

# Online Technical Writing: Proposals

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This chapter focuses on *proposals*—the kinds of documents that get you or your organization approved or hired to do a project. While this chapter focuses on proposals in general, see the section on [proposals for documentation projects](#) for the specifics of getting hired to write technical documentation.

For illustrations of the discussion you are about to read, see:

Example proposal 1: Employee Wellness Program	<a href="#">Frames</a>	<a href="#">Nonframes</a>	<a href="#">Plain</a>
Example proposal 2: Proposal to Write the Operation and Maintenance Manual for the M-16A2 Rifle	<a href="#">Frames</a>	<a href="#">Nonframes</a>	<a href="#">Plain</a>
Example proposal 3: Academic Proposal	<a href="#">Frames</a>	<a href="#">Nonframes</a>	<a href="#">Plain</a>
Example proposal 4: Nursing Staff Handbook on Communication and Swallowing Disorders in the Elderly	<a href="#">Frames</a>	<a href="#">Nonframes</a>	<a href="#">Plain</a>
Example proposal 5: Corporate Standards Manual	<a href="#">Frames</a>	<a href="#">Nonframes</a>	<a href="#">Plain</a>
Example proposal 6: Student Guide for Solving Engineering Mechanics Problems	<a href="#">Frames</a>	<a href="#">Nonframes</a>	<a href="#">Plain</a>

## Some Preliminaries

As you get started, make sure you understand the definition we're using for proposals. Also, make sure you understand the proposal assignment—not to write just any proposal but one that, at least in part, proposes to write something.

**Real proposals.** To begin planning a proposal, remember the basic definition: a proposal is an offer or bid to do a certain project for someone. Proposals may contain other elements—technical background, recommendations, results of surveys, information about feasibility, and so on. But what makes a proposal a proposal is that it asks the audience to approve, fund, or grant permission to do the proposed project.

If you plan to be a consultant or run your own business, written proposals may be one of your most important tools for bringing in business. And, if you work for a government agency, nonprofit organization, or a large corporation, the proposal can be a valuable tool for initiating projects that benefit the organization or you the employee-proposer (and usually both).

A proposal should contain information that would enable the audience of that proposal to decide whether to approve the project, to approve or hire you to do the work, or both. To write a successful proposal, put yourself in the place of your audience—the recipient of the proposal—and think about what sorts of information that person would need to feel confident having you do the project.

It's easy to get confused about proposals, or at least the type of proposal you'll be writing here. Imagine that you have a terrific idea for installing some new technology where you work and you write up a document explaining how it works and why it's so great, showing the benefits, and then end by urging management to go for it. Is that a proposal? No, at least not in this context. It's more like a feasibility report, which studies the merits of a project and then recommends for or against it. Now, all it would take to make this document a proposal would be to add elements that ask management for approval for you to go ahead with the project. Certainly, some proposals must sell the projects they offer to do, but in all cases proposals must sell the writer (or the writer's organization) as the one to do the project.

**Types of proposals.** Consider the situations in which proposals occur. A company may send out a public announcement requesting proposals for a specific project. This public announcement—called a request for proposals (RFP)—could be issued through newspapers, trade journals, Chamber of Commerce channels, or individual letters. Firms or individuals interested in the project would then write proposals in which they summarize their qualifications, project schedules and costs, and discuss their approach to the project. The recipient of all these proposals would then evaluate them, select the best candidate, and then work up a contract.

But proposals come about much less formally. Imagine that you are interested in doing a project at work (for example, investigating the merits of bringing in some new technology to increase productivity). Imagine that you visited with your supervisor and tried to convince her of this. She might respond by saying, "Write me a proposal and I'll present it to upper management." As you can see from these examples, proposals can be divided into several categories:

- Internal, external.** If you write a proposal to someone within your organization (a business, a government agency, etc.), it is an *internal* proposal. With internal proposals, you may not have to include certain sections (such as qualifications), or you may not have to include as much information in them. An *external* proposal is one written from one separate, independent organization or individual to another such entity. The typical example is the independent consultant proposing to do a project for another firm. (The proposal that begins on page is an example of an internal proposal; the one beginning on page is an example of an external proposal.)
- Solicited, unsolicited.** If a proposal is *solicited*, the recipient of the proposal in some way requested the proposal. Typically, a company will send out requests for proposals (RFPs) through the mail or publish them in some news source. But proposals can be solicited on a very local level: for example, you could be explaining to your boss what a great thing it would be to install a new technology in the office; your boss might get interested and ask you to write up a proposal that offered to do a formal study of the idea. *Unsolicited* proposals are those in which the recipient has not requested proposals. With unsolicited proposals, you sometimes must convince the recipient that a problem or need exists before you can begin the main part of the proposal. (The proposal that begins on page is an example of an unsolicited proposal; the one beginning on page is an example of a solicited proposal.)
- Other options for the proposal assignment.** It may be that you cannot force your report-project plans into the proposal context. It may be that you cannot force your brain into imagining a proposal scenario. There is the option of writing the straight academic proposal—you address it to your instructor and make no pretense of realism. See an [example](#) of this type of proposal. Talk about this option with your instructor—there may be other requirements or a difference in the way it is evaluated.

