



What Makes a Good Proposal

In “real people” language

By Dimitra Tasiouras

Quick: What’s the difference between a goal and an objective?

If you’re stumbling over the answer, you are not alone. If I had a dollar for every time I heard even experienced nonprofit and foundation professionals debate the difference, I could have started my own foundation by now.

Yet describing goals and objectives is considered a necessary part of a grant proposal. Almost every guide to proposal writing and almost every foundation’s guidelines instruct applicants to write about goals and objectives, needs assessments, anticipated outcomes, work plans, timelines, evaluation, etc.

In ten years of grantmaking, I’ve probably read nearly 1,000 proposals and have written dozens myself. And they’ve all followed the recommended formats: sections on needs assessments, goals and objectives, etc. Yet some of these proposals have been more powerful, more eloquent, and more persuasive than others. What is it about these proposals, I’ve wondered, that makes them so good?

I’ve come to realize that the best and most readable proposals basically tell a good story and tell it in a fairly simple and organized manner. And by story I don’t mean an anecdote, or history of the organization, or a warm and fuzzy tale about a client. I’m talking about the basic story of the organization and its work: What are you doing? Why are you doing it? Who are you doing it with? How do you know you’re doing the right thing?

A basic rule in journalism is that a good news story has to answer some basic questions — the five W’s: Who? What? Where? When? Why? In the same spirit, I’m suggest-

ing that a good proposal has to answer a basic set of questions. I am a bit embarrassed that I’ve come up with more than five questions and they are somewhat longer and more involved than the five W’s. But for someone who asks questions for a living, maybe it’s not so bad.

I doubt that I’m going to tell you anything you don’t already know about proposal writing. There are many excellent guides out there, written by folks with years of experience who have successfully raised money from foundations. Read them. Use them. Read them again. They will tell you almost everything you need to know to write a good proposal.

Telling the Story with the Seven W’s and Five H’s

What I’m offering here is a way to take a fresh look at what you’re writing in your proposals. My hope is that it will help you get to the stripped-down, basic truth of your organization and its work. So, without further delay, I present the Seven W’s and Five H’s that a good proposal should answer.

1. What’s the problem? I know, I know, it’s a negative way to put it, but it’s the simplest way to say it. What is it that isn’t right in the world or in your community that you want to change? What conditions do you want to improve? What conditions do you want to eliminate? What is the ultimate purpose of your work?

2. How do you know it’s a problem? Of course the answer to this question is very obvious to you. You’ve devoted your time and resources to solving this problem, and you have

any project-specific proposals. Can you find the answers to each of these questions in the proposal? If not, write out the answers and work them into your proposal.

2. Have other staff members or board members do the same exercise.

3. Better yet, bring in a family member, friend or neighbor who isn't involved with your work and maybe doesn't even understand it. Ask them to read your proposal. Then hand them the 12 questions presented here and see if they can answer all of them from what they read in your proposal. This is a great way to find out if you're losing your story in the convoluted "proposal-speak" that we all fall victim to sometimes. If your Aunt Bessie or your neighbor Pat can answer the above questions, it's a good sign that you're telling your story in a clear, simple and organized fashion.

4. Write a new proposal from scratch. Use the 12 questions

as your section headings, instead of the standard headings of history, mission, needs assessment, goals and objectives, etc. Once you've written out the full answers to all of the questions, go back and change those section headings from the questions to something shorter and snappier, like oh, goals and objectives, needs assessment, evaluation.

Over the years, proposal writing has developed its own language, rules, regulations, dogma and mythology. These can be intimidating and confusing to new grantseekers and distracting and confining to experienced grantseekers. Put them aside for a while. Underneath all of that stuff is the story of how you're changing your community. Tell it. **GFJ**

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