room for architects and staff	4. Plan that causes least disruption to current operations
• Innovative approaches welcome (desired?)	5. Prefer to stay in current office (?)
• Plan that causes least disruption to current operations	6. Stay among the top ten architecture firms
• Cost an issue, but not most important	7. Innovative approaches welcome (desired?)
• Not overextend themselves	8. Cost an issue, but not most important
• Prefer to stay in current office (?)	9. Not overextend themselves

After listing the objectives and identifying the top rank objective, Lisa turned to defining the subject, purpose, readers, and context for the proposal.

Subject

From her notes on the RFP, Lisa knew that her subject was the lack of office space at Overture Designs. This subject, Lisa decided, called for a planning proposal in which she would suggest that Overture use a local area network (LAN) and an intranet site to free up some office space. Specifically, she was going to propose that

some of Overture's employees be asked to telecommute from home at least a few days a week, using the LAN and intranet site.

Along these lines, she wrote, "The subject of this proposal is the use of a LAN and intranet site to free up office space at Overture by allowing some employees to telecommute." This sentence itself already hinted at what the readers would need to know in order to make a decision. First, the proposal would need to define LANs and intranet sites, while showing how these communication tools could be used to conduct the firm's business. Second, she would need to show the readers how telecommuting works and why it would be beneficial to their company. And most important, she would need to show the readers exactly how much office space would be freed up by her plan.

Purpose

The purpose of the proposal was tough to write, but Lisa ended up stating, "The purpose of this proposal is to persuade Overture Designs that telecommuting will free up space in their office, allowing the company to avoid the disruption and cost of moving to a new location." Of course, this purpose statement was rough and it would need to be modified for the proposal itself; nevertheless, it seemed to sum up what Lisa wanted the proposal to do. This sentence was fine as a working statement to guide her planning and writing of the proposal. It would help keep her on track as she drafted the proposal.

Readers

She then analyzed the readers, using a writer-centered worksheet and a reader analysis worksheet. Her research on the Internet and her discussion with Grant Moser, the office manager, confirmed that the primary readers for the proposal would be the two principal architects in the firm, Susan James and Thomas Weber. From Overture's website, Lisa discovered that Susan James was a progressive, modernist architect who preferred simplicity when she designed buildings. Lisa noticed that Ms. James's designs and a couple of speeches published on the firm's website showed a strong preference for innovation and creativity above all else. Thomas Weber was a bit more conservative, though still a modernist in approach. He seemed more responsible for the day-to-day functions of the firm, though he was also the principal architect on the standard projects handled by the firm. From her conversations with Mr. Moser, Lisa came to believe that both primary readers wanted to stay in their current Michigan Avenue office. They were also concerned about the disruption in business created by a move to a new building.

On her writer-centered worksheet, Lisa noted that the secondary readers were the financial officers, staff, public relations agents, and clients associated with the firm. She knew the financial officers would probably not want to spend a great amount of money on moving or renovation, because these expenses might overextend the firm's resources. Staff and PR agents, she guessed, would also resist a move to the suburbs. Most members of the staff lived downtown, so relocating to a suburban office would require more commuting. Meanwhile, Lisa guessed that Overture's PR agents would regret their client giving up such a posh

address in Chicago. The firm's clients, too, would probably react negatively to a move to the suburbs. After all, one of the advantages of hiring Overture was the accessibility of their offices and—to be honest—the appeal of having a "Michigan Avenue" architecture firm drawing up the plans.

Tertiary readers included the press, local politicians, and the competition. The press and local politicians, Lisa felt, would react positively to her idea for telecommuting, because it kept an important architectural firm downtown. Lisa's competitors for the project, of course, would not like her proposal. They were motivated by larger, more expensive solutions that would put their people to work and more money in their pockets. Certainly the competition would work hard to undermine her project if they received a copy of the proposal. They would probably point out that telecommuting is new and unproven as a work environment.

Gatekeeper readers included Lisa's boss and the chief engineer at Insight Systems. Lisa's boss, Hanna Gibbons, would be enthusiastic about the project. Lisa knew Hanna valued these higher-profile cases, because they seemed to attract business from other affluent customers. In the proposal itself, Lisa's boss would want the biographies of key employees at Insight Systems to play a prominent role. Her boss believed high-profile clients put added emphasis on relationships, so extensive biographies would be important. The chief engineer at Insight Systems, Frank Roberts, was far more interested in the technical details of a proposal. He would, as always, insist that the technology be clearly explained in the greatest detail. In fact, his insistence on "full disclosure," as he termed it, had almost sabotaged Lisa's last proposal because the clients could not comprehend some of the technical parts of the project plan. This time, Lisa would need to figure out another way to satisfy Frank's need for detail.

