Writing Effective Grant Application Narratives

Humanities and Arts Grant Development Program
University of Iowa Office of the VP for Research
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Agenda

- How to think about writing
- How to be clear and well-organized
- How to use natural positions of emphasis
- How to engage the reader
- How to make applications compelling
- Examples
How to think about writing: writing is a process

- Writing is not only a means to share information and ideas, but is a way to develop and refine them.
- “Use writing as a tool for thinking”
  —Zinsser
- “I write to understand what I think”
  —Vergheese
How to think about writing: good writing is clear and convincing

“...terms so clear and direct as to command their consent”—Jefferson

The feature–benefit model
How to think about writing: good writing is reader-based

- Reader expectations
  - Familiar format
  - Clear, logical, understandable
  - Important, interesting

- The psychology of reviewers
How to think about proposal writing

- Write the proposal so that someone else could carry out the work (recipe analogy)
- Write it to make the job of the reviewer to summarize the project as easy as possible
- Write it so that readers could understand it even if they read only
  - The headings and subheadings
  - The first sentence of each paragraph
- Write it like a story (show your thought processes); show how to think about the topic
William Zinnser

- "Use writing as a tool for thinking."
- "Take care of the process, and the product will take care of itself."
- "Freewriting" or brainstorming, then editing
  - You can’t do both at the same time
- Zinnser’s books on the writing process:
  - *On Writing Well*
  - *Writing to Learn*
At least 3 steps to the whole writing process

- The intuitive stage
  - Freewriting, brainstorming, testing ideas
- The teaching stage
  - Explaining to the reader, linking ideas, organizing them logically
- The revision stage
  - Fine-tuning for clarity and emphasis
Freewriting exercise: writing grant applications
Freewriting exercise: writing grant applications
The writing process: “journaling”

- Write a page a day, every day, in a log of your ideas and observations.
- Read your log to get insight into issues that you cannot understand in real time
  - Weather map analogy
  - Story of the Wright Brothers
  - “The incubation of ideas”
Attending to the writing process

- Regular time of day
- Regular place conducive to writing
- A positive
  - mental framework
  - physical environment
The incubation of ideas

Abraham Verghese, MD: story of writing his first book

Creating an environment for ideas to prosper

Attending to the process
Other writing ideas

- Use the spoken language to inform the written language
  - Use dictation or speech-recognition software
  - Give a series of talks about your work and plans

- Integrate your physical routine with your writing routine
  - Exercise and then write (“to get the blood flowing”)
  - Write and then exercise (as a reward)
Good writing is clear, compelling, and

- Concise
- Transparent
- Available
- Easy to follow lines of reasoning
- [Clarity will be rewarded]

—Former Emory University Committee Chair Prof. David Pacini
Bad writing is

- Niche
- Self-referential
- Jargon
- Unintelligible
- [Obscurity will be punished]
The importance of structure to convey clarity and logic

The structure of:
- Sentences
- Paragraphs
- Proposal as a whole
How many interpretations should readers get from your writing?
How many interpretations should readers get from your writing?

1
Positions of emphasis: George Gopen, JD, PhD

“Misunderstanding in writing is 85% due to structural issues and only 15% due to contextual issues.”

“It is theoretically impossible to forward only a single interpretation. By using natural positions of emphasis, the best an author can do is make available to the reader the interpretation the author wants to convey.”
Structure of the sentence

A sentence has a subject and a verb.

Guideline: *1 idea per sentence*
Position of emphasis in the sentence

| 1\textsuperscript{st} half | 2\textsuperscript{nd} half |
Position of emphasis is the 2\textsuperscript{nd} half of the sentence

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
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<td>• Specific information</td>
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<td>1st half</td>
<td>2nd half</td>
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<tr>
<td>Development of a gallery for locally-produced folk art is the goal of this project.</td>
<td>The goal of this project is to develop a gallery for locally-produced folk art.</td>
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<td>1\textsuperscript{st} half</td>
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<tr>
<td>Only a select few historians studied topic X in the last decade.</td>
<td>Topic X has been studied by only a select few historians in the last decade.</td>
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Structure of a paragraph

1st sentence is the most important
  - Main idea or the context of the information
  - “Topic sentence”
Middle sentences: the information
Structure of a paragraph

