

Three top tips for writing a lay summary for a grant proposal

As grant funding manager, I read lots of advice and best practice on how to write a good grants proposal. Advice comes from disparate sources, so I thought I'd collate and share my three favourite tips for writing a lay summary.

It's worth investing time in getting the lay summary right as it's one of the first sections of your proposal seen by the reviewers. It can be challenging to write because you are writing it for multiple audiences – the general public, end users of the science, decision-makers and researchers in different disciplines – but with these handy guidelines, your lay summary will stand out from the crowd.

Here are my top tips:

1. Show how your work fits into the bigger picture.

This is my favourite tip and comes from Helen White-Cooper, Deputy Chair on Panel C for BBSRC grants. Helen recommends writing using the inverted triangle technique. Using this technique means that you start with the wide base of the triangle – the big picture – and say why you are doing the work. From there you zoom in and focus on building a convincing argument, layered with evidence. And finally, the tip of the triangle – the smallest bit – you include detail.

The lay summary should not be a duplication of the technical summary written in more simple language. This forms the critical difference between the lay and the technical summary. The technical summary focuses on 'how' you are doing the work and the lay summary focuses on 'why' you are doing the work.

2. The lay summary must speak for itself when separated from the rest of the proposal.

The lay summary should be a concise and accurate description of the proposal, even when it's separated from the proposal. The lay summaries of BBSRC-funded proposals are published publically without the rest of the proposal, so this is worth bearing in mind.

This tip comes from Jacob Kraicer who wrote [The Art of Grantsmanship](#). One reason why Kraicer emphasises that the lay summary must be standalone is because not all reviewers will read the whole application. This is particularly true for philanthropic funding bodies where the Board of Trustees will focus their attention on the summary, especially when they have many hundreds of proposals to review and a finite amount of funds to distribute.

3. Write it last

Although the lay summary appears early on the application form, write it last. My reasoning for this top tip is because it emphasises my first two points. If you write it last, you will have captured the detail in the rest of the application and therefore will be less tempted to make the lay summary full of detail. You will side-step the trap of focusing on 'how' you will do the work, and instead you will focus on 'why' you are doing the work. And you'll be in a better position to present the essential meaning of the proposal so it can stand alone from the rest of the proposal.

These three tips are not an exhaustive list, but I hope will serve to help make your proposal stand out from the crowd. By catching the reviewers' attention in a positive way, you maximise your chances of funding success.

My final thought...

I do have one final tip – and this is very much a personal one from me. A proposal flows and has more impact when it's written in the active voice. When I'm reviewing proposals, I find proposal in the active voice have more rhythm and are easier to digest, compared to those in the passive voice.

And if you don't want to take my word for it, just check out Warren Buffet's writing style. He is the master of an easy to read, positive and engaging style, which is neatly captured [in this blog](#) by Ian Harris, one of my favourite bloggers. Here's to keeping it simple.