

26. Proposal

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An internet search for the word *proposal* will bring up several common usages, the two most prominent being marriage proposals and self-described “modest proposals”—though most of the proposals in this second category fail to understand that Jonathan Swift’s classic satire was ironic and not meant to be modest. The third most popular usage of the word *proposal* is the one that most interests us in technical and professional communication: a document that defines a problem or opportunity and then presents a plan or method for solving or taking advantage of that problem. A proposal in this sense is a *genre* used to get things done in workplaces and civic life (Johnson-Sheehan, 2008).

The proposal is one of the oldest and most powerful genres in technical and professional communication. The ability to write persuasive proposals to clients, customers, and funding sources can make or break a high-tech business or organization (Sant, 2012). Whether someone works in an engineering firm, a scientific laboratory, or a nonprofit organization, they will need to write persuasive proposals as part of their career.

The English word *proposal* derives from the word *propos*, which probably arrived in the British Isles in 1066 with Norman invaders. In Middle French, the term *proposer* meant “to intend, purpose,” according to the *Oxford English Dictionary* (Oxford University Press). This French word was derived from the Latin word *propositum*, which means a “plan, intention, design” (Provost, 1961). Thus, the root word for proposal is *posit*, which means “position, posture, situation.” The prefix *pro-* adds a sense of direction or support, and the suffix *-al* means “related to” or “the kind of.”

As shown in the *Oxford English Dictionary*, the English meaning of the word *proposal*, as we know it now, probably originated in the mid-14th century, when the usage of the word *propos* narrowed to mean “purpose.” Not long afterward, the word *proposal* became common in the English language, perhaps due to the rise of English commerce and industry.

Today, proposals are usually categorized according to how they were initiated. A proposal can be either *external* or *internal*. An external proposal is written from one company or organization to another, usually to pitch a product or service. An internal proposal is written to be used within a company or organization, usually to present new ideas for products, services, or processes.

Proposals can also be categorized by who initiates them. A proposal can be either *solicited* (requested by the customer or client) or *unsolicited* (initiated by the provider without being requested by the customer or client). These categories

overlap with the external/internal distinction. For example, an external solicited proposal is one that has been requested by a customer or client from another company or organization. An external solicited proposal usually begins when the customer or client sends out an advertisement called a request for proposals (RFP) that describes the desired product or service. A typical RFP will summarize the current problem, state the project objectives, explain the scope of the project, provide an overview of the company or organization, and specify expectations and deliverables (Hamper & Baugh, 2011, p. 56). The RFP will also include information about submission deadlines, assessment procedures, points of contact, and formatting. Depending on the industry, RFPs can also be called a request for bids (RFB), call for proposals (CFP), request for application (RFA), information for bid (IFB), call for quotes (CFQ), or advertisement for bids (AFB). Each of these types of RFPs will signal the specific kinds of information that the customer or client is seeking in the proposal.

An internal solicited proposal, meanwhile, is usually one that was requested by a supervisor or management within the writer's company or organization. In our increasingly entrepreneurial workplaces (or "in-trepreneurial" workplaces), it is becoming common for management to solicit proposals from their divisions or teams. This process puts these divisions and teams into competition with each other, urging them to compete for the company's limited pool of resources.

An external unsolicited proposal is typically a sales device through which salespeople at one company reach out to another company, introducing themselves and pitching their products and services (Sant, 2012). Consultants use unsolicited external proposals to make clients or customers aware of solutions to problems that they aren't sure how to handle or may even not know exist.

An internal unsolicited proposal might be written by employees to their managers, making suggestions for changes to products, services, or corporate operating procedures. Usually, internal unsolicited proposals come about because a person or team identifies a persistent problem and decides to offer a plan to management for solving that problem.

Recently, pre-proposals (also known as letters of intent in nonprofit settings) have become more common as a way to streamline the proposal process (Markin, 2015). A pre-proposal can be as short as two pages long, allowing the proposing company or organization to describe the project or service in general terms. Then, the customer or client will invite a limited number of providers to submit full proposals. The pre-proposal process is advantageous for both providers and their customers or clients. By asking for pre-proposals rather than full proposals, the customers or clients can limit the final bidding to providers who seem to best understand what is needed and have the ability to provide it. Pre-proposals also allow customers and clients to give providers feedback that helps them craft better full proposals. Providers, meanwhile, save time because they don't need to write full proposals for all the RFPs that interest them. Instead, they only write

full proposals for companies or organizations that have already reviewed and responded favorably to the ideas in their pre-proposals.

Another recent change, especially in this entrepreneurial age, is a shift to less formal and briefer proposals (Copel Communications, 2016). Just as an entrepreneur might wear a hoodie and jeans to pitch a new startup, the tone of these proposals can be intentionally informal and personal. Nevertheless, these “informal” proposals, just like those entrepreneurs in hoodies, are very serious and the stakes can be high. The informal tone is intended to put the readers at ease, and the shorter length is designed to encourage them to actually look over the proposal. Typically, if the customer or client expresses interest, an informal proposal will then be revised into a much longer formal proposal. The formal proposal, with its cover page, table of contents, abstract, appendixes, and itemized budget, becomes the *de facto* contract that spells out the formal offer.

Proposals come in many forms and sizes, which reflects the highly flexible nature of this genre (Northcut et al., 2009). Like most documents, a proposal typically has an introduction, body, and conclusion. The body of a proposal can be arranged into a variety of *structures*, but it will usually make five major moves that often take the form of separate sections: (1) a *background* or *narrative* that explains the problem or opportunity by describing its causes and effects; (2) a list of *objectives* or *aims*, which are the goals any plan would need to achieve to solve the problem or take advantage of the opportunity; (3) a *project plan* or *methods* that describes how those objectives would be achieved; (4) the *qualifications* of the people who would do the work; and (5) the *costs* and *benefits*, which attempt to persuade the readers that the deliverables of the project would be worth the price (Johnson-Sheehan, 2008). Each of these sections plays a unique role.

