

Proposals

Proposal Definition and Purpose

A proposal is a written document that outlines a problem and offers a solution to that problem. The purpose of a proposal is to persuade a potential client to adopt the recommended solution and grant funding for the solution's implementation. Proposals are written for both private and public sector organizations.

The main reason to write a proposal is to obtain executive buy-in. You want key people to support your project. You need decision-makers on your side to turn a vision into reality. Therefore, you want the proposal to speak to them, and then motivate them to take the next step, which is to greenlight, and, ideally, fund your project.

Most proposals require the author(s) to respond to a Request for Proposal (RFP), which outlines what the proposal should be about (problem, purpose, audience, etc.), what sections to include, and how to format the document (most RFP include some form of template to use). Proposals usually follow a number of similar steps, as listed below. ***However, it is very important that all proposals follow the content and template instructions for their specific RFP, regardless of the steps and tips below.***

Step 1: Read the Request for Proposal (RFP)

Read the RFP carefully and be sure to cover *all* areas that are requested.

Tips for reading the RFP:

- **Highlight key passages.** RFPs vary in length, and specific requirements can often be overlooked. Highlighting the key passages that are important to research and write about in your proposal will help you remember what you need to cover.
- **Take notes.** As you read the RFP, you may think of points to make or areas to research for the proposal. Just because you think of these things while reading the RFP doesn't mean you'll remember them when you sit down to write. Be sure to take notes so you remember.

Step 2: Define the problem¹

What's the problem your project is trying to address? Why is it a problem? Why is it worth solving? Make your audience see the problem the way you see it.

Tips for defining the problem:

- **Start strong.** Decision-makers usually don't allot much time to look over a proposal, so make sure that the pain point is succinctly described and in a manner that resonates with them.
- **Use facts, not opinion.** Although you want your audience to understand the severity of a problem, you don't want to exaggerate. Instead, use data from your research to back up your assertions.

Step 3: Present your solution

How will your project solve the problem? Why is your solution the better option over other similar solutions? Discuss why other solutions won't work for the situation.

Tips for presenting your solution:

- **Anticipate questions and objections.** Be prepared to defend your solution from all angles. Be ready to explain why your more expensive solution is better than a less expensive one, for example.
- **Present the solution's larger impact.** Stakeholders generally get more excited about projects with wide-ranging effects than those with limited impact.
- **Again, facts over opinion.** Provide as many research-backed examples as you can.

Step 4: Define your deliverables and success criteria

This section provides a picture of the functions and attributes of the deliverable, plus how to know if the project is successful.

¹ Content adapted from The Blueprint's [7 Steps for Writing the Perfect Project Proposal](#)

Tips for defining deliverables:

- **Include a delivery date.** Define what your project will deliver and what users can expect from it, such as a cloud-based phone system that's accessible 24/7 from anywhere if it's a customer service project you're proposing. Also, indicate when you plan to complete each deliverable.
- **Your solution must be SMART.** Your success criteria will signal whether the project has been successful. Remember to keep your solution SMART (specific, measurable, achievable, realistic, and time-bound.)

Step 5: State your plan or approach

This is the most critical section of the proposal and discusses how to achieve the project's objectives. It starts with an explanation of the approach and why it's relevant and effective. It also explains how problems will be managed.

Tips for planning:

- **Introduce project strategies.** Will you be using the traditional waterfall approach? Why? Will you be using third-party contractors, in-house staff, or consultants? What will their objectives and responsibilities be? This is your opportunity to discuss the "why" behind the decisions you're making to get the project completed.
- **Explain how problems will be addressed.** This explains your project management plan's risk mitigation strategies.

Step 6: Outline your schedule and budget

This is the section where you break down project costs and detail how you will meet deadlines.

Tips for defining a schedule and budget:

- **Provide as much detail as possible.** Break your budget down into categories, such as supplies, tools, salary, etc. Include all overhead and indirect costs. A detailed financial breakdown will signal to stakeholders that you've done your research and don't intend to waste their money. Note that certain projects may require financial statements and funding sources.
- **Be concrete. Don't guess.** Provide project start and end times, and if certain sections of the project can be done simultaneously.

Step 7: Tie it all together

End your proposal with a conclusion that briefly summarizes the problem, solution, and benefits. Emphasize the significant parts, and make your proposal stand out by restating ideas or facts you want your audience to remember. Check your proposal for consistency of ideas and whether the elements support each other.

Tips for tying everything together:

- **Your proposal should read like a book.** Your proposal should tell a story. Every section and element must work together to form a cohesive whole.
- **Refrain from introducing anything that doesn't fit.** Be careful not to introduce anything that seems off or doesn't contribute to the overall objectives of the project.
- **Make sure all project proposal elements are present.** Check your document and ensure all the necessary elements have been addressed.

Step 8: Edit/proofread your proposal

Rewrite your proposal as necessary to make it interesting, helpful, clear, and persuasive. Ask for feedback, and ensure the proposal is organized and visually appealing (resources for this step are listed below).

Tips for editing:

- **Check the tone and language.** Your proposal is intended for a certain audience type, so make sure the tone and language used are reflective of that. Don't forget to proofread for grammar, punctuation, or spelling mistakes. You want your proposal to look professional. **In the Other Resources section below you will find a list of editing companies that can help you with your final edit and proofread.*

VT Resources

Virginia Tech offers a variety of resources for graduate students who need assistant writing proposals. Below is a list of a few of those resources; if you know of other resources available on campus, please email Dr. Kelly Scarff (kls16@vt.edu).

Courses

ENGL 4804 Grant Proposal and Reports

Prepares students to write effective proposals, reports, and informational articles. Check with course adviser for eligibility.

Website: <https://liberalarts.vt.edu/academics/majors-and-minors/professional-and-technical-writing-major/course-list.html>

ENGL 3804 Technical Editing and Style

Prepares students for the roles, responsibilities, and tasks that editors perform (writing style, audience, purpose, occasion).

Check with course adviser for eligibility.

Website: <https://www.coursicle.com/vt/courses/ENGL/3804/>

Mechanical Engineering's Technical Communication Program

Offers individualized writing resources, support, and feedback for ME students and hosts various writing workshops throughout the academic year, such as NSF Grant Workshops, Technical Report Workshops, Resume/Cover Letter Workshops, and Graduate Writing Workshop (Just Write). **The Graduate Writing Workshop—Just Write—offers brief writing lessons at the beginning of each session.*

Contact: Dr. Kelly Scarff (kls16@vt.edu)

VT Faculty Activity Support Team (VT-FAST)

Offers proposal and grant content development support for graduate students and faculty.

Website: <https://fralinlifesci.vt.edu/VT-FAST.html>

Contact: Janet Webster (jbwebste@vt.edu)

VT Writing Center

Offers individual writing consultations and multilingual services. Offers undergraduate and graduate students a range of resources for developing their communication skills.

Website: <https://lib.vt.edu/study-learn/writing-center.html>

Online Schedule: <https://vt.mywconline.com/>

Contact: Jenny Lawrence (jlwrnc@vt.edu)

Editing and Proofreading Resources

Editor World

Offers a final read-through of your document, checking for basic errors (grammar, punctuation, etc.). **Please note that payment is required for these services.*

Website: <https://www.editorworld.com>

Contact: info@editorworld.com

Ascent: Center for Technical Knowledge

Offers proofreading and editing for several technical writing genres. **Please note that payment is required for these services.*

Website: <https://www.ascented.com>

Scribendi

Offers proofreading and editing to make sure your document is free from errors and meets the desired style guide specs before you pass it on. **Please note that payment is required for these services.*

Website: <https://www.scribendi.com>