



## Concept Paper: Purpose



- A concept paper provides a brief (1-5 page) summary of a research idea in order to obtain feedback and/or buy-in from potential funders, collaborators, and other stakeholders.
- Funders often require (or request) concept papers prior to a full proposal submission. This allows them to identify ideas that are likely to be funded at the full proposal stage.
- Researchers can use concept papers to
  - Transform a research idea into a focused, high-quality proposal prospect
  - Spark a funder's interest
  - Demonstrate that a project is worthy of funding
  - Seek feedback that can be used to strengthen a full proposal
  - Develop a preliminary idea into a focused, high-quality proposal prospect
  - Serve as a foundation for a full proposal

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Source: "Why Wait for the RFP," Texas Tech University Office of Research Development. <https://www.depts.ttu.edu/research/rdt/resources/why-wait-for-the-rfp-2.php>

## Why write a concept paper?



- Efficient and (relatively) quick way to obtain feedback from a sponsor
  - Often, program officers respond almost immediately
  - Alternative: spend months preparing a full application and wait months for feedback
  - Program officers are normally eager to identify whether a proposed project is:
    - Competitive and/or fundable
    - In line with their goals/mission
    - Likely to advance the field
- Find funding beyond posted solicitations/requests for proposals
  - A majority of funding through the National Science Foundation and National Institutes of Health is made through unsolicited, investigator-initiated proposals.
  - To submit an unsolicited proposal, you must contact the program officer to start the process.

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## Why write a concept paper?



- Investing time and effort in writing a concept paper before you start the long, difficult task of developing a full application or proposal can provide a number of benefits:
  - Craft concise descriptions for each aspect of your project
    - Concept papers are essentially condensed project narratives.
    - Developing focused descriptions of your project will pay off when you write a full proposal.
    - Allows you to consider your project from all angles
  - Build a more competitive application. The feedback you receive will
    - Identify weaknesses of your project & provide guidance on how to address them.
    - Highlight your project's strengths so you can bolster them

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## Why write a concept paper?



- Develop relationships with program officers.
  - A concept paper introduces you and your research interests
  - Program officers can help you learn how to better fit within their program area, or suggest different programs that might be a better match.
- Avoid wasting your valuable time.
  - If you learn your research idea is not supported/recommended, you can avoid the time and effort required to prepare a full proposal.
  - If your project is supported, you have a head start on required elements of a full application.

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## Know (and write for) your audience



- Tailor your writing to fit the audience's interests and needs
- If you send a concept paper to multiple potential funders, you **MUST** make changes based on each funder's
  - Priorities
  - Requirements
  - The level of expertise of the program officers
- Ideally, you will write two separate versions of your concept paper.
  - The audience for the first is **your research colleagues**.
  - The audience for the second is **potential sponsors/funders**

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## Writing for your research colleagues



- The first version of your concept paper, written for your research colleagues, should be shared with
  - Colleagues here at MSU Texas
  - Mentors
  - Experts in your field at other institutions
  - Potential collaborators/partners
- This version can contain jargon and technical language, as the audience consists of fellow experts.
- After you consider and incorporate feedback from colleagues, you should write version 2.

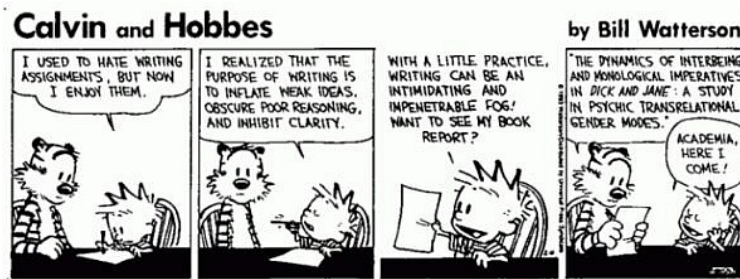
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## Writing for potential sponsors/funders



- The second version of your concept paper will be shared with potential sponsors/funders.
  - Many program officers may be laypeople or generalists
  - Jargon and technical language could impede the reader's ability to evaluate your ideas.
  - Your concept paper is your sales pitch—you want to sell your idea's significance and potential impact



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## Writing Strategies: Audience-Focused Style



- Concept papers are very different from journal articles.
- The goal of a concept paper is to convince the sponsor that your project will be successful, significant, and impactful.
  - Explain how your chosen research team, project design, etc. will lead to success
  - Demonstrate the project's significance, purpose, and impact
  - Clearly show how your project aligns with the sponsor's mission & priorities
    - You MUST do your research, and review a sponsor's:
      - Strategic plan
      - Funding priority areas
      - Previously awarded grants (and abstracts, if available)
      - Annual reports
      - Any other information that will help you link your project to their priorities.
    - If possible, echo the sponsor's own words in your concept paper.