## Typical Scenarios for the Proposal

It gets a bit tricky dreaming up a good technical report project and then a proposal project that proposes at least in part to write that report. Here are some ideas:

- Imagine that a company has some sort of problem or wants to make some sort of improvement. It sends out a request for proposals; you receive one and respond with a proposal. You offer to come in, investigate, interview, make recommendations—and present it all in the form of a report.
- Some organization wants a seminar in your expertise. You write a proposal to give the seminar—included in the package deal is a guide or handbook that the people attending the seminar will receive.
- You want to write a business prospectus for the kind of business you intend to start up. Imagine that you want a top-quality prospectus and don't have the time or expertise to prepare one; therefore, you send out request for proposals to professional consultants. You change hats and pretend you are Business Startup Consultants, Inc., and send your other self a proposal to do the job. Your proposal accepted, you (as Business Startup Consultants, Inc.) write the prospectus.
- Some agency has just started using a fancy desktop-publishing system, but the documentation is giving people fits. You receive a request for proposals from this agency to write some sort of simplified guide or startup guide.

## Common Sections in Proposals

The following is a review of the sections you'll commonly find in proposals. Don't assume that each one of them has to be in the actual proposal you write, nor that they have to be in the order they are presented here—plus you may discover that other kinds of information not mentioned

here must be included in your particular proposal.

As you read the following on common sections in proposals, check out the example proposals starting on page . Not all of the sections discussed in the following will show up in the examples, but most will.

**Introduction.** Plan the introduction to your proposal carefully. Make sure it does all of the following things (but not necessarily in this order) that apply to your particular proposal:

- Indicate that the document to follow is a proposal.
- Refer to some previous contact with the recipient of the proposal or to your source of information about the project.
- Find one brief motivating statement that will encourage the recipient to read on and to consider doing the project.
- Give an overview of the contents of the proposal.

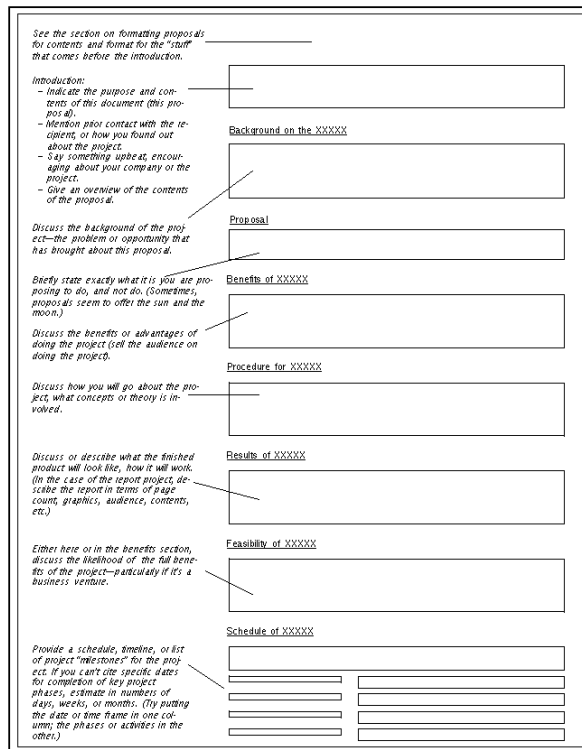
Now remember: you may not need *all* of these elements, and some of them can combine neatly into single sentences. The introduction ought to be brisk and to the point and not feel as though it is trudging laboriously through each of these elements.

Take a look at the introductions in the first two example proposals listed at the beginning of this chapter, and try to identify these elements.