- Last sentence: a way to carry around the information
Structure of a paragraph

- 1st sentence is the most important
  - Main idea or the context of the information
  - “Topic sentence”

- Middle sentences: the information

- Last sentence: summary or evaluation of information
  - eg, “Taken together, these data point to ….”
Structure of a paragraph

1st sentence is the most important
- Main idea or the context of the information
- “Topic sentence”

Middle sentences: the information

Last sentence: significance or relevance of the information; why it is important
Feature–benefit model

- For each key **feature** (fact, data, point, experience) you address,

- Be sure to link a **benefit** (significance, relevance, value, advantage, importance) to it
Examples of feature–benefit sentences

“My work to develop and manage the Community Theater Group gave me the experience necessary to recruit volunteers, organize rehearsals, and produce one-act plays. This experience will guide my future efforts to plan and direct the “spontaneous” street theater events planned (see page 19).

“I plan to take this approach because it will allow me to…. 
Consistency in paragraph format

- Allows a reader to “intellectually skim” a document
- Teaches the reader *how to read* the document
  - to get the information efficiently
  - To understand the issue deeply
Tone

- Is a subtle but important issue
- Conveys your attitude
- Communicates a mental picture of you and your project
- Influences how readers
  - Receive the message
  - Understand the message
  - Respond to the message
Tone to convey in proposals

- Thoughtful
- Thorough
- Detail-oriented
- That you can see the big picture
- Both enthusiastic *and* realistic
- NOT to impress, but to convey meaning
Ways to engage your readers

- Use the first person ("I" or "we")
- Use questions
- Give examples
- Tell the story
- Show images
- Use a journalistic approach
Engage your readers by

- Varying the length of sentences
- Chaining sentences and ideas
- Transitioning between ideas and paragraphs
- Telling it like the story
- Using details and examples
- Using questions
- Showing readers *how to think* about the topic
To make text readable

Have a reasonable margin width
  – 1 inch minimum
  – Consider using two columns per page

- Put line breaks between paragraphs
- Use left alignment (as opposed to full alignment)
- Use subheadings (and perhaps a numbering system)
Effective writers

- Engage the reader
- Tell the story
- Model their writing after proven formats
- Display scholarship
Qualifications for scholarship

- Think clearly and logically
- Express logical thought clearly and cogently
- Discriminate between the significant and the inconsequential
- Display technical prowess in that discipline
- Handle abstract thought
- Analyze data objectively and accurately
- Interpret results confidently and conservatively
An effective grant proposal

- Follows the instructions and **addresses the mission of the grantor**
- Is a marketing document ("sell" the idea)
- Has both
  - A good idea
  - Clear, effective communication
- Is written for both
  - Expert reviewers
  - The "intelligent non-expert" or "a learned scholar but not necessarily an expert in the field" or "reviewers outside the applicant’s field"
NEH Evaluation Criteria
Evaluators are asked to apply the following five criteria when judging the quality of applications:

① The intellectual significance of the proposed project, including its value to humanities scholars, general audiences, or both.

② The quality or promise of quality of the applicant’s work as an interpreter of the humanities.

③ The quality of the conception, definition, organization, and description of the project and the applicant’s clarity of expression.

④ The feasibility of the proposed plan of work, including, when appropriate, the soundness of the dissemination and access plans.

⑤ The likelihood that the applicant will complete the project.
Applications for all AHI grants will be reviewed by a peer review group, advisory to the Vice President for Research. *Applicants are advised to write in a manner that will be clear to reviewers outside of the applicant’s field.*

Applications will be judged on the following criteria:

- The scholarly or artistic originality/creativity/significance of the project.
- How it builds on the work of others and on your own work.
- The reasonableness of the procedures.
- The reasonableness of the timetable during the grant period and for the completion of the project.
- The likelihood that the project will be completed and will produce an important work of scholarship or art.
- If applicable, the likelihood that the project will attract external grant funding.
- The record of achievement in the proposed area of the project director(s).
- The necessity of the requested funds to advance the proposed work.
- If applicable, results of previous AHI Grants.
UI AHI guidelines: narrative

Narrative (five pages maximum single-spaced, plus one page Bibliography, plus one page Results of Previous AHI Grants, if applicable) that directly answers the following questions in the following order [emphasis mine]:

