

Online Technical Writing: Proposals

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This chapter focuses on *proposals*—the kinds of documents that get you or your organization approved or hired to do a project. While this chapter focuses on proposals in general, see the section on [proposals for documentation projects](#) for the specifics of getting hired to write technical documentation.

For [illustrations](#) of the discussion you are about to read, see:

Example proposal 1: Employee Wellness Program	Frames	Nonframes	Plain
Example proposal 2: Employee Work/Life Balance Program	N/A	N/A	Word file
Example proposal 3: Proposal to Write the Operation and Maintenance Manual for the M-16A2 Rifle	Frames	Nonframes	Plain
Example proposal 4: Academic Proposal	Frames	Nonframes	Plain
Example proposal 5: Nursing Staff Handbook on Communication and Swallowing Disorders in the Elderly	Frames	Nonframes	Plain
Example proposal 6: Corporate Standards Manual	Frames	Nonframes	Plain
Example proposal 7: Student Guide for Solving Engineering Mechanics Problems	Frames	Nonframes	Plain

Some Preliminaries

As you get started, make sure you understand the definition we're using for proposals. Also, make sure you understand the proposal assignment—not to write just any proposal but one that, at least in part,

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proposes to write something.

Real proposals. To begin planning a proposal, remember the basic definition: a proposal is an offer or bid to do a certain project for someone. Proposals may contain other elements—technical background, recommendations, results of surveys, information about feasibility, and so on. But what makes a proposal a proposal is that it asks the audience to approve, fund, or grant permission to do the proposed project.

If you plan to be a consultant or run your own business, written proposals may be one of your most important tools for bringing in business. And, if you work for a government agency, nonprofit organization, or a large corporation, the proposal can be a valuable tool for initiating projects that benefit the organization or you the employee-proposer (and usually both).

A proposal should contain information that would enable the audience of that proposal to decide whether to approve the project, to approve or hire you to do the work, or both. To write a successful proposal, put yourself in the place of your audience—the recipient of the proposal—and think about what sorts of information that person would need to feel confident having you do the project.

It's easy to get confused about proposals, or at least the type of proposal you'll be writing here. Imagine that you have a terrific idea for installing some new technology where you work and you write up a document explaining how it works and why it's so great, showing the benefits, and then end by urging management to go for it. Is that a proposal? No, at least not in this context. It's more like a feasibility report, which studies the merits of a project and then recommends for or against it. Now, all it would take to make this document a proposal would be to add elements that ask management for approval for you to go ahead with the project. Certainly, some proposals must sell the projects they offer to do, but in all cases proposals must sell the writer (or the writer's organization) as the one to do the project.

Types of proposals. Consider the situations in which proposals occur. A company may send out a public announcement requesting proposals for a specific project. This public announcement—called a request for

proposals (RFP)—could be issued through newspapers, trade journals, Chamber of Commerce channels, or individual letters. Firms or individuals interested in the project would then write proposals in which they summarize their qualifications, project schedules and costs, and discuss their approach to the project. The recipient of all these proposals would then evaluate them, select the best candidate, and then work up a contract.

But proposals come about much less formally. Imagine that you are interested in doing a project at work (for example, investigating the merits of bringing in some new technology to increase productivity). Imagine that you visited with your supervisor and tried to convince her of this. She might respond by saying, "Write me a proposal and I'll present it to upper management." As you can see from these examples, proposals can be divided into several categories:

- *Internal, external.* If you write a proposal to someone within your organization (a business, a government agency, etc.), it is an *internal* proposal. With internal proposals, you may not have to include certain sections (such as qualifications), or you may not have to include as much information in them. An *external* proposal is one written from one separate, independent organization or individual to another such entity. The typical example is the independent consultant proposing to do a project for another firm. (The proposal that begins on page is an example of an internal proposal; the one beginning on page is an example of an external proposal.)
- *Solicited, unsolicited.* If a proposal is *solicited*, the recipient of the proposal in some way requested the proposal. Typically, a company will send out requests for proposals (RFPs) through the mail or publish them in some news source. But proposals can be solicited on a very local level: for example, you could be explaining to your boss what a great thing it would be to install a new technology in the office; your boss might get interested and ask you to write up a proposal that offered to do a formal study of the idea. *Unsolicited* proposals are those in which the recipient has not requested proposals. With unsolicited proposals, you sometimes must convince the recipient that a problem or need exists before you can begin the main part of the proposal. (The proposal that begins on page is an example of an unsolicited

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proposal; the one beginning on page is an example of a solicited proposal.)

