

# *Sponsored Programs Guidance “Cradle to Grave”*



**DIVISION OF AGRICULTURE  
RESEARCH & EXTENSION**

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## **Technical versus Personal Style**

*When developing a grant proposal, the researcher needs to decide which writing style is best suited for winning approval of the review panel. The following are some tips to consider when choosing the style. And, for added reference, the material is presented twice, first in a technical style and followed by the same information in the more informal personal style.*

### Technical Style

#### I. Introduction

Many researchers struggle with choosing a writing style or voice when developing a grant proposal. While one review panel may frown upon the journal-article voice arising from a technical style, another might view a personal writing style as unprofessional and distracting. In recommending which style to use, many sponsored-programs professionals say it is a matter of personal preference. This suggestion is a disservice to researchers. Researchers do not write proposals to satisfy their personal tastes; rather, they write them to win the approval of review panels. The only taste that matters in a competitive grant review process is the collective preference of the reviewers. A researcher's choice of writing style may determine if a proposal receives a thorough review or an outright rejection.

#### II. Writing Styles

##### A. Technical Style

Most scientists and researchers are trained and comfortable writing in a technical style. Technical styling is direct, fact-based, and normally written for an audience with interests and knowledge similar to the writer. Technical styling often contains statistics, charts, graphs, and other visual aids to assist reviewers in understanding the data presented and attempts to eliminate the need for interpretation. Researchers using a technical style avoid pronouns and instead

focus on goals, objectives, processes, methods, and results. Technical styling also encourages researchers to consider subject matter from various viewpoints, a tactic demonstrating objectivity in the eyes of some reviewers. The formality of a technical style is most appropriate when the writer is attempting to address a serious subject of scientific interest and importance.

## B. Personal Style

Researchers who develop proposals using a personal writing style typically include pronouns focusing on people. These researchers use “Our” and “We” liberally throughout their proposals in attempt to develop emotional bonds with reviewers. The personal style allows researchers to convey passion for their project in hopes reviewers will have similar reactions. While not completely conversational in nature, personal styling is less formal than technical styling, allowing leeway to use contractions and occasionally break grammatical rules. Writers use a personal style to relax and connect with their audience in informally but not so informally as to allow the style to slip into conversational language. A true conversational style employs frequent metaphors and a storytelling approach that should be avoided in developing grant proposals. Even the most relaxed review panels would likely consider such an approach an affront to their funding program’s legitimacy.

The following contrasts some of the key differences between technical and personal styling:

	<u>Technical</u>	<u>Personal</u>
	Formal	Informal
	Focuses on facts	Focuses on people
	Connects with reader on Professional level	Connects with reader on Emotional level
	Emphasizes scientific Value	Emphasizes emotions
subject	Displays professional Interest in subject	Displays passion for
	Requires specificity	Encourages generalizations
frequently	Contractions avoided	Contractions used

discouraged	Professional jargon acceptable	Professional jargon
grammatical	Strict adherence to grammatical Rules	Not as much concern for rules

### III. Choice of Style

It is highly unlikely that a Request for Proposals (RFP) will require or recommend a particular writing style for proposals. Instead, it is up to researchers to determine the type of writing most appropriate for a given program. Researchers should consider a number of questions to help make this decision:

- A. How is the RFP written? Is it technical in nature or informal?
- B. What organization is funding the project? What is their organizational culture? Are they more interested in scientific content or in people?
- C. Have any colleagues developed proposals for the funder before? What style did they use? What review comments did they receive?
- D. What is the content of your proposal? Does it involve a technical approach or one in which people or social development/emotions are a focus?
- E. Are you familiar with the type of individuals who may be reviewers for the funding program? Do you know any of them personally? What style might they prefer?
- F. Will your findings be used or implemented in a formal or informal setting?

### IV. Considerations

In the event a researcher is unable to determine the style appropriate for a given proposal, they may need to consider the advantages and disadvantages of each type of writing and how it may be viewed by those charged with reviewing proposals.

As outlined, both styles of writing have advantages in specific situations, but each also has disadvantages. In general, a technical style makes it more difficult to connect with the reviewer. Traditional technical writing is focused on facts, methods, and results of importance primarily to the scientific community. Emotions are typically absent from this type of writing, and conveying the researcher's passion for the subject matter can be difficult. In addition, technical writing can read like a journal article. Reviewers normally have numerous proposals to consider, and fatigue can be a factor. A technical proposal buried deep in the stack is unlikely to stand out to anyone other than the reviewers most

interested in the subject matter. In short, without significant experience, researchers tend to write technical proposals in a voice many interpret as monotone. Reviewers will have difficulty focusing on facts alone for a significant period of time. Sometimes a fresh voice will get the attention of a reviewer and allow for a more favorable outcome.

While technical style can be monotonous for some reviewers, the researcher must remember that most reviewers are professionals who have significant experience and interest in the subject matter they are considering. In attempting to connect with the reader, a conversational style leads to a tendency to include “fluff,” and passion for the subject may be viewed as lacking objectivity. Some reviewers will consider this style unprofessional, leading them to question the researcher’s qualifications to complete the project. Some may be concerned that the writing style will creep into the final report on the project, ultimately discrediting the findings by scholarly reviewers. From the mechanical standpoint, a conversational style can lead to grammatical errors, sexist language, and a tendency to shift between styles when the writer may subconsciously wish to show professionalism. To many reviewers, the use of pronouns can also be a distraction from the subject matter.