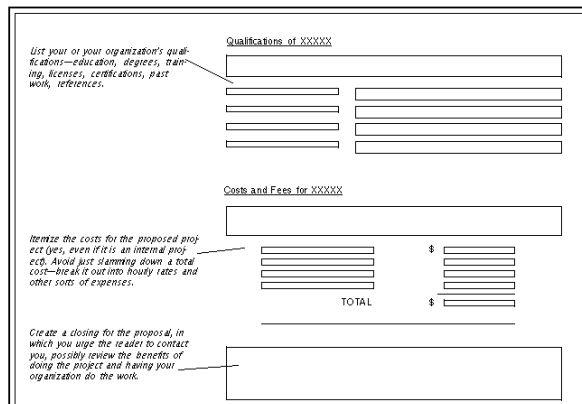
**Background on the problem, opportunity, or situation.** Often occurring just after the introduction, the background section discusses what has brought about the need for the project—what problem, what opportunity there is for improving things, what the basic situation is. For example, management of a chain of daycare centers may need to ensure that all employees know CPR (maybe new state guidelines have been enacted about CPR certification). An owner of pine timber land in east Texas may want to get the land productive of saleable timber without destroying the ecology. (The section entitled "Need for a Wellness Program," in example proposal 1 (listed at the beginning of this chapter) is a good example of this.)

It's true that the audience of the proposal may know the problem very well, in which case this section might not be needed. Writing the background section still might be useful, however, in demonstrating your particular view of the problem. And, if the proposal is unsolicited, a background section is almost a requirement—you will probably need to convince the audience that the problem or opportunity exists and that it should be addressed.

**Benefits and feasibility of the proposed project.** Most proposals discuss the advantages or benefits of doing the proposed project. This acts as an argument in favor of approving the project. Also, some proposals discuss the likelihood of the project's success. In the forestry proposal, the proposer is recommending that the landowner make an investment; at the end of the proposal, he explores the question of what return there will be on that investment, how likely those returns are. In the unsolicited proposal, this section is particularly important—you are trying to "sell" the audience on the project.



Schematic view of proposals. Remember that is a typical or common model for the contents and organization—many others are possible.



See the section on formatting proposals for information about what to put at the end of proposals.

Schematic view of proposals—continued. Remember too that each of the specific sections shown here may not be necessary in your proposal and that the order shown here may not be entirely right for your proposal.

**Description of the proposed work (results of the project).** Most proposals must describe the finished product of the proposed project. In this course, that means describing the written document you propose to write, its audience and purpose; providing an outline; and discussing such things as its length, graphics, binding, and so forth.) In the scenario you define, there may be other work such as conducting training seminars or providing an ongoing service. Add that too.

**Method, procedure, theory.** In most proposals, you'll want to explain how you'll go about doing the proposed work, if approved to do it. This acts as an additional persuasive element; it shows the audience you have a sound, well-thought-out approach to the project. Also, it serves as the other form of background some proposals need. Remember that the background section (the one discussed above) focused on the problem or need that brings about the proposal. However, in this section, you discuss the technical background relating to the procedures or technology you plan to use in the proposed work. For example, in the forestry proposal, the writer gives a bit of background on how timber management is done. Once again, this gives you the proposal writer a chance to show that you know what you are talking about, and build confidence in the audience that you are a good choice to do the project.

**Schedule.** Most proposals contain a section that shows not only the projected completion date but also key milestones for the project. If you are doing a large project spreading over many months, the timeline would also show dates on which you would deliver progress reports. And if you can't cite specific dates, cite amounts of time or time spans for each phase of the project. (See the examples of the schedule section in the examples proposals listed at the beginning of this chapter.)

**Qualifications.** Most proposals contain a summary of the proposing individual's or organization's qualifications to do the proposed work. It's like a mini-resume contained in the proposal. The proposal audience uses it to decide whether you are suited for the project. Therefore, this section lists work experience, similar projects, references, training, and education that shows familiarity with the project. (See the examples of the qualifications section in the examples proposals listed at the beginning of this chapter.)

**Costs, resources required.** Most proposals also contain a section detailing the costs of the project, whether internal or external. With external projects, you may need to list your hourly rates, projected hours, costs of equipment and supplies, and so forth, and then calculate the total cost of the complete project. With internal projects, there probably won't be a fee, but you should still list the project costs: for example, hours you will need to complete the project, equipment and supplies you'll be using, assistance from other people in the organization, and so on.

**Conclusions.** The final paragraph or section of the proposal should bring readers back to a focus on the positive aspects of the project (you've just showed them the costs). In the final section, you can end by urging them to get in touch to work out the details of the project, to remind them of the benefits of doing the project, and maybe to put in one last plug for you or your organization as the right choice for the project.

**Special project-specific sections.** Remember that the preceding sections are typical or common in written proposals, not absolute requirements. Similarly, some proposals may require other sections not discussed above. Don't let your proposal planning be dictated by the preceding discussion. Always ask yourself what else might my audience need to understand the project, the need for it, the benefits arising from it, my role in it, my qualifications to it. What else might my readers need to be convinced to allow me to do the project? What else do they need to see in order to approve the project and to approve me to do the project?