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## Writing Strategies: Audience-Focused Style



### National Science Foundation


- The NSF expects proposers to fully address the **Broader Impacts** of their project, which include:  
*"Increased public scientific literacy and public engagement with science and technology."*

### How to "echo" this language in a concept paper:

- *[The proposed project] will contribute to public scientific literacy and increase public engagement with science through a field trip program that will allow diverse student groups from area high schools to participate in hands-on activities in [research topic] to build their skills in [discipline] and spark interest in future research and study.*

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## Writing Strategies: Memorable Title

A title that leaves a memorable first impression and reflects the purpose of your project can give your proposal an edge over the hundreds of proposals a program officer will review.


- Make sure your title conveys **what** you intend to do and **why** it matters.
- Identify words that capture the problem you'll address, your project's potential impact, and the funder's priorities.
  - Use those terms to create a title using no more than 10 words.
  - Take the full title and create a "short title" to be used throughout the concept paper.

Example:  
*Geoscience Research Experiences to Engage Tomorrow's Scientists*

- Short title: *Geoscience Research Experiences*
- Acronym: *GREETs*

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## DON'T do this..

### Clever Acronyms: the Holy Grail of Academia

**Step 1** Use the loose definition of the word "acronym"

**Step 2** Is it coherent? Does it makes sense? What matters is that it *sounds* cool.

**Step 3** Missing a letter? Pull out an obscure buzzword that fits!

**Step 4** Desperate? Just pick letters from the middle. I'm sure no one will notice.

**Step 5** Ignore words that don't contribute. Kind of like your part in the project.

ACtually Random Onomastic iNitials You Make (up)

**Types of Acronyms:**

<p>- <b>Folksy Names:</b> a cheery name will distract people from the fact your project cost millions</p>	<p>A.L.I.C.E., B.O.B., D.A.V.E. ✓</p>	<p>A.D.O.L.F., Z.I.P.P.O., S.I.G.M.U.N.D. ✗</p>
<p>- <b>Aggressive verb/predatory animal:</b> a requirement for getting military funding</p>	<p>K.I.L.L., S.H.A.R.K., W.O.L.F. ✓</p>	<p>O.B.L.I.T.E.R.A.T.E. (too many words), B.U.N.N.Y. ✗</p>
<p>- <b>Greek names:</b> nothing says "Sci-Fi" like a good greek name</p>	<p>O.M.E.G.A., A.L.P.H.A., S.I.R.I.U.S. ✓</p>	<p>T.O.G.A., P.I.T.A., T.Z.A.T.Z.I.K.I. ✗</p>

**Remember:**  
 Acronyms cleverly reveal one's nimble youthful mastery abbreviating construed rigidly opted nomenclature, yielding monetary awards contracting research overtures not yet manifested!

**Bonus points:** make your acronym recursive!  
 recursive  
 recursive  
 recursive

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## Content that sells your idea:



- A concept paper provides an introduction to and overview of your proposed research.
  - Make clear connections between the funder's mission and priorities and your project's significance, innovation, and impact throughout.
  - Answer the funder's question: "so what?"
  - Show how investing in your project will
    - Advance the knowledge base in your field
    - Lead to improvements in policy and practice
    - Provide a benefit to society
    - Etc....
  - Outline the broad potential impacts **clearly** and **confidently**.
    - Concept papers are not the place for understatement and modesty.

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## Content that sells your idea:



- Avoid excessive detail—think carefully about the content you include.
  - Is this something the funder **needs** to know in order to understand your project?
- Be confident, positive, and clear
  - Example:

*"[Short Title] will impact..."*

not

*"We believe this project could impact..."*

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## Components of a Concept Paper



### Opening “mini abstract” [2 paragraphs]

- Briefly summarize:
  - The significant problem or gap you will address and why it matters
  - The expected outcomes
  - The potential broad impact
- Make sure the first two sentences make a persuasive case for your project’s significance and impact.
- Language should demonstrate your understanding of the funder’s priorities as well as the types of projects they fund
  - Make a clear, strong link between their priorities and your research.
- “So what?” Explain how your research advances their cause.