Context

The proposal's context was complicated also, so Lisa pulled out a context analysis worksheet to help her sort out the outside influences on the readers. The primary readers at Overtime Designs would certainly feel a great amount of political pressure inside and outside the firm to stay in downtown Chicago. After all, both employees and clients would be trying to influence them to keep their current office. Economic concerns were also important, because it was not clear whether the current growth in Overture's business could be sustained in the long term. Lisa also considered the physical context in which her proposal would be read. The primary readers were certainly very busy people, so she needed to make her proposal highly scannable and visual. She would also need to keep sections and paragraphs short and simple, so the primary readers could look over the proposal even when they were being interrupted.

Lisa also did some research into the industry/community issues that might influence the reading of the proposal. Recent stories in the business sections of the Chicago papers talked about the "explosive" rebirth of downtown Chicago. It seemed like this rebirth was leveling off, though, and there was good reason to believe the fast pace of downtown renovation and construction would be slowing down. Of course, local politicians were taking a great amount of credit for bringing

people and businesses back to Chicago. The local alderman would probably call Overture as soon as he heard rumors that the firm might leave his ward.

As you can see, by working methodically through the rhetorical situation, Lisa discovered a great amount about her purpose, her readers, and the contextual factors that will influence her readers. Already, some important themes, like the internal and external politics of moving, were becoming clearer to Lisa. She was also discovering ways she might try to match the proposal to the personalities and values of her primary readers. Of course, Lisa could have just jumped into the writing of the proposal, but she more than likely would have missed many of these subtle influences on the readers. The time she invested toward defining the rhetorical situation would pay off later with a much more informed proposal.

Focusing a Writing Team

Up to this point in the chapter, we have discussed setting objectives and using the four areas of the rhetorical situation (subject, purpose, readers, and context) as strategic planning tools. These items might sound a bit abstract, and, with the deadline looming for your proposal, you might be tempted to just jump ahead to writing a draft. In most cases, though, skipping the analysis of the rhetorical situation only leads to a shallower, less creative proposal. Skipping ahead also wastes your time, because your supervisor, your co-workers, and unforeseen circumstances will send you off on tangents and wild goose chases. Moreover, if you have not clearly defined your objectives, purpose, readers, and context, you are almost certain to misread many of the clients' suggestions about what they are looking for in the proposal.

Perhaps the most effective use of strategic planning is to help you organize team projects. All too often, when writing with a team, co-workers discuss a project at a meeting and agree verbally about what needs to be done. But then each person walks away from the meeting with a slightly different idea of what the project involves. We have all found ourselves in these kinds of situations. As time passes and the project moves forward, each member's ideas grow further apart. Soon, your co-workers and you find yourselves trying to patch together a Frankenstein proposal that was written to multiple audiences for multiple reasons.

If you sit down with your co-workers before writing a proposal and simply agree up front on the objectives, subject, purpose, readers, and context, you are well on your way to writing an effective proposal. Try identifying your objectives and then working through the four-part analysis of the rhetorical situation with them:

- **Subject:** Use the stasis questions to figure out (a) if there is a problem, (b) what the exact problem is, (c) how serious the problem is and (d) what type of proposal will solve that problem. Then, discuss what information the readers need to know to make a decision on your ideas. Also, try to identify information the readers do not need to know.
- **Purpose:** State the purpose of the proposal in one sentence. Period. That is, complete the following phrase, "The purpose of this proposal is to. . . ." If you need two or more sentences to state your purpose, your ideas might not be focused.

- **Readers:** Identify the various readers (primary, secondary, tertiary, gate-keepers) and their individual characteristics (motives, values, attitudes, and emotions). To identify the readers and their characteristics, fill out the writer-centered worksheet (Figure 3.1) and the reader analysis worksheet (Figure 3.2).
- **Context:** Identify the various contextual issues (physical, economic, ethical, and political) that influence the writing and reading of the proposal. Fill out the contextual analysis worksheet to sort these issues into levels that influence the primary readers, the industry/community, and you and your organization (Figure 3.3).

More than likely, you will find that this analysis will start your proposal-writing process off on the right foot.

Looking Ahead

This chapter and the previous chapter were designed to help you start thinking about the problem/opportunity your proposal or grant is pursuing. You learned how to clearly define the problem and anticipate the rhetorical situation in which your document will be used. Now it is time to start learning how to write the proposal itself. In the next chapter we are going to discuss how to write the Current Situation section.

