

Crafting a Sales Pitch for Your Grant Proposal

Robert Porter
University of Tennessee

ABSTRACT

Experienced grant writers know that reviewers are quick to decide whether they like or do not like the proposals they are reading. Therefore, much of the success of any given proposal rides on the strength of the first page—its capacity to “sell” the research idea to skeptical reviewers. This paper describes a writing technique designed to elicit a positive response from grant reviewers at the outset. While the three-paragraph template does not guarantee a winning outcome, it will set the stage for high reviewer scores now required for success in the increasingly competitive world of sponsored research.

INTRODUCTION

In many fields, we know that first impressions count, from job interviews to curbside appeal in real estate. In the highly competitive world of seeking funds to start new businesses, conventional wisdom holds that a good pitch is a short pitch. Venture capitalists are an impatient audience; unless a business idea engages them from the start, they quickly lose interest (Schroter, 2007). In seeking funding for their research, grant writers face a similar challenge, as reviewers form strong first impressions immediately upon reading the abstract

(Molfese, Karp, & Siegel, 2002). The pressure is undeniable: Grant writers must find timely ways to win over reviewers before their proposals are mentally consigned to the “do not fund” category.

“Seasoned grant reviewers will admit to making up their minds on the very first page of the proposal, and rarely change their posture as they read the rest of the document.”

One of the more daunting challenges facing new grant writers is the need to adopt a different rhetorical style. Instead of the expository mode that characterizes most academic writing, a strong grant proposal has to be persuasive from the outset, i.e., it must sell the fundamental idea to a body of grant reviewers who, like venture capitalists, quickly adopt a mental “thumbs up/thumbs down” attitude toward the document they are holding. Seasoned grant reviewers will admit to making up their minds on the very first page of the proposal, and rarely change their posture as they read the rest of the document (Porter, 2005, 2007). A strong grant proposal can be defined as an elegant sales pitch. Therefore, it is critical that the proposal sell itself to the reviewers, and do so quickly, preferably on

the first half of the first page. Typically, grant-writing guides recognize the importance of creating a strong first impression, but few offer specific advice. An exception is Friedland and Folt’s *Writing Successful Science Proposals* (2009), which presents a two paragraph model for writing an effective abstract, but does not emphasize the use of persuasive rhetoric.

CONSTRUCTING THE PITCH

This paper describes a three-paragraph template that grant writers can use to construct a sales pitch for their proposals (Table 1). These are not long paragraphs; consisting of three to four sentences each, in total they should take up no more than one-third to one-half of the proposal’s first page.

Table 1. Constructing the Sales Pitch: Three Paragraphs

I. Set the Stage—Lay Out the Problem (“Who Cares?”)

- A. Get the reviewer interested at the outset
- B. Identify the importance and stress the need
- C. Summarize the state-of-the-art and its limitations
- D. Describe challenges to solving the problem and potential benefits

II. State the Theme—Your Solution

- E. Introduce your concept and establish its credibility
- F. Describe your project’s fundamental rationale

III. Create a Vision (“So What?”)

- G. Show how your work will advance the field
 - H. Envision the world with the problem solved
-

I. Set the Stage—Lay Out the Problem

While grant reviewers are critical readers, they are not inherently negative. They open each proposal with the hope that it is a good one and that reading it will be a pleasure. But experience teaches them that disappointment is more likely, so their first unspoken question is: “Who cares”? To leap this hurdle, the proposal must introduce a problem of unquestioned importance to an academic discipline or to society as a whole, and convince the reviewer that this is an issue worth caring about. For a strong start, the first paragraph of the pitch should consist of four sequential statements (phrases or whole sentences), designed to set the stage:

A. Get the reviewer’s interest at the outset. Seasoned public speakers know how important it is to start with a memorable line or phrase. Lincoln’s “Four score and seven years ago” evoked Biblical language to frame the Gettysburg Address. Franklin Roosevelt forever defined December 7, 1941 as a “date that will live in infamy.” Clearly, grant writers need not reach for such exalted rhetoric, but they should craft the opening statement in such a way that it grabs the reviewer’s attention. In the sample sales pitch below (Table 2), notice how section (A) in the first paragraph introduces a threatening equine disease with the simple declaration that it strikes 50% of mature horses.

