

Becoming familiar with the generic proposal structure can help grant seekers better understand what information funders need to know. If a funder does not specify order of information, the generic structure offers a pattern to follow (although the genre is flexible). Sometimes, funders specify the exact order of information for a proposal and do not explicitly ask for all the generic proposal slots. Despite not always asking for all of the information, *funders need to know the information from each of the six main slots* (the current situation, objectives, project plan, qualifications, costs, and benefits). You may provide some of the information in a written document, at the pre-proposal stage, during an oral presentation, etc., but funders need all of the information in some way.

Note that generic structure is not a matter of organization—you may find these elements in any order. Also, slots do not correspond to sections or headings within a proposal—a writer may weave the information from one slot throughout the entire proposal or include multiple slots within one section. Also note that there should be clear transitions between sections that function as the written logic of the proposal's organization; the outline below should help grant writers see how the slots are connected. In some proposals, each of the six slots function as mini-narratives that contain an introduction, a body, and a conclusion. Pages 2-5 of this document further elaborate on how to introduce proposals and the content of the proposal's six generic slots.

## Introduction:

Identify your purpose, subject, and main claim of your proposal.

### 1. **Current situation:**

Describe the problem or opportunity (the need for your proposal).

### 2. **Objectives:**

Describe objectives or goals in order to solve the problem or seize the opportunity.

### 3. **Project Plan (methods):**

Provide all major and minor steps of the plan that are needed to meet objectives.

### 4. **Qualifications:**

Explain how the people involved in your project are qualified to carry out the project plan.

### 5. **Costs (budget):**

Explain how much it will cost for the team of qualified individuals to carry out the project plan.

### 6. **Benefits:**

Given the team's efforts and the budget costs, stress the benefits the funder can expect as a result of using your proposal to solve the problem or realize the opportunity.

## Introduction: *Make your purpose known and introduce your topic.*

An effective introduction will clearly explain the purpose of the rest of the proposal—readers should never wonder why they are being provided certain information. The proposal’s introduction makes a first impression on readers. This section is often easier to write once the main body of the proposal is complete. In the proposal’s introduction, focus on the following writing moves (which may be executed in any order):

- State the proposal’s **purpose** in one sentence  
*Remember that it is better to be blunt than too subtle.* A writer may choose to write a purpose statement using a phrase like “The purpose of this proposal is \_\_\_\_\_” or “The goal of the proposed project is \_\_\_\_\_.” Do not leave any possibility that a reader will finish a proposal’s introduction without having a clear sense of what the proposal is trying to accomplish. The purpose statement is often related to solving a problem or seizing an opportunity.
- State the proposal’s **subject**  
*Define the subject’s boundaries.* Many times a writer mistakenly assumes that everybody knows about his or her subject. A writer may feel that all readers already know about refugees living in the Fargo-Moorhead community, but in reality, writers of proposals know more about their subjects than do readers.
- State the **main claim** that you will prove in the proposal  
*What is the main point you want readers to understand?* In a research proposal, the main claim may be phrased as a research question or hypothesis. In other proposals, the main claim may be related to the project plan; state briefly what you want to do or have happen.

In addition to the three crucial moves above, optional for the introduction include the following writing moves:

- Explain why the subject is **important** to readers  
*Why should anyone care?* Give your readers a reason to take action. Avoid alarming your readers (which may cause them to feel defensive or resistant), but make them see why they should pay attention to your proposal.
- Provide readers with **background information** to understand the subject  
*Is there something that readers need to know before they can understand the proposal body?* You may want to write about what has changed recently to cause a problem or opportunity (blame change, not people).
- Provide a **forecast statement** for the proposal’s organization  
*What sections are in the proposal body, and in what order are they presented?*

## **Current Situation:** *explain the problem or opportunity and why the proposal is needed.*

There are three guidelines to keep in mind when writing the current situation section: a problem/opportunity is the effect of a cause, if a problem is ignored it will tend to grow worse, and it is best to blame change, not people. You may approach the current situation by focusing your writing in one of three ways:

- **Causal approach:** use this approach if you feel your audience does not already know the causes of a problem or opportunity.
- **Effects approach:** use this approach to describe what will happen if action is not taken to confront the problem or realize the opportunity.
- **Narrative approach:** whereas the other two approaches are best for describing the situation as it stands in the present moment, the narrative approach works to show how an opportunity or problem evolved over time

## **Objectives:** *tell readers what objectives your plan will meet in order to improve the current situation.*

Although you can often decide to focus on something as a positive opportunity instead of a negative problem, the current situation section often does include some negatives of what will happen if a problem is not confronted or an opportunity is not realized. However, starting with the objectives, your writing should become positively focused, even if you are confronting a serious problem.

You may break down this slot into primary and secondary objectives. Be sure that your objectives match certain objectives of your audience; a funder will not be interested in your plan unless it helps them fulfill their mission while adhering to their values.

## **Project plan:** *demonstrate how your plan will meet objectives in order to confront a problem or take advantage of an opportunity.*

The basic writing moves you should make in your project plan are as follows:

- **Provide a summary of your overall plan.** Your reader should be able to understand in a short sentence or phrase what your plan is. Your plan should be directly connected to your objectives.
- **Forecast your major steps.** This will provide your readers with an outline of how your plan will be carried out.
- **Provide the major and minor steps of your plan.** Be sure to sufficiently break apart complex steps so your reader can understand how you will meet your objectives. Include the dates you expect each major step to be completed by (you may decide to include a timeline or Gantt chart as an appendix). Your reader needs to know more than the “what,” of your plan, however. Every step of your plan should do the following:
  - **Describe “how” you will complete steps.** For example, simply stating “training faculty” as one of your steps is not sufficient (this is a major step that needs to be broken down). *How* will you train faculty? Do you have training materials? Will you use workshops?

