Truman State University
Proposal Writer's Guide
edited from the *Proposal Writer's Guide*
by Don Thackrey, University of Michigan

Foreword
This Guide is intended for faculty and staff members with little or no experience in writing proposals for external support.

I. Introduction
Writing a proposal for a sponsored activity such as a research project or a curriculum development program is a problem of persuasion. You should assume that your reader is a busy, impatient, skeptical person who has no reason to give your proposal special consideration and who is faced with many more requests than he can grant, or even read thoroughly. Such a reader wants to find out quickly and easily the answers to these questions.

*   What do you want to do, how much will it cost, and how much time will it take?

*   How does the proposed project relate to the sponsor's interests?

*   What difference will the project make to: your university, your students, your discipline, the state, the nation, the world, or whatever the appropriate categories are?

*   What has already been done in the area of your project?

*   How do you plan to do it?

*   How will the results be evaluated?

*   Why should you, rather than someone else, do this project?

These questions will be answered in different ways and receive different emphases depending on the nature of the proposed project and on the agency to which the proposal is being submitted. Most agencies provide

detailed instructions or guidelines concerning the preparation of proposals (and, in some cases, forms on which proposals are to be prepared); obviously, such guidelines should be studied carefully before you begin writing the draft.

Two Preliminary Steps. You will benefit by consulting two persons at an early stage in the planning of the proposal: your Dean and the Director of the Office of Grants who maintains liaison with the sponsoring agency you have in mind.

The Dean, whom you will eventually be asking to approve the proposal and thereby endorse your plans for staff and facility commitments, should be informed of your intentions and especially of any aspect of the proposed project that might conceivably affect departmental administration or your departmental duties. Early discussion of potential problems will smooth the way for the proposal later.

The Grants Office is a good source of help for the whole process of planning and writing the proposal. She can give you the latest agency guidelines, know the deadlines, can explain funding peculiarities that might affect your preparation of the proposal, can sometimes put you in touch with others at the University in similar work or capable of helping you in some way, can judge whether any additional University officials need to be informed at an early stage about your proposal, can help you work out a detailed budget appropriate to the work you wish to undertake, and in general can raise the pertinent questions that must be resolved before the proposal will be approved for submission by the University. These questions may concern, for example, human subjects review, the use of animals, potential conflicts of interest, off-campus work, subcontracting, space rental, staff additions, consultants, equipment purchase, biological hazards, proprietary material, cost sharing, and many other matters.

II. The Parts of a Proposal

Proposals for sponsored activities follow generally a similar format, although there are variations depending upon whether the proposer is seeking support for a research grant, a training grant, or a conference or curriculum development project. The following outline and explanation concern chiefly the components of a research proposal. This section

concludes with a discussion of certain variations in format required if one is seeking support for other kinds of academic programs.

A. Research Proposals

Typical parts of a research proposal are:

Title (or Cover) Page
Abstract
Table of Contents
Introduction (including Statement of Problem, Purpose of Research, and Significance of Research)
Background (including Literature Survey)
Description of Proposed Research (including Method or Approach)
Description of Relevant Institutional Resources
List of References
Personnel
Budget

The Title (or Cover) Page. Most sponsoring agencies specify the format for the title page, and some provide special forms to summarize basic administrative and fiscal data for the project. Generally, the principal investigator, his or her Dean, and an official representing the University sign the title page. In addition, the title page usually includes the University's reference number for the proposal, the name of the agency to which the proposal is being submitted, the title of the proposal, the proposed starting date and budget period, the total funds requested, the name and address of the University unit submitting the proposal, and the date submitted. Some agencies want the title page to specify whether the proposal is for a new or continuing project. And some ask to which other agencies the proposal is being submitted.

A good title is usually a compromise between conciseness and explicitness. Although titles should be comprehensive enough to indicate the nature of the proposed work, they should also be brief. One good way to cut the length of titles is to avoid words that add nothing to a reader's understanding, such as "Studies on...," "Investigations...," or "Research on Some Problems in...."

The Abstract. Every proposal, even very brief ones, should have an abstract. Some reviewers read only the abstract, and most reviewers rely

on it initially to give them a quick overview of the proposal and later to refresh their memory of its main points. Agencies often use the abstract alone in their compilations of research projects funded or in disseminating information about successful projects.

