# Research Development & Grant Writing News

## Why Halloween Is Bad for Proposals, Part 5

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There are many scary Halloween costumes you might **inadvertently** wear to mask the identity of the research idea put forward in your proposal, and unfortunately any one of them will result in more tricks than treats when it comes to the success of your grant. Of course, **the premise here assumes that a fundable idea lies cloaked beneath a number of correctable grant-writing mistakes identified sufficiently before the due date to allow for their correction**. Unlike Halloween, when scary costumes earn treats, program officers and reviewers will not reward ideas cloaked in ghoulish disguises. Unfortunately, a number of all too common scary costumes can so successfully **disguise a potentially fundable idea that the idea becomes unrecognizable to the reviewers**. To avoid spooking reviewers, don't submit your proposal cloaked or masked, or wearing one of the more common scary costumes guaranteed to horrify, as addressed in the below **examples of possible proposal disguises**.

### The No-Value-Added Mask

While economists have long argued the merits of a value-added tax (VAT), there is no such debate over the importance of describing the value-added benefits of your research when it comes to writing a successful proposal. Describing the value-added benefits of your research—to an agency mission, to a scientific field, and in response to the program objectives defined in a solicitation—is a fundamental requirement for competitiveness across all agencies and foundations, regardless of your academic discipline. Surprisingly, such a description is often overlooked or stated unclearly in the project description on many proposals.

Sometimes PIs neglect such a description because they simply have not thought sufficiently about how the proposed research fits into the overall context of an agency's mission priorities, or considered how the proposed research meets the overall goals and objectives of a specific solicitation. At other times, unfortunately, the PI may be proposing research that does not offer sufficient value-added benefits to warrant funding. Funding agencies support research that advances the disciplinary field in some clear and significant way, or advances the agency's mission-critical objectives in a clear way and significant way.

The key words here linked to value-added benefits are "clear," "significant" and "advances." The benefits that need to be described in the project narrative represent a "unit of change" that advances the current state of knowledge in a field or discipline and moves it forward in some significant way. The intertwining of value-added benefits and significance needs to be described clearly and succinctly in any research narrative if you hope to capture the interest of program officers and reviewers.

Moreover, the exact nature of the value-added benefits your research offers the funding agency is not a trivial consideration. To address it in the most compelling way requires an understanding of the agency mission objectives at multiple scales—from the level of the agency to a specific solicitation. It also needs your keen assessment of how well your research maps to the agency mission objectives and how it does so in the context of the current state of

knowledge in the field.  Your ability to capture these multiple contexts and weave a compelling narrative statement describing how your proposed research brings value-added benefits to the funding agency will be a key factor in the success of your proposal.

### The Overly Ambitious Disguise

While it is common during presidential election years to hear politicians promise the equivalent of "free beer and wide roads" on every conceivable political topic of potential interest to voters, it is not a good strategy when it comes to crafting a research narrative that you hope will impress program officers and reviewers sufficiently for them to recommend funding.  They are a critical audience with sufficient experience to distinguish between what you hope to do and what you can realistically accomplish  given the constraints on your time, resources, and expertise.

The overly ambitious project description is a fairly common reason for denying funding to proposals, particularly those submitted by more junior investigators whose earnest enthusiasm may  charm reviewers but finally requires them to recommend against funding, with perhaps the  suggestion to resubmit a more realistic proposal in the next grant cycle.  The education and outreach component of an NSF CAREER proposal, for example,  often tempts new investigators to overreach, while others may overreach in the proposal research plan.

In any proposal, however, getting this balance right is critical.  If you submit a proposal in which the research narrative seems to suffer from inflationary promises that are out of balance with your budget, current and pending support, resources, expertise, and teaching obligations, among other constraints, you will likely not be funded.  Be realistic in what you can and cannot accomplish within the constraints that set your operational boundaries, and then reflect that in your project narrative.  Reviewers don't fund promises; they fund promises that can be kept.

### The Solipsist Disguise

While solipsism is largely dismissed as a frivolous philosophical notion best left to late night discussions in bars bordering college campuses, it does, nonetheless, occasionally manifest itself in proposal narratives.  Like its philosophical counterpart, the solipsistic project description is self-absorbed and apparently oblivious to the external reality of an audience, i.e., program officers and reviewers, that will pass judgment on the proposal.

The PIs of self-absorbed project narratives typically make several fatal mistakes, all in some way related to an inability to place their ideas in the proper context, specifically, advancing the research and mission-critical objectives of the funding agency.  These narrative flaws include ignoring or attempting to circumvent the mission objectives of the sponsoring agency in the mistaken belief that the PI's ideas are so important they should be funded whether or not they respond to the agency's research requirements; ignoring or appearing to be unaware or indifferent to the fact that successful project narratives are written with an audience in mind—program officers and reviewers, who must be convinced of the significance and value-added benefits to funding the proposed research; and ignoring the need to write a research narrative that is easily read, responsive to the specifics of the solicitation, and accessible to program officers and reviewers in making their funding decision.   The bottom line

here is that funding agencies are not interested in funding promotional "self portraits" of ideas only marginally relevant to the agency mission objectives.

**The Slogan Mask**

Passing slogans off as ideas may be sufficient for those running for political office, but it is a really bad idea for those writing a proposal. Slogans are not ideas. In writing a project description, particularly for certain types of institutional grants where research and educational objectives are intertwined, such as at NSF, or where institutional transformation of some kind is the desired outcome, such as an AGEP or IGERT, project narratives often over rely on slogans or on echoes of an agency phrases picked up from reports, presentations, and conferences.

While it is important to have a common language to describe common programmatic elements, that common language must be used judiciously and, most importantly, be grounded in the specific context of the institutional objectives that motivate the proposal. Making the claim, for example, that your research is transformational or your proposal integrates research and education in innovative ways amounts only to a slogan without substantive programmatic descriptions in the project narrative that outline the specifics and details to support such a claim. Some authors of what are often institutional proposals of one sort of another, as those mentioned above, or authors of educational components required of research proposals such as the NSF CAREER, make the mistake of sprinkling the narrative with key words and phrases used by the agency in multiple solicitations, reports, and presentations. This seems to be done under the mistaken belief that echoing the language used in agency vision statements can substitute for the hard work of grounding an agency's overarching vision or goals in the unique context of the particular institution or research or educational program.

While echoing back an agency's language or phrasing is important to demonstrate that you understand and are familiar with the agency's mission objectives as well as the specific solicitation to which you are responding, the real work, as is always the case in proposal writing, comes when you must move from the general vision to the specific program that will allow that vision to be achieved within your unique institutional context.

So slogans, terms, and phrases adopted by an agency to describe their overarching vision, such as the NSF terms *innovative, transformational, research and education integration*, and numerous others, lack substantive meaning until you define them with the specific details of your research and/or educational objectives within your unique institutional or programmatic context. Until you perform that hard work, these terms are nothing more than agency vision slogans without substance. Throwing them back at program officers and reviewers without the specificity and detail that gives them substantive meaning will bring no value-added benefit to the agency and no reason to fund your proposal.