B. Identify the importance and stress the need. Once you have the reviewer’s

attention, you can sharpen interest by citing widespread recognition of the problem and a sense of urgency to address it. Notice how section (B) of the sample mentions euthanasia of some horses and a national conference specifically convened to find better ways to prevent and manage the disease.

C. Summarize the state-of-the-art and its limitations. The purpose of this section is to heighten the reviewer’s awareness of current knowledge or practice and why we should not be satisfied with it. In the sample, (C) is a one-sentence summary of the inadequacies of current therapeutic methods in veterinary medicine. Citations of current literature strengthen the validity of the claim. (*Note: The sample was composed some years ago and no longer reflects current veterinary practice. It is presented as a structural model only.*)

D. Describe challenges to solving the problem and potential benefits. This section adds to the reviewer’s understanding of the reasons why current practice fails to address the problem. The concluding sentence of D (“Clearly, current research shows a need for more effective RAO treatment modalities”) directly solicits the reviewer’s support for a new approach.

Properly constructed, this first paragraph of the pitch should be the beginning of a mental alliance between the proposal writer and the reviewer.

Table 2. Sample Sales Pitch for a USDA Grant Proposal, "Intravenous Magnesium as a Treatment Modality for Equine Recurrent Airway Obstruction"

I. SETTING THE STAGE

(A) Recurrent Airway Obstruction (RAO) is a progressive, debilitating respiratory disease, occurring in 50% of mature horses, (B) with 5% affected severely enough to result in an end to their working careers or to euthanasia.^{1,2} It is a chronic, recurrent condition with clinical characteristics that are well recognized, although its pathogenesis is complex, multifactorial, and currently not well understood. As an indication of industry concern, in June of 2000, 30 of the world's leading investigators were joined by pharmaceutical companies at a Michigan State University conference devoted entirely to improving RAO prevention and management.³ (C) Further, current management and therapeutic regimens for horses with chronic or severe disease are either not efficacious or are not able to be implemented. (D) For example, drugs commonly used to manage RAO, such as corticosteroids with anti-inflammatory properties and bronchodilators that open the passageways, also stress the heart, adding additional risk to an already debilitated animal.^{4,5} Strategies to remove environmental precipitators such as dust and mold often fail as many horse owners are unable or unwilling to comply with such recommendations. Clearly, current research shows a need for more effective RAO treatment modalities.

II. PROJECT THEMES

(E) With this study, we propose to administer intravenous magnesium to horses with acute and chronic RAO to determine if this treatment improves respiratory function and/or reduces arterial hypertension, without the deleterious side effects of other commonly administered drugs. Recent case reports show magnesium to be efficacious for acute human asthmatics who fail to respond to more conventional therapy.^{6,7} (F) As RAO is increasingly seen as an equine analog to asthma in humans (replacing the previous use of the COPD model),⁸ and severely affected RAO horses demonstrate many of the same clinical signs as human asthmatics, RAO horses could be equally responsive to this treatment.

III. VISION

(G) Should the research hypothesis be supported, clinicians will have another viable treatment modality at their disposal, one that is inexpensive, and effective in treating a resistant disease without the damaging side effects of other modalities. (H) Additionally, horse owners and breeders could reduce the significant financial losses caused by the malady, currently estimated at more than \$1.5 billion annually in the U.S. alone.⁹

Note: Footnote/endnote numbers in this table are for illustrative purposes only.

II. STATE THE THEME—YOUR SOLUTION

Having set the stage by laying out a pressing problem, the grant writer must now introduce a credible approach to finding a solution. From a writer's perspective, if you have succeeded in piquing the reviewer's interest in a problem, there is a natural desire to know what you want to do about it. The second paragraph serves the critical function of persuading the reviewer that the scientific rationale for the proposed research is sound and worth testing.

“From a writer's perspective, if you have succeeded in piquing the reviewer's interest in a problem, there is a natural desire to know what you want to do about it.”