Though it appears first, the abstract should be written last, as a concise summary (approximately 200 words) of the proposal. It should appear on a page. To present the essential meaning of the proposal, the abstract should summarize or at least suggest the answers to all the questions mentioned in the Introduction above, except the one about cost (which is excluded on the grounds that the abstract is subject to a wider public distribution than the rest of the proposal). Certainly the major objectives of the project and the procedures to be followed in meeting these objectives should be mentioned.

The abstract speaks for the proposal when it is separated from it, provides the reader with his first impression of the request, and, by acting as a summary, frequently provides him also with his last. Thus it is the most important single element in the proposal.

The Table of Contents. Very brief proposals with few sections ordinarily do not need a table of contents; the guiding consideration in this is the reader's convenience. Long and detailed proposals may require, in addition to a table of contents, a list of illustrations (or figures) and a list of tables. If all of these are included, they should follow the order given in the guidelines, and each should be numbered with lower-case Roman numerals. If they are brief, more than one can be put on a single page.

The Introduction. The introduction of a proposal should begin with a capsule statement of what is being proposed and then should proceed to introduce the subject to a stranger. You should not assume that your reader is familiar with your subject. Administrators and program officers in sponsoring agencies want to get a general idea of the proposed work before passing the proposal to reviewers who can judge its technical merit. Thus the introduction should be comprehensible to an informed layman. It should give enough background to enable him to place your particular research problem in a context of common knowledge and should show how its solution will advance the field or be important for some other work. Be careful not to overstate, but do not neglect to state very specifically what the importance of your research is.

In introducing the research problem, it is sometimes helpful to say what it is not, especially, if it could easily be confused with related work. You may also need to explain the underlying assumption of your research or the hypotheses you will be using.

If the detailed exposition of the proposed research will be long or complex, the introduction may well end by specifying the order and arrangement of the sections. Such a preview helps a reviewer begin his reading with an orderly impression of the proposal and the assurance that he can get from it what he needs to know.

The general tone of the introduction should reflect a sober self-confidence. A touch of enthusiasm is not out of place, but extravagant promises are negative to most reviewers.

The Background Section. This section may not be necessary if the proposal is relatively simple and if the introduction can present the relevant background in a few sentences. If previous or related work must be discussed in some detail, however, or if the literature of the subject must be reviewed, a background or literature review section is desirable.

A background discussion of your own previous work usually can be less detailed than the customary "progress report." Here you should not attempt to account for time and money spent on previous grants but rather point your discussion to the proposed new (or continuing) research. Sufficient details should be given in this discussion (1) to make clear what the research problem is and exactly what has been accomplished; (2) to give evidence of your own competence in the field; and (3) to show why the previous work needs to be continued. Some sponsors want to know also who has funded the previous work.

Literature reviews should be selective and critical. Reviewers do not want to read through a voluminous working bibliography; they want to know the especially pertinent works and your evaluation of them. A list of works with no clear evidence that you have studied them and have opinions about them contributes almost nothing to the proposal.

Discussions of work done by others should therefore lead the reader to a clear impression of how you will be building upon what has already been done and how your work differs from theirs. It is important to establish what

is original in your approach, what circumstances have changed since related work was done, or what is unique about the time and place of the proposed research.

The Description of Proposed Research. The comprehensive explanation of the proposed research is addressed not to laymen but to other specialists in your field. This section, which may need several subsections, is, of course, the heart of the proposal and is the primary concern of the technical reviewers. Research design is a large subject and cannot be covered here, but a few reminders concerning frequently mishandled aspects of proposals may be helpful.

*   Be realistic in designing the program of work. Overly optimistic notions of what the project can accomplish in one, two, or three years or of its effects on the world will only detract from the proposal's chances of being approved. Probably the comment most frequently made by reviewers is that the research plans should be scaled down to a more specific and more manageable project that will permit the approach to be evaluated and that, if successful, will form a sound basis for further work. In other words, your proposal should distinguish clearly between long-range research goals and the short-range objectives for which funding is being sought. Often it is best to begin this section with a short series of explicit statements listing each objective, in quantitative terms if possible.