## Organization of Proposals

As for the organization of the content of a proposal, remember that it is essentially a sales, or promotional kind of thing. Here are the basic steps it goes through:

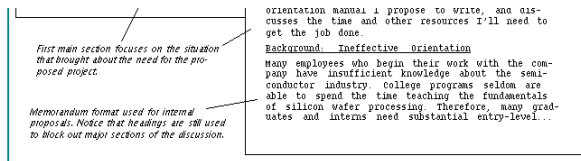
1. You introduce the proposal, telling the readers its purpose and contents.
2. You present the background—the problem, opportunity, or situation that brings about the proposed project. Get the reader concerned about the problem, excited about the opportunity, or interested in the situation in some way.
3. State what you propose to do about the problem, how you plan to help the readers take advantage of the opportunity, how you intend to help them with the situation.
4. Discuss the benefits of doing the proposed project, the advantages that come from approving it.
5. Describe exactly what the completed project would consist of, what it would look like, how it would work—describe the results of the project.
6. Discuss the method and theory or approach behind that method—enable readers to understand how you'll go about the proposed work.
7. Provide a schedule, including major milestones or checkpoints in the project.
8. Briefly list your qualifications for the project; provide a mini-resume of the background you have that makes you right for the project.
9. Now (and only now), list the costs of the project, the resources you'll need to do the project.
10. Conclude with a review of the benefits of doing the project (in case the shock from the costs section was too much), and urge the audience to get in touch or to accept the proposal.

Notice the overall logic of the movement through these sections: you get them concerned about a problem or interested in an opportunity, then you get them excited about how you'll fix the problem or do the project, then you show them what good qualifications you have—then hit them with the costs, but then come right back to the good points about the project.

## Format of Proposals

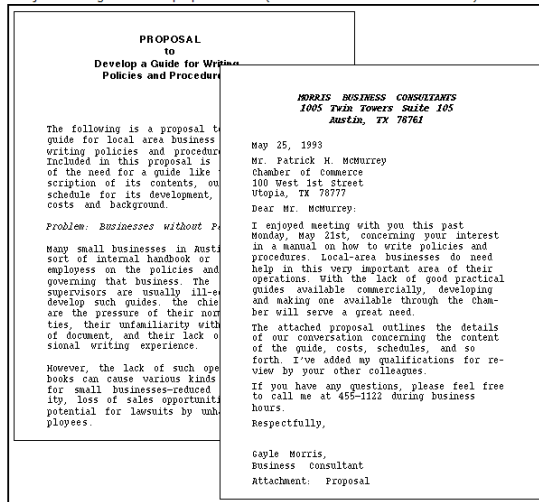
You have the following options for the format and packaging of your proposal. It does not matter which you use as long as you use the memorandum format for internal proposals and the business-letter format for external proposals.

<p>Christine L. Morris, P.E. 1999 S. IH 35 Round Rock, TX 78761 February 2, 1993 Ms. Jane Doe Director of Public Works City of Utopia Utopia, TX 77777 Dear Ms. Doe: The following is in response to your January 15, 1992 advertisement in the <i>Commerce Journal</i> in which you requested proposals for a new wastewater treatment plant for Utopia. This proposal describes the current problem, outlines the actionization will take, details our schedules, and costs.</p> <p><b>Wastewater Treatment Problem</b> According to your ad, the city has a current system, which is causing certain regulatory limits set by state government. Our preliminary research shows the city is currently using a trickling tank system known as the "contact-bed" system no longer used because of low loading and efficiencies. Even if it were on plant would continue to experience beyond its permit limits. Therefore, t</p>	<p><i>Business-letter format used by an independent consulting engineer. Notice how headings are used to indicate major sections.</i></p> <p><i>Introductory paragraph refers to a previous contract, reminds the reader of the topic of the meeting, indicates that this is a proposal (states the purpose), and gives an overview of the proposal contents.</i></p> <p><b>To:</b> David A. Newberry Development Trainer/Coordinator <b>From:</b> Perea Phillips Device Engineer MOS 2 <b>Date:</b> 11 June 1993 <b>Subj:</b> Proposal to develop an orientation report on semiconductor processing for new hires and summer interns Thanks for meeting with me yesterday to discuss the idea of writing an orientation manual or our manufacturing process for new hires and summer interns. As I mentioned to you then, our current method of introducing new employees to the silicon wafer manufacturing process is tedious for us and often ineffective for the new employees. The following proposal details this problem, outlines the</p>
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Excerpts from two proposals, one internal, the other external. These examples integrate the cover letter (or memo) and the proposal proper into one continuous document.