– What do you propose to do?
– Why is it an important scholarly or artistic contribution to your field? How will it build on previous work in the field? How will it build on your own work?
– How will the proposed work proceed during the grant period? Specify what and when you (and any others) will be doing during the grant period. Be sure to incorporate requested budget items in your narrative....
What will be the final scholarly or creative product? When do you estimate it will be completed? Give a rough time table for achieving that estimated completion date. Identify likely journals or publishers or venues for your completed work. If the final scholarly or creative product is digital in nature, include a plan that describes 1) how you will draw visitors to the site, and 2) how you expect it to be maintained and supported beyond the grant period.

Indicate whether you will be developing a proposal for external funds. Specify the likely agency or foundation.
Exercise: Write sample sentences in response to guidelines and evaluation criteria

- “This project is **significant** because....”
- “This project is **original** because....”
- “This work is **innovative** in that....”
- “I am **uniquely qualified** to do this work because....”
Example: page 1
I am writing *A Case of the Nerves*, a book on late-nineteenth century “American nervousness.” Many believed in that era that Americans were too tense, suffering from neurasthenia or hysteria, and experiencing “nervous prostration.” Before Freud and his followers informed the American public that all was in the mind, especially in subconscious mental life with its profound link to the emotions and sexuality, American physicians emphasized the important role of the body and physical organs in what is today labeled mental illness. In particular, Americans read, heard, and thought about the controlling force of the nerves. As a cultural historian, I hope to explore the nervous body as those in the late nineteenth century envisioned it. The subject offers a critical intersection where the biological person meets the ideas and practices of the age.

I begin *A Case of the Nerves* with a number of key questions. What did late-19th-century Americans mean when they spoke of nerves and of nervousness? How did they understand the connection between mind and body? How did they build upon or reject earlier knowledge? How did the primary physical science of the day, evolutionary biology, guide them? And what of the new fields of sociology and psychology? How did the first generation of nerve specialists—the physicians who called themselves “neurologists”—answer these and related questions? How did *Popular Science Monthly* and other influential periodicals convey these ideas to the broader public?

What makes these questions come alive are the sources that I have to answer them. While a considerable literature exists on the emergence of American psychiatry and psychology during this era and their impact on American intellectual and literary life, none exploit the varied sources as I do. In manuscript collections, such as those of the Baltimore philanthropist Mary Elizabeth Garrett, are letters that detail her decades-long experience of nervous illness, visits to physicians and their diagnoses, and courses of treatment. I am exploring approximately thirty similar collections. Some of the patients, such as William James and Charlotte Perkins Gilman, are familiar figures; others are less known. But even those whose lives have been studied and restudied by scholars bear new attention, for no scholarship treats their anxiety and psychological problems in the context of their own era’s understandings of the relation of body and mind.

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Although my major concern is with the post-Civil War era, I begin with the approaches of the early nineteenth-century. Americans of that period experienced a range of symptoms for mental illness. Many resorted to religious explanations for their distress, even as they sought relief from physicians and other health practitioners. New writings in reform physiology advocated fresh air and exercise and the water cure. Neither sufferers nor those who treated them saw diseases typically as specific entities with specific causes. Rather diseases reflected debility or inflammation, general conditions of the body.
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By the late-1860s, regular physicians gained new authority as they told Americans how their bodies worked, why they were ill, and how they might be restored to health. Those dealing with nervous ailments called themselves “neurologists,” and explored new concepts of the mind and its relation to the body. William A. Hammond, S. Weir Mitchell, George Miller Beard, and others were materialists whose secularism rejected any authority, including that of religion, over science. The Civil War gave these physicians new experience in treating the nervous ailments of wounded soldiers. After the war they broadened their practice to civilians, male and female. For both the medical profession and wider audiences, they wrote and spoke about nerve-related ailments.

