

Why Formatting is Important

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By [Lucy Deckard](#), co-publisher

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Stereotypical scientists and engineers are famously unconcerned with superficial appearances. We may feel that content, not appearances, are what count, and that attitude often manifests itself in how our proposals look. While it may seem reasonable to expect reviewers to focus on your ideas and research plan and not on how the proposal looks, it's important to remember that every reader will have an initial emotional—and perhaps unconscious—reaction to your proposal when he first looks at it, and that initial attitude can affect the entire reading experience. In addition, formatting can make a dramatic difference in how easy it is for the reader to follow and understand your proposal. Below are some tips on how to use formatting to make your proposal more compelling, appealing, and easy to follow.

Formatting: the Emotional Factor

Current psychological research is providing fascinating insights into how people make complex decisions and the strong role that emotions and the unconscious have in the decision making process. It's hard to think of a more complex decision than whether to fund a grant proposal. So put yourself in the place of the reviewer. You have already read three proposals, and you're getting tired. You turn to the next proposal, and it looks like this:

Project Description

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What would your emotional reaction be to facing this block of dense text? Perhaps dismay – “Oh no, I’ve got to wade through this text before I get to go to bed.” Or it might be hostility – “This author doesn’t care about me, the reader.” Add some misspellings and typos to that, and you’ll get downright anger – “This PI didn’t care enough to use spell check, and I’m giving up sleep to read this stuff.” It’s probably safe to say that your reaction won’t be, “Oh good, this PI has a lot to tell me and decided to use every available inch to pack as much information as possible into her proposal, and I get to read it!”

Now, what if the proposal looks more like this:

Project Description

INTRODUCTION AND OVERVIEW

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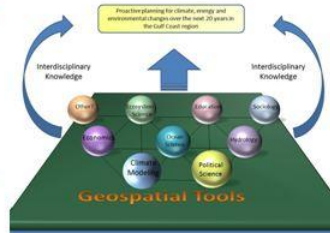


Figure 1. This figure explains our approach

Innovation

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Not only are you likely to think, “This proposal looks interesting!” but you are also likely to make unconscious judgments about the competence of the author (“This proposal looks polished and the PI seems to really know what she’s doing”). Before you’ve even read a word of the proposal, you’re starting with a positive attitude.

However, this is not to say that having more figures, headings, and white space is always better. The proposal format must fit within the culture of the particular agency and discipline.

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For example, consider your reaction if you're a reviewer for NSF and you open the following proposal:

Project Description

INTRODUCTION AND OVERVIEW

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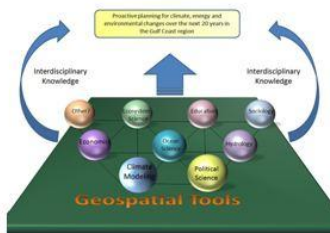


Figure 2. This figure explains our approach

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Figure 1. This figure doesn't say much but it gives visual appeal

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Although this formatting is visually appealing, the fact that it's double spaced (which is allowed according to NSF's formatting guidelines but is not normally done) immediately marks it as "not belonging" to NSF culture. As a reviewer, your first reaction is likely to be, "This is from someone who isn't one of us and doesn't understand how things are done at NSF." It will then be extremely difficult for the PI to convince you that this proposal should be recommended funding. Further, including figures that don't communicate useful information may give the impression that you don't have enough content to fill the allotted pages and really don't have a rigorous project plan.

A corollary of the above is the importance of following the agency's formatting rules. NSF specifies allowed fonts, margin sizes, etc. in its [Grant Proposal Guide](#) (note that MS Word's default font, Calibri, is *not* allowed). Similarly, NIH specifies formatting rules for their proposals in the [SF424 R&R](#) instructions (page I-20). If you don't follow formatting rules, even if you're lucky and your proposal isn't rejected outright, you will irritate your reviewers and mark your proposal as "not belonging" as we discussed above. Some agencies don't specify font even though they may specify page limits. In that case, try to find a funded proposal to the agency or

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talk to someone who had been funded in order to find out what fonts are customarily used. If all else fails, it's usually safe to stick with Times New Roman or Arial.

