

WRITING STYLE ADVICE FOR PROPOSALS

Created by Northwestern University's Writing Program and the Science Research Workshop Program of the Searle Center for Advanced Teaching and Learning

In research proposals, writers strive for a style that is precise, concise, objective, and persuasive. Proposals are essentially logical arguments written to convince a well educated but non-specialized group of readers to fund the research project. A related genre—the summary report that researchers generally need to submit when their work is completed—uses the same kind of style.

Organization

- In your rough draft, include a heading for each major section of the proposal (or have a heading in mind). Ensure that the details in each section relate to that heading.
- In your final copy, eliminate the headings (to save space and create “flow”), but use the first sentence of each paragraph to make its topic or key idea clear.
- Keep related ideas (such as project goals or research questions) together.
- Keep paragraphs moderate in length. If a paragraph becomes too long, break it where you can emphasize a key idea.
- Use transitional words and phrases at the beginning of sentences and clauses to show how a new idea relates to one you've just discussed (examples: *however*, *in contrast*; *furthermore*, *in addition*, *similarly*; *in other words*; *therefore*, *thus*; *first*, *second*, *third*).

Sentences

- Keep sentences from becoming too long.
 - Break long sentences into two or into readable chunks (using internal numbers or punctuation). Example: Testing showed that (1) . . . , (2) . . . , and (3)
 - Eliminate wordy phrases; for clarity and conciseness, emphasize verbs and active voice. In active voice, the subject of the sentence does something. Examples: The literature shows; the results indicate; the data suggest.

<i>wordy</i>	<i>concise</i>
-The main cause of these problems stems from . . . -This approach can result in the understanding of how to . . .	-These problems stem primarily from . . . - This approach will help researchers understand how to . . .

- Put lists and long complicated ideas at the ends of sentences.
- Punctuate sentences correctly to make reading easier and to avoid ambiguity.
 - When two complete ideas are joined by a conjunction such as “and,” use a comma before the “and” to separate your ideas.
 - If a sentence starts with a long dependent idea (like this one), put a comma after the introductory clause or phrase to show readers where the main idea starts.
 - In a series of three or more things, put a comma before the “and”:
Example: Here I have learned proper mutagenesis techniques, fluorescence techniques, and oocyte injection.
- Proofread carefully to correct spelling mistakes, catch typographical errors, and eliminate unnecessary repetition of words or phrases.

Word choice

- Check all pronouns to make sure they point to a clear antecedent (a noun that precedes them). Avoid vague pronouns as in "this shows" Instead write, "This trend shows..." Clear pronouns help readers follow your argument without having to stop and look back at a previous sentence.
- Use "I" to discuss work you intend to do. Do not use "we" unless you've clarified who else is involved in the work.
- Sound confident; replace tentative words like "hope to" with positive words like "aim to," "intend to," "will," or "plan to."
- Treat "data" as a plural ("the data show," not "the data shows").
- Use "affects" as a verb ("this affects that") and "effects" as a noun ("the effects of the experiment").
- Use "complements" to mean "completes" or "balances" ("complimentary" means "free" or "full of praise").