These male professionals came of age in an era radically different from the antebellum years. The late-nineteenth-century generation rejected earlier non-scientific explanations and enthusiasms. It sought fact, hard fact. To this generation, science, particularly new evolutionary notions, satisfied many of the great questions of the age. That humans evolved from lower animals by natural selection marked only the beginning. Scientific inquiry declared that biological truths were the basis of everything that humans saw, felt and did. All that we call mind, from unconscious reflexes to higher thought, was part of the evolution of the species: it was the mechanism by which those highest on the evolutionary scale adjusted their inner to their outer selves. These were the ideas that guided and motivated the earliest American neurologists as they established their specialty in New York, Philadelphia, and Chicago in the late 1860s.

Moreover, each disease now had a specific cause. The diagnostician’s goal, indeed purpose, was to find it. But this generated a new problem. Although neurologists believed that mental disorders were physical disorders, with clearly traceable causes, they had no laboratory tools to detect the specific causes, to register the lesions of the brain or spinal cord. A horde of paying patients sought their help in seeking relief from pain, but physicians lacked appropriate vehicles or mechanisms to test or measure their newfound theories. Instead, they relied upon the implicit contract between doctor and patient—patients described symptoms, and doctors provided means to relieve or cure them. In the breach, neurologists offered therapeutics that drew on old and new strategies to stimulate or calm the body. Leaders in the field quickly became wealthy and renowned.
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But letters are not records of raw experience. Such sources are filtered by culture and relationships to correspondents. Subjects are conscious of both broad and specific understandings and standards. Memoirs and other reflections composed later in life are also shaped by cultural influences. Writers often read back into their earlier experiences their later understandings shaped by new knowledge. Thus awareness of changing conceptions of brain, body, and mind is necessary to the appropriate interpretation of primary sources. At this point in my work I have found the need to reevaluate the scholarly narratives of familiar figures such as Charlotte Perkins Gilman and William Dean Howells.

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After a prologue on the antebellum period, the book focuses on the years after the Civil War, when important physicians established themselves as neurologists. It concludes with the aftermath of Freud’s visit to the United States in 1909. I see the book as a series of interconnected essays, focused on individual case studies, each one chosen to enable exploration of a facet of the larger issue of American nervousness moving through time. I anticipate that the book will thus move not only biographically but also thematically and chronologically. Currently I plan to present five major case studies, chosen from the approximately 30 individuals researched. Under consideration at present are the experiences of Mary Garrett, William James, and Charlotte Perkins Gilman. Although all my subjects will likely be middle or upper class, I will be looking as I select the final two for regional, racial, and ethnic diversity. Although especially attentive to these five, I will bring in points of comparison and contrast from the experiences of the broader group as seen in their letters. I am also researching the papers of physicians, such as S. Weir Mitchell.
During the time of the NEH, I hope to complete two chapters that surround two case studies already selected and largely researched, Mary Garrett and William James. This will allow me to confront the gendered nature of diagnosis and attempted therapies. I will also give me practice with combining the individual case study with elements of a narrative thread. I hope to develop each chapter into an article that I will submit to a peer-reviewed journal, such as the *Journal of American History*.

There are excellent materials in the Boston area which I have begun to research. I have visited a number of important archives, including the College of Physicians that holds the S. Weir Mitchell Papers, the University of Southern California, the Huntington, and the Bancroft Library in Berkeley. During the time of this fellowship I will continue to explore archives and rare book rooms accessible in the Boston area, such as the Houghton, the Schlesinger, and the Countway. I plan, in addition, to work at Yale, the Library of Congress, the New York Public Library, where there are many collections important to this project. I will return to Philadelphia to continue work on S. Weir Mitchell materials. I also hope to use professional travel farther afield, such as my twice-yearly trips to Indiana University (where I am a member of the board of trustees of the Kinsey), to research important collections.

*A Case of the Nerves* will be written to appeal to both scholars and educated lay readers. Placing American nervousness in deep personal stories of illness, combined with intellectual, cultural, and institutional context, will not only illuminate the time when Americans diagnosed nervous prostration, but it will also and more importantly force readers to reexamine the origins and cultural influences of this mysterious and illusive subject.
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Your writing is “authorized” if

- The proposal manuscript is well-organized
- All logic and reasoning are sound
- The author has
  - Accounted for the development of the ideas in each section of the proposal
  - Traced the background to justify the work
  - Shown how the work will advance the field of scholarship or art
Key concepts