Background or Narrative. After the introduction, a proposal will typically include an analysis of the customer’s or client’s problem or opportunity by identifying its causes and the likely effects. When experienced proposal writers draft this section, they usually spend a great amount of time asking two questions: 1) “What exactly is causing the problem our customer or client is trying to solve?” and 2) “What has changed recently to create this problem?” (Johnson-Sheehan, 2008). Of course—to use consultant-speak—a problem is always an opportunity in disguise. That is true, but using the word “problem” adds a sense of urgency in this section that holds the customers’ or clients’ attention (Miner & Ball, 2019, p. 91).

The word “narrative” is a tip-off to how proposal writers often approach the writing of this section. They will tell a story that identifies the main characters (protagonists and antagonists) as well as the events, causes, and effects that brought those characters to the current problem state. Experienced proposal writers will use narrative techniques, such as setting the scene, using rising action, and describing a climax, to explain how the problem emerged and how the problem will affect the customer or client in the future.

Statement of Objectives or Aims. Stating the objectives or aims is typically a major pivot point at which a proposal transitions from describing the problem (looking backward) to presenting a plan for solving that problem (looking forward). The objectives or aims are designed to focus the readers' attention, revealing the goals that need to be achieved to solve the problem. Typically, in a solicited proposal, these objectives or aims will be aligned with, but not duplicate, the evaluation criteria named in the RFP.

Project Plan or Methods. After stating its objectives, a proposal typically includes a step-by-step description of the work, which is called the "Project Plan" or "Methods." While generating the content of this section, proposal writers will often ask themselves, "What are the three to seven major steps required to achieve the objectives or aims?" Then, for each of those major steps, they will come up with three to seven minor steps needed to achieve the major step.

Proposal writers often use the following three questions to fill out the content for each major and minor step:

- "How will we complete each step?" Identify each major step and then describe the minor steps needed to complete that major step.
- "Why are these steps needed?" After stating each major step and its minor steps, spend a little time, perhaps a sentence or two, explaining why that step would be handled that way.
- "What are the deliverables or outcomes of each major step?" After describing each major step, explain what will be finished (products, services, reports, data sets, software, etc.) by the end of the step. Specifically, mention things that will be delivered (i.e., deliverables) to the customer or client (Johnson-Sheehan, 2008).

This How-Why-What pattern can be very persuasive to the readers because they see *how* the project will be completed step-by-step, *why* each step is needed, and *what* kinds of deliverables they will receive.

Qualifications. Even the best plan or methods won't work if the right people aren't in place to implement it. Most proposals will include a "Qualifications" section that describes the provider's management and labor, facilities and equipment, and prior experiences with similar projects. Individual qualifications can be expressed through biographical statements, resumes, curriculum vitas, or other genres that summarize the skills and experiences of the project team.

Costs and Benefits. Usually, a summary of the costs and benefits concludes the proposal by trying to persuade the readers that the benefits of saying "yes" to the proposal are worth the costs. The overall price of the project (the costs) is stated in a straightforward and unapologetic way. Proposal writers may include the bottom-line figure, a small table that categorizes the major costs, or a fully itemized budget.

After the costs are stated, many proposal writers will summarize the three to seven major benefits of the project. These benefits had been previously identified

as the deliverables within the description of the project plan. Here at the end of the proposal, they are reframed as benefits and used to balance the costs. This allows the readers to do a quick cost-benefits analysis as they finish reading the proposal. The key move in this concluding section is to convey to the readers, “Here’s what you get” for your money. The customer or client needs to be persuaded that the plan will solve their problem and that they will receive substantial benefits after the problem is solved.

Table 26.1 shows how each of these sections of a proposal is used in various disciplines. As shown in the table, the genre itself is similar across fields, but the genre’s flexibility allows it to be used in many different ways.

Always remember that proposals are unabashedly persuasive in nature, and both sides know it. The readers are fully aware that something is being pitched to them. The proposal writers know their job is to use persuasion to sell the readers a solution. Proposal writers do this by showing the customers or clients that they understand the problem, that they have a reasonable plan for solving that problem, that they have the right people to do the work, and that the benefits of doing the project clearly outweigh the costs.

Table 26.1 Similarities in Proposals Across Various Fields.

	Business Proposals	Engineering Proposals	Science Proposals	Nonprofit Proposals
Background or Narrative	Service the client may not know they need	Problem with a manufacturing process	Literature review that highlights a gap in research	Problem in the community that needs to be solved
Objectives or Aims	List of the customer’s needs	Criteria for determining a successful change to process	Version of funding agency’s criteria for obtaining funding	Version of a funding source’s evaluation criteria
Project Plan or Methods	Step-by-step description of service and how it would work for the customer	Step-by-step description of how the change would be implemented	Step-by-step description of the research methodology	Step-by-step description of the program to address a problem
Qualifications	Company backgrounder	Bios of the engineering and design team	Bios and CVs of the team of scientists and facilities	Bios and resumes of the nonprofit’s administrators
Costs and Benefits	Estimate of the costs and benefits of the new service	Estimate of the costs and benefits of a new process	Significance and impact of the research	Project costs and impact on the community

The proposal, as one of the core genres in technical and professional communication, will be around as long as people have new ideas. In the future, proposals will continue evolving to match the speed and fluidity of today's networked and global workplace. They will likely become briefer, more visual, and more interactive, taking the form of slide decks, poster canvases, and *multimodal* presentations. In new forms, these brief, visual, and interactive proposals will still make the same major moves as traditional written proposals, but they will be designed for clients and customers who want to see more, read less, and be entertained.

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