CASE STUDY **Defining the Rhetorical Situation**

In their previous meeting to discuss the Cool Campus Project, Anne, George, Calvin, Karen, and Tim agreed that Durango University's problem was that it lacked a long-term strategy for eliminating or offsetting the greenhouse gases produced on campus.

They agreed that most people on campus would not voluntarily change their amounts of energy consumption in a significant way—even if these people supported the Cool Campus concept. Therefore, the university itself would need to renovate the campus infrastructure in ways that would lead to more conservation and use of renewable energy sources.

"All right," said Anne, as she grabbed a dry-erase marker and went up to the whiteboard in the room, "let's start listing out our objectives for the project." The others brainstormed some objectives:

- Use alternative fuels and/or hybrid engines in the campus trucks
- Heat buildings with solar energy
- Generate electricity with solar power and wind power
- Use geothermal heat pumps to heat and cool buildings
- Develop a comprehensive strategic plan that guides decisions about conservation and sustainability
- Encourage people to walk or ride their bikes to campus
- Plant more trees to offset greenhouse gas emissions
- Maximize recycling
- Introduce composting
- Support research on fuel cells
- Raise awareness of energy conservation on campus
- Raise awareness of climate change/global warming
- Encourage faculty and students to see campus as a research site for conservation and alternative energy

"This is a good start," said Anne. "I'm sure we'll be adding and subtracting items from this list. Now, what is our top rank objective?"

Everyone looked over the list. Then George spoke up. "Well, it seems like all of these objectives point to the need for a comprehensive strategic plan."

Calvin added, "Yeah, the strategic plan seems to be the one thing that holds all these other pieces together." The others agreed.

Anne wrote "TRO" next to "Develop a comprehensive strategic plan." "All right, let's move on," she said. "Let's look at the subject, purpose, readers, and context of this proposal."

Keeping their objectives in mind, they began filling out the rhetorical situation in the following way:

Subject: Transforming the Durango University campus into a "Cool Campus" that produces net-zero carbon emissions

Purpose: The purpose of the Cool Campus Project is to develop a strategic plan that guides the long-term conversion of the campus to renewable and sustainable sources of energy.

Readers: Tempest Foundation Board of Directors

Context: Offices of Tempest Foundation, and perhaps a campus visit?

With these elements of the rhetorical situation tentatively defined, they then studied each individually.

Subject

Defining the subject of the proposal was a bit more difficult than they expected. They all agreed that issues involving renewable energy sources, like solar power, wind power, and geothermal heating, were part of the proposal. They had trouble deciding whether issues like improved campus recycling programs should be part of the plan also.

Karen said, "I think it is important that we add in a few goals that are reachable in the short-term. Better recycling and encouraging people not to drive their cars to campus are things we can do right now."

Calvin was skeptical. "I'm just concerned that these smaller items might distract from our larger goals," he said. "You know how these

things happen. We'll see some extra recycling bins and a few signs about taking the bus. The rest will be forgotten over time."

"That's why we need to find ways to make this strategic plan an integral part of the infrastructure and mission of this university," said Anne.

George added, "Yeah, it needs to be more than just a plan. It needs to be a core objective of the university—how the university does business."

"I'm reluctant to say this," said Tim, "but I think we need to narrow our subject to energy issues, cutting out non-energy issues like recycling."

"What?" said Karen. "Recycling is very important."

"I agree," said Tim, "but energy issues seem to be our main issue in this proposal. I believe we need to focus on issues that directly involve converting the campus to renewable energy sources."

The group debated whether non-energy issues like recycling should be included in the grant. They decided that Tim was probably right, so they crossed out all the objectives that didn't directly address energy-related issues.

Karen then said, "Something else I think we should avoid is looking outside of campus. As much as I care about the Amazon rain forests or sustainable farming practices in Africa, we should keep our focus on campus."
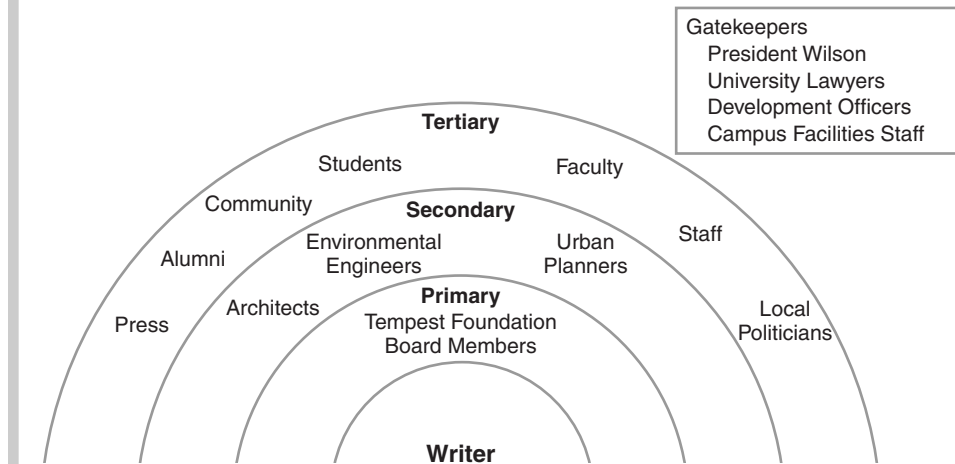
"I agree," said George. "The strategic plan should only be concerned with issues that directly impact the Durango University campus. Other issues are important, but they make our subject seem less focused."