- Form follows function
- Consistency of format
- Linking of lines of reasoning
- Use of positions of emphasis
- The feature-benefit model of selling
- Reinforcing and weaving important info throughout proposal
- Awareness of readers/psychology of reviewers
Questions?
Proposal for a non-fiction book

- Table of contents of the proposal
- Concept statement
- Overview
- Audience
- Publicity/promotion
- Competition
- About the author
- Table of contents of the book
- Chapter outlines
Proposal for a non-fiction book: concept statement (1 page)

- Offers an agent or editor the first impression
- Must generate excitement
- Explains the subject of the book
- Identifies the book’s uniqueness and timeliness
- States the benefit the book offers to readers
- Includes a primary feature of the book
- Sketches the author’s credentials
- Identifies an audience
Proposal for a non-fiction book: overview (2–5 pages)

- Is a sales pitch
- Provides a thesis statement
- Describes the book’s contents
  - How you came to write the book
  - The importance or need for the book
- Includes rough word count of book
Proposal for a non-fiction book: audience (1 page)

- Be specific
- Target your audience
  - Who is your audience?
  - Who will buy your book? Why?
  - How will they use it or how will it help them?
  - What will it tell them that’s new or important?
Proposal for a non-fiction book: publicity/promotion (1 page)

- Sell your “outreach”
  - clinics
  - workshops
  - seminars
  - tv/radio lecture circuit

- Publishers
  - expect you to promote and sell your book
  - want authors with “national outreach”
Proposal for a non-fiction book: competition (1 page)

- Open with brief recap of your book’s uniqueness
- Research other books in area
  - Compare and contrast other books in area
  - Include title, author, publication info, dates
- Make a case for
  - The need for your book
  - how your book fits into market
Proposal for a non-fiction book: about the author (1 page)

- Describe yourself and your credentials
- Detail your experience with the topic
- Tell why you are best suited to write this book
- List other books or articles you’ve written
- Emphasize your chances to publicize book (seminars, workshops)
- Include CV
Proposal for a non-fiction book: table of contents

Organize the table of contents so that it

- is logical
- “tells the story”
- has
  - a beginning
  - a middle
  - an end
Proposal for a non-fiction book: chapter outlines

- 1 to 2 pages per chapter
- Should convey the organization and content of each chapter
- All together should convey the organization and content of the book
Proposal for a non-fiction book: sample chapters

- Serve a similar purpose as the preliminary studies in a scientific proposal
  - Gives reviewer the confidence that you can do the work
- Gives the literary agent an example so as to better sell the book to a publisher
Facts about writing

- Writing is a skill
  - It can be improved with practice

- Writing is a process
  - It takes a number of different steps

- Writing is re-writing
  - “10% inspiration, 90% perspiration”
Clear proposal writing

- Is reader-based
- States objectives, goals and planned work clearly and directly
- Uses
  - Direct, simple sentences
  - Manageable, consistent paragraphs
  - Headings and subheadings
Proposal-writing is a *process*

- Freewrite, then revise for your readers
- Keep a log, or journal, of your ideas
- Use a deliberate, measured approach—an hour a day, every day
- Organize and structure your writing to serve your purpose and the reader’s needs
- Stress the benefits of your points
- Solicit feedback
- Revise, revise, revise
Exercise: title

- Write the title of your project
- Revise title to include the
  - Importance
  - Significance
  - Relevance
  - Value
  - Benefit

of the project
Proposal resubmission

Opportunity to
- Improve proposal and the project
- Show that you addressed all the concerns of reviewers
- Capitalize on the strengths of the application
Revised applications

Purpose is to
- Show how you revised the proposal in response to the critiques
- Justify the revisions
- Direct reviewers to the revisions in the proposal

ALSO
- Show that you can be flexible
- Show that you value the critiques and suggestions
Revised applications: format

- First paragraph
  - Thank reviewers for their critiques
  - Mention that their suggestions have allowed you to strengthen the proposal (in the following ways…)

- Following paragraphs
  - List critique or summarize reviewer suggestion
  - Detail how you revised the application to reflect the reviewer’s comment; list section or page number in which the revision appears
Revised applications: tone

- Genuinely thankful for the guidance to improve the proposal
- Enthusiastic about the added strength of the proposal
- Detail-oriented
- Able to see the big picture and added benefits of revised proposal