*   If your first year must be spent developing an analytical method or laying groundwork, spell that out as Phase 1. Then at the end of the year you will be able to report that you have accomplished something and are ready to undertake Phase 2.

*   Be explicit about any assumptions or hypotheses the research method rests upon.

*   Be clear about the focus of the research. In defining the limits of the project, especially in exploratory or experimental work, it is helpful to pose the specific question or questions the project is intended to answer.

*   Be as detailed as possible about the schedule of the proposed work. When will the first step be completed? When can subsequent steps be started? What must be done before what else, and what can be done at the same time? For complex projects a calendar detailing the projected

sequence and interrelationship of events often gives the sponsor assurance that the investigator is capable of careful step-by-step planning.

*   Be specific about the means of evaluating the data or the conclusions. Try to imagine the questions or objections of a hostile critic and show that the research plan anticipates them.

*   Be certain that the connection between the research objectives and the research method is evident. If a reviewer fails to see this connection, he will probably not give your proposal any further consideration. It is better here to risk stating the obvious than to risk the charge that you have not thought carefully enough about what your particular methods or approach can be expected to demonstrate.

The Description of Relevant Institutional Resources. The nature of this section depends on your project, of course, but in general this section details the resources available to the proposed project and, if possible, shows why the sponsor should wish to choose this University and this investigator for this particular research. Some relevant points may be the institution's demonstrated competence in the pertinent research area, its abundance of experts in related areas that may indirectly benefit the project, its supportive services that will directly benefit the project, and its unique or unusual research facilities or instruments available to the project.

The List of References. This list is desirable only if the proposal contains six or more references. Otherwise, the references can be inserted in the text within parentheses, like this (A. N. Author, " An Article," A Professional Journal, XX [1987], pp. 45-50). (Note that brackets, not parentheses, are used within parentheses.)

If a list of references is to be included, it is placed at the end of the text proper and before the sections on personnel and budget. The items should be numbered and should be in the order in which they are first referred to in the text. In contrast to an alphabetical bibliography, authors' names in a list of references should not be reversed.

In the text, references to the list can be made in various ways; a simple way is to use a raised number at the appropriate place, like this.1 Such numbers should be placed outside any contiguous marks of punctuation.

The style of the bibliographical item itself depends on the disciplinary field. The main consideration is consistency; whatever style is chosen should be followed scrupulously throughout.

The Personnel Section. This section usually consists of two parts: an explanation of the proposed personnel arrangements and the biographical data sheets for each of the main contributors to the project. The explanation should specify how many persons at what percentage of time and in what academic categories will be participating in the project. If the program is complex and involves people from other departments or colleges, the organization of the staff and the lines of responsibility should be made clear.

Any student participation, paid or unpaid, should be mentioned, and the nature of the proposed contribution detailed. If any persons must be hired for the project, say so, and explain why, unless the need for persons not already available within the University is self-evident.

The biographical data sheets should follow immediately after the explanatory text of the " personnel" section, unless the agency guidelines specify a different format. For extremely large program proposals with eight or more participants, the data sheets may be given separately in an appendix. All biographical data sheets within the proposal should be in a common format. These sheets should be confined to relevant information. Data on marital status, children, hobbies, civic activities, etc., should not be included unless the sponsor's instructions call for them. The list of publications can be selected either for their pertinence to the proposed work or for their intrinsic worth. All books written and a selection of recent or important journal articles written may well be listed, but there is no need to fill several pages with a bibliography. The list can be labeled "Selected Publications," "Recent Publications," or "Pertinent Publications," whichever best fits the facts.

The Budget Section.   The Grants Office will be glad to assist you with the budget. Sponsors customarily specify how budgets should be presented and what costs are allowable. The overview given here is for preliminary guidance only.

The budget section may require not only the tabular budget but also a budget summary and explanation or "budget justification" if the budget is

complicated or if all its details are not made completely clear by the text of the proposal. The need for consultants, for example, or the unavailability within the University of an item of equipment proposed for purchase may need to be explained. Foreign travel should be specifically detailed and justified, not combined with domestic travel, and the need to travel to professional meetings should be tied specifically to the proposed project, if possible.

