Ron Payne Photography

Writing Effective Project Summaries for Grant Proposals

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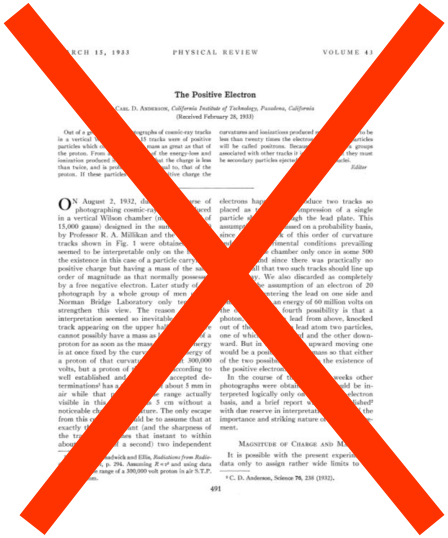
First, let's define our terms—a project summary *is*



The Positive Electron

a stand-alone document

in a formal multi-part proposal

that explains the goals, methods, and expected outcomes of the project

A project summary is *NOT* a scientific article—

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A project summary is *NOT* a scientific article—
think of it as a *prospectus**

**why the funding agency should invest in your research*

Different agencies call this document different names (abstract, executive summary), and they all have their own rules

The project summary does for the full proposal what a picture postcard in the museum gift shop does for a famous painting

Project Summary

Project Description

P. Gaugin, *The Swineherd*

It's a miniature version of the <u>full</u> proposal

The project summary will probably be the first thing most reviewers read…

and it may be the *only* thing that some reviewers read!

First step—follow the directions!

Print out a copy of the directions and read them with a highlighter in your hand

Make a checklist and adhere to it witlessly

Pay special attention to margins, fonts, and length limits

b. Project Summary

Each proposal must contain a summary of the proposed project not more than one page in length. The Project Summary consists of an overview, a statement on the intellectual merit of the proposed activity, and a statement on the broader impacts of the proposed activity.

The overview includes a description of the activity that would result if the proposal were funded and a statement of objectives and methods to be employed. The statement on intellectual merit should describe the potential of the proposed activity to advance knowledge. The statement on broader impacts should describe the potential of the proposed activity to benefit society and contribute to the achievement of specific, desired societal outcomes.

The Project Summary should be informative to other persons working in the same or related fields, and, insofar as possible, understandable to a broad audience within the scientific domain. It should not be an abstract of the proposal.

NSF 22-1, *PAPPG*, Chapter II

Different funders have different rules

Max 1 page—must contain three separate sections: Overview, Intellectual Merit, Broader Impacts

Max 1 page—must list the applicant institution and PI/Co-I names at the top

Max 30 lines of text

Most are max 1 page—must be written to be understandable to the general public

The project summary must “stand alone”

No figures

No tables

No references

No complex equations

No unfamiliar acronyms

No special characters (NSF)

No jargon

Quiz Question #1

How important is the project summary to the success of your proposal?

a) Not as important as the technical description

b) Not as important as the overall budget

c) Not as important as having a novel method

d) Not as important as having a well-qualified team

Answer: None of the above

An effective project summary is *critical*

You may be able to recover from a poorly conceived, badly written summary, but you'll have a deep hole to climb out of

If your summary is not compliant with agency rules, your proposal may not get reviewed at all

To whip up a perfect project summary…

…follow the recipe!

Celia's Foolproof Project Summary

Ingredients:

What problem will you study and why is it important?

What methods will you use and why did you choose them?

What results do you expect and how will you analyze them?

Why you? Why now?

How will funding your project benefit the agency?

Assemble ingredients in this order. Don't add ingredients or omit any. Measure carefully.

Taste frequently and adjust seasonings.

Allow to rest before serving.

Don’t write a partial summary

Describe the *entire* project:

- goals and objectives
- methods, data analysis, metrics
- qualifications of the team
- unique resources
- benefit to the funder
- significance to science and society

Omissions and ambiguities in the project summary

- raise immediate questions in reviewers’ minds about the whole project

Don't assume all reviewers will be an expert in your narrow field—some will, but some won't, and they may all have equal votes

Advice from NIH:

"This section should be informative to other persons working in the same or related fields and insofar as possible understandable to a scientifically or technically literate reader."

Get rid of irrelevancies; eliminate introductory fluff*

Project summaries are always constrained by word or page limits; make every word *count*

Don't waste precious space on any idea that is not directly relevant to your project, no matter how "interesting" it might be

Delete, rephrase, clarify, quantify

In fact, eliminate all fluff; reviewers appreciate conciseness

If your project is funded, the summary may be made public

- Do not include any confidential or proprietary information
- Don’t put anything in the project summary that you wouldn’t want the whole world to see on the agency’s website
- The summary should represent your best, clearest, most thoughtful, most persuasive writing

To recap…

- Follow the rules—witlessly
- Use the five-ingredient recipe
- Aim for the three C's: *clear, concise, compelling*
- Write for a generalist—emphasize *meaning*
- Leave out proprietary information
- Plan for time to revise and polish—your summary must be *perfect!*

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