

## Writing a Concept Paper

Many private foundations have always required a concept paper be submitted for review prior to the submission of a full proposal. In recent years federal and state agencies have begun to encourage the use of concept papers as a way for applicants to obtain informal feedback on their ideas and projects prior to preparing a proposal. Some of these agencies now require a concept paper be submitted as part of the formal submission process.

The purpose of a concept paper, from the funding agency's point of view, is to help applicants develop more competitive proposals and to save time by eliminating proposals that are not likely to be funded. The applicant's purpose in developing a concept paper is to capture the interest of the funding agency and demonstrate that the idea they are proposing is worthy of further consideration. Therefore, the first sentences of a concept paper are very important. You want the funding agency representatives or board members to continue reading!

The first section (**Introduction**) should include some information about the funding agency. You need to demonstrate that you have done your homework and understand the mission of the funding agency and the types of projects that they support. Then you need to identify the agency you represent and how the missions of your agency and the funding agency mesh. Describe any partner agencies that will be involved and their interest in the project.

Next describe the question, problem or need that needs to be addressed (**Purpose**). Briefly provide supporting documentation for the importance of addressing this question, problem or need. If you have statistical data, use it; numbers are always convincing. In short, indicate why anyone should care! This may sound harsh, but when you are close to a particular issue, it is easy to forget that everyone does not understand the situation as well as you.

Make sure that you cite or refer to what others have accomplished relative to your project or research so that you convince the funding agency that you are an expert on this particular issue *and* more needs to be done. Beware of stating that you are the only person who has ever proposed such a project. Even the most brilliant and innovative concepts are based on the work of others from related fields.

Next describe your project: what your agency plans to do, why this is a unique approach, and who will benefit (**Project Description**). Briefly describe your basic **goal/s and objectives** or state your **research questions**. (A goal is statement describing a broad or abstract intent, state or condition. An objective is a statement of measurable outcomes that relate to the goal. An objective includes "who, what, and when" information. It is not a statement about "how.")

Give an overview of **your methodology**--how the project will be carried out--and any innovative approaches, techniques, or processes that will be used. Make sure that the goals, objectives, and methods relate to each other. Include general **timelines** for what you hope to accomplish. Describe the anticipated **benefits** and who will benefit. (If your project is basic research, the impact of the research may not be as easy to describe, however you should be able to describe how your research will add to the body of knowledge of a particular scientific discipline and the numbers of students who will gain scientific knowledge from working on your project or in your lab.)

Try to be brief, concise, and clear. Concept papers should not be longer than five pages. Don't overwhelm the reader with detail, but avoid sounding vague or unsure about what you want to accomplish. Be positive and definite. Instead of saying an objective "may be accomplished," indicate that the objective "will be accomplished" by a certain time. Avoid requesting money for "planning" unless that is the purpose of the funding program. Most funding agencies want to fund a project that is beyond the planning stage.

Consider your audience. If your concept paper is going to be reviewed by scientists in your field, scientific terms and technical jargon may be acceptable. However, if your proposal is being reviewed by generalists or lay persons, this type of language will not communicate your ideas effectively.

Only include budgetary information if it is specifically requested (**Support**). If you are asked to provide specific dollar amounts, make sure that you work with the Office of Sponsored Projects in LM 132 x-5203 to develop your budget. Otherwise, generally describe the types of support you need, e.g, personnel, travel, equipment, etc.

Finally, appearance is important. This concept paper represents you! The type size should be large enough to read easily, and margins should be standard size. Check for spelling errors before submission. Attention to detail is important. Number all pages. Place your name and date in the header. Include your contact information with the concept paper (**Contact**).

The following is a suggested outline for your concept paper. If the agency provides a different format—use it! “He that has the gold makes the rules!”

## Suggested Format for a Concept Paper

(See discussion above.)

Introduction

Purpose

Project Description

Goals and Objectives/Research Questions

Methodology and Timelines

Benefits/Anticipated Outcomes

Support Needed & Costs (if requested)

Contact Information