

How to Write a Concept Paper

A concept paper is often used to generate feedback and guidance from a program officer before a full grant proposal is developed. In most cases, the program officer will be, or will have been, a researcher, clinician, or scholar, like yourself. Before you start writing, think about the Golden Rule and the kind of project summary you'd like to read. Avoid forced, "grantsmanship" language, and communicate your ideas in a simple, direct manner. Also, read your sponsor's mission statement. If the sponsor is a federal agency, look at its most recent budget request to Congress; the request will outline the agency's priorities and express them in plain language.

Design your paper to answer these questions:

- 1. What's the problem?**
 - State the problem/gap in a manner that's concise and demonstrates your grasp of the literature.
 - If you're proposing a research project, state the research objective(s).
- 2. Who cares?** (This question has both figurative and literal meanings.)
 - What is the significance of the project in terms of both advancing knowledge and benefiting the public?
 - Who/which group(s) will benefit from the research?
- 3. What exactly are going to do?** (How will you address the problem?)
 - Provide goals/specific aims.
 - What is the study design? For problems involving data samples, how do you know that the sample size is adequate?
 - Provide a statement about your access to the population, if applicable.
 - Communicate why you are ideally suited to tackle this specific problem and/or what is unique about your approach.
- 4. What will the deliverables be?**
 - The deliverables can include intangibles as well as tangibles. Examples: outreach events, grant applications, trained individuals/groups, new or improved products, patents, partnerships, paradigms, process improvement, dissemination products, etc.
- 5. How will you know you've achieved your goals?**
 - The evaluation section is often a critical part of an application. While you may not need to discuss this aspect of the project to generate a positive response from a program officer, doing so may lead to valuable feedback.
- 6. Who are your team members?** (May not be applicable.)

The optimal format of the concept paper depends on your project. Not every paper needs to address all of the above questions, and separate sections aren't necessary for each question addressed. Further, you don't have to answer the questions in the order shown here. Some concept papers begin with an introductory statement which provides a general statement as to what you are trying to accomplish. (This statement is distinct from the more specific research or project objective, included later.) A common format includes these headings: Need, Goals, Methodology, and Deliverables.

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