Other options for the proposal assignment. It may be that you cannot force your report-project plans into the proposal context. It may be that you cannot force your brain into imagining a proposal scenario. There is the option of writing the straight academic proposal—you address it to your instructor and make no pretence of realism. See an [example](#) of this type of proposal. Talk about this option with your instructor—there may be other requirements or a difference in the way it is evaluated.

Typical Scenarios for the Proposal

It gets a bit tricky dreaming up a good technical report project and then a proposal project that proposes at least in part to write that report. Here are some ideas:

- Imagine that a company has some sort of problem or wants to make some sort of improvement. It sends out a request for proposals; you receive one and respond with a proposal. You offer to come in, investigate, interview, make recommendations—and present it all in the form of a report.
- Some organization wants a seminar in your expertise. You write a proposal to give the seminar—included in the package deal is a guide or handbook that the people attending the seminar will receive.
- You want to write a business prospectus for the kind of business you intend to start up. Imagine that you want a top-quality prospectus and don't have the time or expertise to prepare one; therefore, *you* send out request for proposals to professional consultants. You change hats and pretend you are Business Startup Consultants, Inc., and send your other self a proposal to do the job. Your proposal accepted, you (as Business Startup Consultants, Inc.) write the prospectus.
- Some agency has just started using a fancy desktop-publishing system, but the documentation is giving

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people fits. You receive a request for proposals from this agency to write some sort of simplified guide or startup guide.

Common Sections in Proposals

The following is a review of the sections you'll commonly find in proposals. Don't assume that each one of them has to be in the actual proposal you write, nor that they have to be in the order they are presented here—plus you may discover that other kinds of information not mentioned here must be included in your particular proposal.

As you read the following on common sections in proposals, check out the example proposals starting on page . Not all of the sections discussed in the following will show up in the examples, but most will.

Introduction. Plan the introduction to your proposal carefully. Make sure it does all of the following things (but not necessarily in this order) that apply to your particular proposal:

- Indicate that the document to follow is a proposal.
- Refer to some previous contact with the recipient of the proposal or to your source of information about the project.
- Find one brief motivating statement that will encourage the recipient to read on and to consider doing the project.
- Give an overview of the contents of the proposal.

Now remember: you may not need *all* of these elements, and some of them can combine neatly into

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single sentences. The introduction ought to be brisk and to the point and not feel as though it is trudging laboriously through each of these elements.

Take a look at the introductions in the first two example proposals listed at the beginning of this chapter, and try to identify these elements.

Background on the problem, opportunity, or situation. Often occurring just after the introduction, the background section discusses what has brought about the need for the project—what problem, what opportunity there is for improving things, what the basic situation is. For example, management of a chain of daycare centers may need to ensure that all employees know CPR (maybe new state guidelines have been enacted about CPR certification). An owner of pine timber land in east Texas may want to get the land productive of saleable timber without destroying the ecology. (The section entitled "Need for a Wellness Program," in example proposal 1 (listed at the beginning of this chapter) is a good example of this.)

It's true that the audience of the proposal may know the problem very well, in which case this section might not be needed. Writing the background section still might be useful, however, in demonstrating your particular view of the problem. And, if the the proposal is unsolicited, a background section is almost a requirement—you will probably need to convince the audience that the problem or opportunity exists and that it should be addressed.

Benefits and feasibility of the proposed project. Most proposals discuss the advantages or benefits of doing the proposed project. This acts as an argument in favor of approving the project. Also, some proposals discuss the likelihood of the project's success. In the forestry proposal, the proposer is recommending that the landowner make an investment; at the end of the proposal, he explores the question of what return there will be on that investment, how likely those returns are. In the unsolicited proposal, this section is particularly important—you are trying to "sell" the audience on the project.

See the section on formatting proposals for contents and format for the "stuff" that comes before the introduction.

Introduction:

- Indicate the purpose and contents of this document (this proposal).
- Mention prior contact with the recipient, or how you found out about the project.
- Say something upbeat, encouraging about your company or the project.
- Give an overview of the contents of the proposal.

Background on the XXXXX

Proposal

Discuss the background of the project—the problem or opportunity that has brought about this proposal.

Briefly state exactly what it is you are proposing to do, and not do. (Sometimes, proposals seem to offer the sun and the moon.)

Benefits of XXXXX

Discuss the benefits or advantages of doing the project (sell the audience on doing the project).

Procedure for XXXXX

Discuss how you will go about the project, what concepts or theory is involved.

Discuss or describe what the finished product will look like, how it will work. (In the case of the report project, describe the report in terms of page count, graphics, audience, contents, etc.)

Results of XXXXX

Either here or in the benefits section, discuss the likelihood of the full benefits of the project—particularly if it's a business venture.

Feasibility of XXXXX

Schedule of XXXXX

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