Purpose

They then defined the purpose of the Cool Campus Project. What did they want the project to do? Confining themselves to one sentence, they hammered their purpose down into a clear, crisp statement: "The purpose of the Cool Campus Project is to develop a strategic plan that guides the long-term conversion of the campus to renewable and sustainable sources of energy."

This statement of the purpose, though generic, offered them two immediate tools for writing the proposal. First, it specified the overall purpose for the proposal itself. Second, it offered them a knife to cut away the nonessential details so they could focus on the need-to-know information.

FIGURE 3.4
Cool Campus Proposal's Writer-Centered Worksheet

Gatekeepers
  President Wilson
  University Lawyers
  Development Officers
  Campus Facilities Staff

Tertiary
Students   Faculty
Community
Secondary
Environmental   Urban   Staff
Engineers   Planners
Alumni
Primary
Architects   Tempest Foundation
Press   Board Members   Local
                                      Politicians

Writer

Readers

They then turned to the writer-centered worksheet to identify their other potential readers (Figure 3.4).

The primary readers would be the Tempest Foundation board of directors, who would decide whether to fund the grant. These readers, after all, were the people who could actually say yes to their ideas and fund their project. They would be the decision makers.

They weren't sure who the secondary readers might be. More than likely, the Tempest Foundation would hire advisors or consultants to determine whether a project was feasible. These secondary readers might be engineers, architects, or urban planners who specialize in environmental projects.

The tertiary readers, at first, seemed a bit more problematic. Who else might be interested in obtaining a copy of the proposal? Karen immediately pointed out that the media might be interested in a copy. "They will probably receive a copy, whether we send it to them or not. We need to keep them in mind as we're writing."

Calvin pointed out that local contractors would also be interested in a copy of the proposal, because they would want to bid on any future contracts. Tim mentioned that other universities might want a copy to use as a model for writing similar grants.

George added, "Don't forget the alumni. The Alumni Association is going to be very interested in this project. We need to always remember that concerns from alumni can scrap a project like this one."

Finally, they listed several gatekeepers. Anne pointed out that the President Wilson was probably the most influential gatekeeper. "And, as VP for Physical Facilities, I guess I'm a gatekeeper, too." They also wrote down the university's accountants, legal counsel, and development officers. All of these people would need to see the grant proposal before it went to the Tempest Foundation.

Having identified their various readers, they filled out a reader analysis worksheet, as shown in Figure 3.5.

Context

With their readers identified and described, the group decided to use a context analysis worksheet to look more closely at the situations in which the proposal would be used. It wasn't long before they realized that the context for the proposal was very complex.

The context analysis worksheet seemed to highlight the economic and political issues that would influence how the readers interpreted the proposal (Figure 3.6). On one hand, they felt the directors of the Tempest Foundation would be

FIGURE 3.5
Cool Campus Proposal's Reader Analysis Worksheet

Readers	Motives	Values	Attitudes	Emotions
Primary Readers (Board Members of Tempest Foundation)	• Address global warming issues • Fund environmental causes	• Making progress • A viable plan • Getting something accomplished	• Concerned about global warming • Hopeful for solutions • Reluctant to fund projects that don't change things	• Fearful of global warming • Feel good about doing something to solve the problem
Secondary Readers (Environmental Engineers, Architects, Urban Planners)	• Technical feasibility • Realistic objectives • Attention to detail	• Solid science • Conservation of environment • Aesthetic appeal	• Want to protect the environment • Want to avoid wasting time and money on dead-end projects	• Desire to promote projects that work • Hope for projects that will make lasting changes
Tertiary Readers (Press)	• Raise awareness • Like an interesting story	• Leans toward underdog • Values diversity	• Curious about project • Could become allies in conversion of campus	• Could take up a story as a "cause." • Rooting for people who are doing something positive
Tertiary Readers (Alumni)	• Keep campus the way they remember it • Maintain the reputation of the university	• Desire university to have a positive image • Want to support bettering the university	• Worried that changes to campus will "ruin it" • Like the idea of the university being on the cutting edge	• React negatively to drastic visual changes to campus • Pride in the university
Gatekeepers (President Wilson, Board of Regents)	• Improve university • Lower energy costs • Do something about global warming • Recruit top students and faculty	• A forward-thinking university culture • Changing the university for the better	• Hopeful that the project will succeed • Cautious about stirring up negative feelings among stakeholders	• Positive about the project • Concerned that failure might have long-lasting effects