## V. Conclusion

Technical writing style is impersonal, formal, and tends to be filled with jargon and acronyms. Written largely from the researcher’s point of view, it discourages the writer from considering the reviewer’s needs—the same reviewer who will determine whether or not the proposal is funded. However impersonal, technical styling is common throughout many institutions and fills a prerequisite for fitting into organizational bureaucracy.

Some reviewers, while finding a personal writing style easier to understand and more pleasant to read, perceive the personal style as unprofessional and lacking objectivity. A researcher using the personal style of writing is prone to insert ego or bias issues into a proposal, a death knell in the hands of many reviewers. Ultimately, the choice of style rests with the researcher; however, the reaction of the reviewer will determine the fate of a proposal. It is up to the researcher to consider the audience characteristics and the writing style most effective in a given situation.

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### Personal Style

#### I. Introduction

As a researcher, you probably struggle to decide which writing style to use when developing a grant proposal. If you use a technical style, your proposal might

sound like a journal article, and lots of reviewers can be turned off. On the other hand, if you write in a personal style, your proposal may be considered unprofessional. You've probably been told that your choice of style is just that—your choice. But, viewing writing style as personal preference is short-sighted. Remember, you are writing your proposal for a review panel that has biases and preferences. To be successful, you need to figure out what the review panel is looking for. Otherwise, your well-planned proposal may wind up atop the rejection pile.

## II. Writing Styles

### C. Technical Style

If you're like most researchers, you're probably comfortable writing in a technical style. This style is direct and fact-based, something your colleagues, and likely your review panel, can easily relate to. Statistics, charts, graphs, and other visual aids can be used liberally to help the review panel understand your data. If you write in a technical style, you'll need to avoid pronouns and focus on the meat of your project--goals, objectives, processes, methods, and results. You'll also want to look at your subject matter from different points of view to show your review panel that your approach is objective. If you are developing a grant proposal addressing a serious subject, a technical style is probably for you.

### D. Personal Style

If you decide to use a personal style, you'll include lots of pronouns. Words like "Our" and "We" will be some of your best tools in reaching your review panel on an emotional level. You'll be able to show your passion for your subject and hopefully ignite passion in your review panel as well. If using a personal style, use of contractions and even an occasional grammatical faux pas are allowed. Your goal is to relax your audience and treat the subject matter informally. But, be careful. If you are too informal, you'll slip into a conversational tone and use too many metaphors and go on tangents. No review panel who takes itself seriously would award a grant to someone who takes such a lackadaisical approach to a proposal.

Some of the differences between technical and personal writing styles are listed below:

#### Technical

Formal

Focuses on facts

Connects with reader on Professional level

#### Personal

Informal

Focuses on people

Connects with reader on Emotional level

	Emphasizes scientific Value	Emphasizes emotions
subject	Displays professional Interest in subject	Displays passion for
	Requires specificity	Encourages generalizations
frequently	Contractions avoided	Contractions used
discouraged	Professional jargon acceptable	Professional jargon
grammatical	Strict adherence to grammatical Rules	Not as much concern for rules

### III. Choice of Style

You probably won't find a particular writing style required in a Request for Proposals (RFP). It's up to you to figure out the type of writing you should use in a given situation. A few questions to consider:

- G. How is the RFP written? Is it technical in nature or informal?
- H. What organization is funding the project? What is their organizational culture? Are they more interested in scientific content or in people?
- I. Have any colleagues developed proposals for the funder before? What style did they use? What review comments did they receive?
- J. What is the content of your proposal? Does it involve a technical approach or one in which people or social development/emotions are a focus?
- K. Are you familiar with the type of individuals who may be reviewers for the funding program? Do you know any of them personally? What style might they prefer?
- L. Will your findings be used or implemented in a formal or informal setting?

### IV. Considerations

In case you can decide which style of writing to use, you'll probably want to consider the pros and cons of personal versus technical writing.

As noted above, both writing styles have advantages, but they also have disadvantages. Basically, a technical style's formality can make it difficult for you to connect with your audience. Technical writing is usually focused on the facts, methods, and results that scientists care about. It is unemotional and doesn't give much opportunity to show your passion for your subject. Technical writing can also sound like a journal article. Your review panel probably has a lot of proposals on their desk, and they can easily become tired. If you write in the same style as everyone else, your proposal isn't going to stand out. It will probably come across in a monotone voice and put your audience to sleep. A fresh voice might bring you a better outcome.

Even though some reviewers think technical writing is monotonous, remember that your proposal is being reviewed by professionals with a lot of experience and knowledge. They are not interested in reading "fluff" and want to make sure you are objective in your approach. They may consider a personal style of writing unprofessional and you the same. They surely don't want a personal style to show up in the final report that will be reviewed by scholars. And, if the review panel is a stickler for grammar, sexist language, or consistency in writing, the personal style is full of pitfalls. Finally, the panel may find your frequent use of pronouns distracts from the real topic at hand—your proposal.

## V. Conclusion

Without a doubt, a technical writing style is impersonal, formal, and filled with jargon and acronyms. It is written from your point of view as a researcher. It can be a selfish method of writing that fails to consider what the reviewer wants, and this same reviewer will be deciding if your proposal gets funded. But, technical styling is pretty common in government and many feel it is the only way to be considered seriously.

You may find that some reviewers realize a personal style is easier to read and understand, but they find it unprofessional. Those who use a personal style are apt to include ego or bias issues that will turn off the review panel. Technical or personal styling—the choice is yours to make. But, remember you're your proposal is in the hands of your reader. You need to decide which style your reader will prefer.