Typical divisions of the tabular budget are personnel, equipment, supplies, travel, and indirect costs. Other categories, of course, can be added as needed. The budget should make clear how the totals for each category of expenses are reached. Salary information, for example, often needs to be specified in detail: principal investigator (1/2 time for 3 months at $24,000 [9-month appointment]) = $4,000. If salary totals involve two different rates (because of an anticipated increase in salary during the budget period), this should be made clear.

The category of personnel includes not only the base salary or wage for each person to be employed by the project but also (listed separately) the percentage added for staff benefits. Contact the Grants Office to determine the University's rate charged for benefits.

Indirect costs are shown as a separate category, usually as the last item before the grand total. At Truman, indirect costs are figured as a fixed percentage of the total of salaries, wages, and fringe benefits. Contact the Grants Office to get the current rate.

Cost sharing, which is sometimes required, is usually shown as a separate budget category. Frequently a portion of the salary of the principal investigator, paid from University funds, with its related staff benefits and indirect costs, can be used to satisfy cost-sharing requirements.

Be sure to contact the Grants Office to get assistance in preparing and reviewing your budget. This office can help ensure that the budget has not omitted appropriate elements of cost that could be easily overlooked.

The Appendices. Some writers are prone to append peripheral documents of various kinds to their proposals on the theory that the bulk will buttress their case. Reviewers almost never read such appendices, and may resent the padding. The best rule of thumb is: When in doubt, leave it out.

Appendices to proposals are occasionally used for letters of endorsement or promises of participation, biographical data sheets (when there are too many — say, eight or more—to be conveniently placed in the "personnel" section), and reprints of relevant articles.

If two or more appendices are included in a proposal, they should be designated Appendix A, Appendix B, etc.

B. Proposals for Academic Programs

It may be that your need is not for a research grant, but for outside sponsorship of an academic program involving a new curriculum, a conference, a summer seminar, or a training activity. If so, once again your best guide in proposal preparation is to consult any guidelines that the sponsoring agency provides. In the event that none is available, however, the following outline may be followed.

The **Introduction**, including a clear statement of need, and the **Background** section, describing the local situation and developmental activities to date, should begin the request. These should be followed by a section entitled **Planning**. This section details the activities that will occur after the grant is received and before the institution of the new courses, training activities, or seminar. A **Program Description** should come next. This section lists the courses or instructional sessions to be offered, the interrelationship of parts, and the program leading to certification or a degree. It discusses the students or participants to be selected and served by the program, as well as plans for faculty retreats, negotiation with cooperating institutions, released time to write instructional materials, and so on.

Before concluding with the **Institutional Resources, Personnel**, and **Budget** sections, special attention should be given to a section entitled **Institutional Commitment**. Here the agreements made by various departments and cooperating institutions are clarified, and the willingness of the home institution to carry on the program once it has proven itself is certified. This section is crucial to the success of curriculum development programs because, in contrast to research programs, they have a profound impact on the host institution. Funding agencies need to be reassured that their funds will not be wasted by an institution that has only responded to a funding opportunity without reflecting soberly upon the long-range commitments implied.

III. Inquiries to Private Foundations

Most foundations have specific areas of interest for which they award funds. It is essential that the grant seeker identify those foundations whose interests match the proposed project. Seldom will a foundation fund a project outside of its stated field of interest. The Office of Grants can help you determine how to approach a foundation and whether a particular foundation might be interested in your project.

Some foundations request an initial letter of inquiry or a preliminary description of the project request. An effective letter will discuss the significance or uniqueness of the project: Who will benefit? Who cares about the results? What difference will it make if the project is not funded? It will give enough indication of step-by-step planning to show that the project has been thought through and that pitfalls have been anticipated. It will demonstrate the writer's grasp of the subject and his credentials to undertake the project. It will emphasize at the same time that this is a preliminary inquiry, not a formal proposal, and that the investigator will send further details if the foundation is interested in the project.

For assistance with any aspect of grants preparation or submission contact:
The Office of Grants
Judy Lundberg, Director
Pickler Memorial Library 204 ~~ 660.785.7459