Interestingly, [an informal experiment](#) conducted by Errol Morris at the New York Times demonstrated that the font used has a strong effect on the reader's assessment of the reliability of the information delivered. Not surprisingly, fonts typically used in informal situations such as Comic Sans rated lowest on credibility. Very old fashioned fonts, such as Baskerville, ranked best, perhaps because they unconsciously reminded readers of text book or encyclopedia fonts from their youth.

Another formatting issue that can stir a lot of debate is whether to right justify or have a "ragged right" margin. Accepted wisdom is that text with a ragged right margin is easier to read; however, in some disciplines right justification is strongly preferred because of its neat appearance. This is another case where you'll want to conform to the culture of your agency and discipline. In some disciplines, both options are used about equally, in which case you should simply choose the option that you like best.

Formatting for Clarity

Good formatting is also an extremely helpful tool in guiding the reader through your proposal. Your project may be very complex, with multiple objectives, parallel tasks, and so forth, so it can be easy to lose the reader (particularly a tired one). To avoid that, your proposal should have a very clear structure, and formatting should help reinforce that structure. Formatting can also be used to help the reviewer find your main points and navigate easily to the places where you explicitly and succinctly address the review criteria.

Before you start writing your proposal, make an outline and decide what style you'll use for each level of heading. For example, your highest level headings might be Arial 14 point bold; the next level down might be Arial 12 point; the next level could be Arial 10 underlined, and so forth. (There is no requirement that the headings have the same font as the text as long as all fonts used are allowed according to the formatting instructions.) These differences in style can provide easy, intuitive clues to the reader about where they are in the proposal. However, it's important that you keep these styles consistent, or you risk confusing the reader. Using MS Word's style feature can help you keep track of the styles for each heading level.

It can also be helpful to the reader to use numbered headings, with subsections indicated through decimal points, as in:

2. Research Plan

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2.1 Phase 1 – Characterization of Nanoparticles

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2.1.1 Chemical Testing

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Or use letters and numbers combined:

A. Research Plan

A.1 Phase 1 – Characterization of Nanoparticles

A.1.1 Chemical Testing

However, it's generally not a good idea to take this scheme more than three levels down. For example, a heading like this is more likely to distract than inform the reader:

2.1.3.4 Differential Scanning Calorimetry Testing

Some people use indents to signal to the reader the level of the section, such as:

2. Research Plan

2.1 Phase 1 – Characterization of Nanoparticles

2.1.1 Chemical Testing

However, this can make headers harder to find as a reviewer scans through the document. Remember that not every header needs to have a number or letter label. For example, you can use only formatting as you get down to the lowest level sections:

A. Research Plan

A.1 Phase 1 – Characterization of Nanoparticles

A.1.1 Chemical Testing

Differential Scanning Calorimetry

To save space, you can also use in-line heading such as:

Differential Scanning Calorimetry: Lorem ipsum dolor sit amet, consectetur adipisicing elit, sed do eiusmod tempor incididunt ut labore et dolore magna aliqua. Ut enim ad minim veniam, quis nostrud exercitation ullamco laboris nisi ut aliquip ex ea commodo

Remember also to use space to help the reader's eye find new sections and subsections. The section label should have some white space above it, but it should also have less white space between it and the text it heads so that it's clear at first glance that the header and text belong together. In fact, too much white space can be as confusing as too little since it can make it harder for the reader to track the text. For example, note how the following spacing actually makes things harder for the reader:

2. Research Plan

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2.1 Phase 1 – Characterization of Nanoparticles

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Typically, most PIs struggle to fit their proposals into the designated page limit, so white space can seem like a costly luxury. Luckily, a small amount of white space can be as effective as a larger amount. If you're struggling to get those last three lines to fit, consider reducing 10 pt spaces above headers to 6 pts, and changing 6 pt spaces below headers to 3 pts (you can do this in Word by editing the paragraph settings in your style or directly). If you've included spaces between your paragraphs, to save space you might also consider using first line indents for paragraphs within sections rather than spaces between paragraphs. This usually works well as long as you have done a good job labeling subsections so that you still avoid large uninterrupted blocks of text.

Next month, we'll talk about the use of figures, lists and bullets.