

Outline talksheet for: **Proposal writing: why the frenzy?**

This is a handout I put together for a round-table discussion with academic colleagues from a variety of disciplines at a recent teaching and learning conference. They were concerned about their own proposal-writing expertise (or, rather, lack of it), and had asked what I had learned from my research into engineering proposals that might help them.

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Why the frenzy?

1. Intellectual and emotional investment – prospection and creativity (look at what we could do if we had the funding); jubilation and celebratory party, or despondency and, for some, job losses?
2. High costs in terms of finance and time – a rough rule-of-thumb estimate of 7 to 9 hours per page, from scratch to finished document. Could be more, or less. Depends on number of people involved, size of document, and difficulty of subject matter.
3. Pressure of time and tight deadlines.
4. Ambivalent feelings – is it really worth all the effort, when there's such a small chance of winning?
5. Intensive work, which is like a whirlwind of writing, thinking, and consulting. It leaves people drained and exhausted.

Special features of proposal documents

1. Hope about the future: proposals can make people feel good about themselves and proud about what they could achieve (look what I could do if ...). The hope they feel uplifts them.
2. 'Big texts'. In the commercial workplace, these are written by teams of writers and reviewed by reading teams.
3. Complexity, in terms of document structure and writing – a textual matrix (Hoey 2001:93), often comprising numerous different sections, genres, and types of writing.
4. Aspects of persuasion, which are really tricky: how to be persuasive without being obvious about it? See Myers (1990:42) and Sales (2006: 136-152) for more on persuasion in proposal writing.
5. Demands distinctive writing style(s), which is hard to pin down, but usually should exclude any emotive, 'flowery' language. We need to achieve a style that has those elusive qualities of clarity, cogency and conciseness. Easier said than done.
6. Intense (sometimes disconnected) scrutiny: there is a curious way in which proposals are read: often teams of readers reading deconstructed documents.
7. Writing conformity – we often need to write according to funding body's writing strictures, imposed in the belief (mistaken) that their decision-making will be made easier.
8. The executive summary (covering letter, or other similar text-type) is crucial when writing is constrained by funding bodies templates.
9. Main themes – proposals should be imbued with these, and they should be expressed consistently throughout the document. For more on themes, see Sales 2006 (P.201-205, esp. P.205).

The bid process/ tendering procedures – secretive, mysterious (and sometimes murky)

1. The selection criteria are not often as clear (or fair) as they are painted.
2. Understanding your audience? No chance. Unless you know someone (who knows someone) on the panel, it's guesswork all the way. This is a MAJOR problem for proposal writers.

3. The way winning bids are selected remains a mystery to most proposal writers, who believe that reasons given for being rejected by the funding body are only part of the story. They are probably right.

What can we learn from this?

Ask anyone who has written proposals and you will get a mixed reaction. On balance, the cons outweigh the pros. It is easy for novice writers to get discouraged, and so we need to think about strategies to encourage us to keep trying. We need to build a culture of proposal writing (for want of better words) because proposal writing can be exciting and exhilarating, a creative learning process for academics. But we know it can also be a lonely, demanding writing task. Often, we need more people involved in proposal writing and some kind of writing support infrastructure to bring about more assertive, competitive writing. So, some suggestions:

1. A set of reading and writing procedures to provide support to writers and avoid duplication:
2. Proposal scrutineers, who meet to discuss proposals and give feedback. Probably, some of these should be different from those providing writing support.
3. A proposal writing support group to give ideas to writers.
4. Intelligence gathering: how much can we find out about the funding body we are applying to and the people on the vetting panel. We need to be in touch with those who know the game and have the experience.
5. So far, we don't have a way of budgeting for proposal writing (or any other type of non-teaching or research-related document, for that matter). Should we? It might encourage colleagues to participate more, if it didn't have to be squeezed in around our usual teaching and writing tasks.

Useful readings

Bolinger, D. (1980) *Language the Loaded Weapon*. Harlow, UK: Longman Group Ltd.

Covey, F. (1997) *Style Guide - For Business and Technical Communication*. 3rd Edition. Salt Lake City, USA: Franklin Covey Company.

Hoey, M. (2001) *Textual Interaction: An Introduction to Written Discourse Analysis*. London and New York: Routledge.

Myers, G. (1990) *Writing Biology – Texts in the Social Construction of Scientific Knowledge*. Madison, Wisconsin: The University of Wisconsin Press.

Newman, L. (2003) *Proposal Guide – For Business Development and Sales Professionals*. 2nd Edition. Farmington, UT, USA: Shipley Associates.

Sales, H.E. (2006) *Professional Communication in Engineering*. Basingstoke, U.K.: Palgrave Macmillan.

Sales, H.E. (2007) 'What makes a proposal persuasive?', *Communicator*, Journal of the Institute of Scientific and Technical Communicators. Winter 2007.

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