FIGURE 3.6
Cool Campus Proposal's Context Analysis Worksheet

	Physical	Economic	Ethical	Political
Primary Readers	• Initially, received in the mail, read in their office • Later, proposal might be used on a campus visit	• Want to use funds to the maximum benefit • Want to pay for projects that accomplish specific goals	• Environmental issues are paramount ethical issues	• Use projects as models for action • Good public relations for Tempest Foundation
Industry/ Community	• Issue of global warming changing ecosystems • Raise proposal awareness on a website?	• Money turning from research on global warming to solutions • New advances in technology making renewable energy more affordable	• People waking up to importance of global warming • Social justice issues involved with change	• Desire to make changes to renewable energy • Resistance to changes that cause too much inconvenience
Writers	• Can meet personally with many stakeholders • Can work with other experts to devise good solutions	• Limited means for travel • Have other jobs besides writing this proposal	• Importance of making a lasting change • Using this project as a model for other projects	• Don't want to anger or threaten networks of people on campus • Cannot anger alumni or members of community

interested in a project like this one, but they would question the university's economic and political will to implement the strategic plan.

George said, "We need to show the Tempest Foundation that everyone, from the university president to the students, is interested in transforming this campus into a Cool Campus."

Karen added, "We also should mention that we aren't expecting the Tempest Foundation to pay the whole bill. The funding they give us would help us develop the strategic plan, but the university would raise the money for implementing these changes."

The physical and ethical issues, fortunately, didn't seem too complex. Physically, the proposal would be used in offices and perhaps on a campus visit. It might be put on a website for easy access. As for ethical issues, the movement toward a sustainable campus seemed to be a plus from an ethical standpoint. However, they would

need to be careful to hear diverse viewpoints about any changes to the campus.

George said, "Perhaps we need to plan some campus meetings to solicit feedback. That might help us avoid the ethical pitfalls that can emerge with these kinds of well-intentioned plans."

Anne agreed. "We don't want to trample someone's rights in our eagerness to do the right thing for the environment."

Defining the objectives and the rhetorical situation for their proposal ended up taking them an hour and a half. When they finished, they had developed a much richer sense of the content, purpose, and social/political factors surrounding their proposal. The foundation for writing the proposal had been set.

They were ready to start inventing the Current Situation section of the proposal.

Questions and Exercises

1. Using a proposal or grant from your workplace or one you found on the Internet, write a two-page analysis in which you discuss how the writers handled the proposal's purpose, readers, and context. Can you find any places in the proposal that seem tailored to the specific readers or context? Do you think the proposal achieves its purpose? Are there places in the proposal where the writers stray from their purpose? How might the proposal be improved to fit its rhetorical situation?

2. With a team, choose a problem on campus, at your workplace, or your community that might warrant a proposal. Analyze the rhetorical situation in which that proposal would need to operate. Use a writer-centered worksheet and a reader analysis worksheet to identify the readers and their characteristics. Then, fill out a context analysis worksheet to work through the physical, economic, political, and ethical factors that might influence the readers. Write a memorandum to your instructor in which you summarize the important issues that relate to the proposal's readers and context.

3. In the Cool Campus case study, what are some reader-related issues that will probably require special attention when the group writes the proposal? Look closely at how the writers filled out the reader and context worksheets. What are some issues that jump out at you? What are some issues that the writers will need to keep in mind as they write this complex proposal? Are there any items you might add to these worksheets? What are some of the political and ethical issues that the writers might be neglecting?

4. Writing with a team can be challenging. How might you use the methods and worksheets in this chapter to help you manage a writing team for a proposal? What might you do differently if you were writing a proposal with a team that you might not do if you were writing alone?

5. Study the RFP in Question 6 at the end of Chapter 2. What are the contextual issues (physical, economic, political, and ethical) that might be influencing this rhetorical situation? What political issues would you need to keep in mind as you write a pre-proposal for this RFP? What ethical issues might also be involved?