- **Explain “why” you will complete steps.** In addition to explaining the step-by-step process of how you will train faculty, your project plan should offer a narrative of *why* you will complete a step in a certain way. Why is training faculty related to your overall objectives? Why will you use workshops but not some other method of training?
- **Report any deliverables for each major step.** Funders do not like to give money to projects that disappear without a trace once funding runs out. A deliverable might be something tangible like a building. In other cases, a deliverable might be communication with the funder. Some funders require reporting requirements at certain time intervals; even if a funder does not require reporting, you might consider including reporting as part of your deliverables.
- **Close the project plan section.** Many grant writers close the section by summarizing main steps, major deliverables, or how the plan meets the objectives.

**Qualifications:** *explain how your project team is composed of individuals qualified to carry out your plan.*

How much information you provide about qualifications will depend on the context you are operating within. If you are proposing a plan within your own organization, for instance, there is less of a need to explain who the qualified individuals are because the organization will already be aware (although there is nothing wrong with *reminding* readers of a person’s qualifications). External funders might appreciate more in-depth background information. When writing qualifications, think about ways to turn your weaknesses into strengths. You may be a newcomer to a field, for example, but could present yourself as having a fresh and energized perspective. For qualifications, focus on the following writing moves:

- **Make a direct claim about your team’s top strength.** This strength should be something that would directly help you carry out the project plan. Make sure that you are able to back up your main claim, but know that making your team stand out as the *most* qualified or qualified in some *unique* way will help build trust with your readers.
- **Describe your Personnel.** Proposal readers want to know the people who will be working on a project and their credentials—what are the experiences, educational achievements, and other credentials of the personnel? Has anyone received any special training related to the project? You may also explain relevant past achievements of the personnel—if someone on the team has done something similar in the past, highlight this similarity. (If you are writing a proposal on the behalf of an organization or company, describe a brief history, the mission statement, philosophy, facilities/equipment, and quality-control measures of the organization/company. Also highlight any similar project successes the organization/company has taken on in the past.)
- **Create a persona.** Make sure that you weave a central idea throughout your qualifications section. The persona should be related to your team’s top strength. Think about related words and phrases to sprinkle throughout the section. For example, if your team’s top strength is its *ambition*, you might highlight how one of your team member’s is personally connected to the topic and thus feels particularly *inspired* to fulfill the project objectives.

**Costs:** *State how much it will cost your qualified team to carry out your project plan.*

Some writers include the costs of a project as a discrete section separate from the conclusion, sandwiched between qualifications and benefits. Other writers decide to weave costs and benefits together in one section; the second approach can help sweeten the costs of a project by juxtaposing costs and benefits.

No matter how or where you present costs, *never apologize for or become defensive about the costs of a project*. The purpose of the proposal as a genre is to ask for funding or assistance—do not be shy about doing so. Be confident in your budget. Also, be aware that proposals can sometimes act as contracts—if you say a project will cost a certain amount, you may be contractually obligated to only charge that amount.

The detail of the costs section will depend on the project; larger projects usually require a detailed and lengthy cost breakdown. However, including a breakdown of costs in the proposal's body can interrupt the flow of the document and slow your project's momentum. Keep your readers excited about your project. If you have a long and detailed costs section, consider placing it as an appendix in the back of your proposal. You can offer a synopsis of costs in the body, perhaps highlighting the top costs. You may even simply state the overall cost and point readers to the appendix; for example, you might write, "We calculate that the Media Restoration project will cost \$27,400. See Appendix B for a detailed cost breakdown."

**Benefits:** *Stress the benefits the funder can expect as a result of funding your proposal.*

In your proposal's conclusion, you should mostly be summarizing your proposal's body, not stating new information. Follow these four writing moves when crafting a conclusion:

- **Signal to your readers that you are concluding the proposal.** Although you should be using transitions between all sections of your proposal, using a transition for your conclusion is especially important because you want to wake your readers up—the conclusion is important. You can transition into a conclusion in three ways:
  - Use a heading that signals you are wrapping up ideas
  - Begin the first sentence of the conclusion with a phrase such as "to conclude" or "in summary"
  - Begin the first sentence of the conclusion by summarizing or restating your proposal's main claim
- **Highlight your plan's benefits.** You want to persuade your readers that your plan is desirable, so be sure to stress the benefits of your plan in the conclusion. There are three different types of benefits a project may meet:
  - **Hard benefits** include deliverables, results, and outcomes
  - **Soft benefits** include satisfaction, service, or quality of work
  - **Value benefits** include common ideals shared by your team and the funder
- **Glimpse into the future.** Prove that your plan leads to lasting results, not a short-term fix. Write about how taking advantage of an opportunity or confronting a problem will make the future better.
- **Identify you're the next step for your readers.** Tell your readers what you want them to do next. Often, the very last moves for a proposal are to thank the readers, tell them how to contact you if they have any questions, and most importantly, let them know what the first step is to get a project in motion. Invite your readers to set up a meeting, email, or call. If a reader is excited about your ideas, make it as easy as possible for him or her to get a project moving.