E. Introduce your concept and establish its credibility. This is best done with a simple, direct summary of the overall research idea. In the sample, section (E) uses first-person and active voice to describe the research approach and how it would avoid the drawbacks associated with existing treatment methods. It also cites relevant research which shows that magnesium has shown promise in treating asthma in humans.

F. Describe your project's fundamental rationale. Here (F) is the crux of the researcher's argument: The shortcomings of

existing ROA treatment modalities may be due to adopting the wrong model of human disease, i.e., RAO is to horses as chronic obstructive pulmonary disease (COPD) is to humans, and therefore COPD treatments ought to be beneficial to RAO-afflicted horses. The researcher suggests that asthma, not COPD, is a more fitting human analogue to ROA. If so, and we know that some asthmatics are reacting well to magnesium treatments, it is reasonable to test whether RAO horses might benefit from a similar modality.

In two paragraphs (steps A–F), the writer forges a concise argument in two parts: 1) introduction of an important problem; and 2) a general description of a research approach that promises success. A straightforward, persuasive case constructed in this manner enhances the likelihood that the reviewers' early responses to the proposal will be positive.

III. Create a Vision (“So What?”)

Even when the reviewer buys into the basic research idea, there is still the question of impact. If the project is funded and the research accomplished, what will be the result? As evidence that funding agencies are increasingly concerned with this question, one need only cite the revised peer review system at the National Institutes of Health, where “Impact” is the newest and most important criterion, to be scored independently from all other considerations (National Institutes of Health, 2011). Given this dynamic, the

essential purpose of the third paragraph is to persuade the reviewer that there is a reasonable expectation that the requested funding will result in desirable outcomes.

G. Show how your work will advance the field. In the sample (G) summarizes the advances this research could bring to veterinary medicine, emphasizing the potential improvements over existing clinical practice.

H. Envision the world with the problem solved. This element is the most idealistic of all, as (H) projects with extreme optimism the potential clinical and economic impact of research findings, suggesting a strong return on investment.

CONCLUSION

It should be emphasized that a well-written sales pitch does not guarantee success with reviewers; like an overture in the theater, it merely “warms the audience” and makes them more receptive to the total package. What follows in the proposal—the goals and objectives, the review of current literature, the research design and evaluation method—must be equally persuasive. Similarly, reviewers will be assessing criteria unique to specific grant programs, such as the National Science Foundation’s “broader impacts” requirement. So while a strong start does not guarantee success, the converse is genuinely ominous for grant writers: A weak start rarely results in a winner. This template, then, is offered as just one tool in the grant writer’s kit of effective techniques.

But it is, arguably, a tool of considerable power.

“So while a strong start does not guarantee success, the converse is genuinely ominous for grant writers: A weak start rarely results in a winner.”

LITERATURE CITED

- Friedland, A. J., & Folt, C. L. (2009). *Writing successful science proposals* (2nd ed.). New Haven: Yale University Press.
- Molfese, V. J., Karp, K. S., & Siegel, L. S. (2002). Recommendations for writing successful proposals from a reviewer’s perspective. *The Journal of Research Administration*, 33(3), 21–24.
- National Institutes of Health. (2011). Scoring System and Procedure. Retrieved May 3 2011 from http://grants.nih.gov/grants/peer/guidelines_general/scoring_system_and_procedure.pdf.
- Porter, R. (2005). What do grant reviewers really want, anyway? *The Journal of Research Administration*, 36(2), 47–55.
- Porter, R. (2007). Why academics have a hard time writing good grant proposals. *The Journal of Research Administration*, 38(2), 161–167.
- Schroter, W. (2007). Quoted in *The art of the business pitch*. *Forbes.com: Ask an Expert*. Retrieved May 3, 2011 from www.Forbes.com.

ABOUT THE AUTHOR

Robert Porter, Ph. D., is Director of Research Development, University of Tennessee, where he conducts grant-writing workshops for faculty and graduate students. Over the past ten years he has presented papers and workshops on grant writing at national conferences and has published prize-winning articles in the *Journal of Research Administration* and *Research Management Review*. Dr. Porter has previously taught at Virginia Tech, Swarthmore College, and Eastern Washington University. He holds graduate degrees in Speech Communications from the University of Michigan.