- Cover letter with separate proposal:** In this format, you write a brief "cover" letter and attach the proposal proper after it. The cover letter briefly announces that a proposal follows and outlines the contents of it. In fact, the contents of the cover letter are pretty much the same as the introduction (discussed in the previous section). Notice, however, that the proposal proper that follows the cover letter repeats much of what you see in the cover letter. This is because the letter may get detached from the proposal or the recipient may not even bother to look at the letter and just dive right into the proposal itself. (This format is illustrated in below.)



Excerpts from a proposal that uses a cover letter. The proposal proper uses a title at the top of the page and repeats some of the contents of the cover letter (in case the letter is separated from the proposal). A cover memo would work the same way as the business letter does in this example.

- Cover memo with separate proposal:** In this format, you write a brief "cover" memo and attach the proposal proper after it. The cover memo briefly announces that a proposal follows and outlines the contents of it. In fact, the contents of the cover memo are pretty much the same as the introduction (discussed in the previous section). The proposal proper that repeats much of what's in the cover memo. This is because the memo may get detached from the proposal or the reader may not even bother to look at the memo and just dive right into the proposal itself. (See the illustration above and just picture the letter reformatted as a memo.)
- Business-letter proposal:** In this format, you put the entire proposal within a standard business letter. You include headings and other special formatting elements as if it were a report. (This format is illustrated in the left portion of a [previous illustration](#).)
- Memo proposal:** In this format, you put the entire proposal within a standard office memorandum. You include headings and other special formatting elements as if it were a report. (This format is illustrated in the right portion of a [previous illustration](#).)

## Special Assignment Requirements

Remember that the assignment for this unit serves several purposes: (1) to give you some experience in writing a proposal; (2) to get you to start planning your term report; (3) to give your instructor a chance to work with you on your report project, to make sure you've got something workable. For the second and third reasons, you need to include certain specific contents in (or with) your proposal, some of which may not seem appropriate in the proposal proper. If it doesn't fit in the proposal proper, put it in a memo to your instructor as is done in first example proposal listed at the beginning of this chapter.

Here's a checklist of what to include somewhere in the proposal or in an attached memo to the instructor:

- Audience:** Describe the audience of the proposal and the proposed report (they may be different) in terms of the organization they work for, their titles and jobs, their technical background, their ability to understand the report you propose to write.
- Situation:** Describe the intended audience of the proposal: who they are, what they do, what their level of knowledge and background on the proposal topic is. Describe the situation in which the proposal is written and in which the project is needed: what problems or needs are there? who has them, where are they located?
- Report type:** Explain what type of report you intend to write: is it a technical background report? a feasibility report? Provide enough explanation so that your instructor can see that you understand the type of report.
- Information sources:** List information sources; make sure you know that there is adequate information for your topic; list specific books, articles, reference works, other kinds of sources that you think will contribute to your report.
- Graphics:** List the graphics you think your report will need according to their *type* and their *content*. (If you can't think of any your report would need, you may not have a good topic—do some brainstorming with your instructor.)
- Outline:** Include an outline of the topics and subtopics you think you'll cover in your report.

## Revision Checklist for Proposals

As you reread and revise your proposal, watch out for problems such as the following:

- Make sure you use the right format. Remember, the memo format is for internal proposals; the business-letter format is for proposals written from one external organization to another. (Whether you use a cover memo or cover letter is your choice.)
- Write a good introduction—in it, state that this is a proposal, and provide an overview of the contents of the proposal.
- Make sure to identify exactly what you are proposing to do.
- Make sure that a report—a written document—is somehow involved in the project you are proposing to do. Remember that in this course we are

trying to do two things: write a proposal and plan a term-report project.

- Make sure the sections are in a logical, natural order. For example, don't hit the audience with schedules and costs before you've gotten them interested in the project.
- Break out the costs section into specifics; include hourly rates and other such details. Don't just hit them with a whopping big final cost.
- For internal projects, don't omit the section on costs and qualifications: there will be costs, just not direct ones. For example, how much time will you need, will there be printing, binding costs? Include your qualifications—imagine your proposal will go to somebody in the organization who doesn't know you.
- Be sure and address the proposal to the real or realistic audience—not your instructor. (You can use your instructor's name as the CEO or supervisor of the organization you are sending the proposal to.)
- Watch out for generating technobabble. Yes, some of your proposal readers may know the technical side of your project—but others may not. Challenge yourself to bring difficult technical concepts down to a level that nonspecialists can understand.
- Be sure to include all the information listed in "Special assignment requirements." If it doesn't logically or naturally fit in the proposal itself, put it in a memo to your instructor.

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