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## Components of a Concept Paper



### Background and Purpose [3 paragraphs]

The goal? Convince the funder you are knowledgeable about your research topic *and* that more research is necessary. (Impact)

- **Paragraph 1:** Start with a clear, concise **description of the research topic** (not your project...yet)
  - Include a very brief summary of the literature to provide context for your project.
- **Paragraph 2:** Describe the **purpose of your research project:**
  - Identify the problem or need you will address and how your project will address it.
  - Provide evidence to show that your research addresses a significant/timely problem
  - Use relevant data (if you have it), but don’t go into unnecessary specifics
- **Paragraph 3:** Describe the **“So what?” Why your project matters.**
  - Persuade the program officers that they SHOULD care about the problem your research will address.
  - Link the problem to their organization’s priorities
  - Describe the potential short- and long-term impact

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## Components of a Concept Paper



### Project Description [4 paragraphs]

- **Paragraph 1:** Describe your **research project**, including:
  - What you plan to do
  - Who is involved
  - Who will benefit
  - If applicable, highlight the innovative aspects of your research approach.
- **Paragraph 2:** List the **research questions, goal(s), and objectives**
  - No elaboration will be needed, as you laid the foundation in the previous section.
- **Paragraph 3:** Briefly describe—based on your audience—**how you will conduct the research**
  - Research methodology
  - The data you will collect
  - How you will analyze the data
  - Describe major milestones and a general timeline for what you will accomplish.
- **Paragraph 4:** Describe the **expected outcomes** of your project
  - Link expected outcomes to research questions, goals, and objectives
  - Discuss outcomes in terms of their impact on those who will benefit directly or indirectly.

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## Components of a Concept Paper



### Project Needs and Key Personnel [1 paragraph]

- Include the following:
  - Estimate of total costs
  - Categories of expenses
  - Project timeframe (start and end dates in months/years)
- Briefly discuss your qualifications as PI and the expertise of the research team

### Impact of Project [1 paragraph]

The goal of this section is to solidify the funder's impression of your project as important to their mission.

- Briefly restate:
  - Why the project is important
  - Expected outcomes
  - How it will add new knowledge to the field and/or inform policy and practice
- End with a **strong statement** of:
  - how your project aligns with the sponsor's strategic priorities.
  - How your expected outcomes will impact the targeted population, the college and university, Wichita Falls, Texas, the USA, the world....

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## Specifications/Format



- The appearance of your concept paper is important.
  - Avoid presenting a “wall of text” with too little white space.
  - Use headings and subheadings to help the reviewer follow your organization
- Follow any and all sponsor guidelines (if given); otherwise,
  - 1” margins
  - Single spaced
  - 11- or 12-point, legible font
  - Block paragraph style
  - Provide “white space,” not walls of text
  - Include a footer with your project’s short title, last name, date, and page #
- Finally, keep it concise
  - If a page limit is given, don’t exceed it
  - If not, an ideal length is 2 pages—but 1-5 pages are common

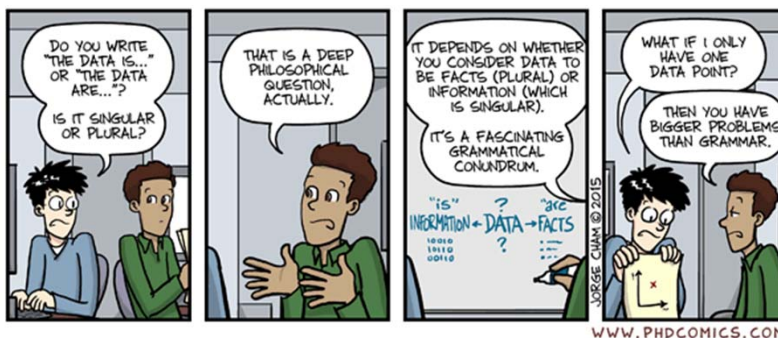
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## Specifications/Format



- Carefully edit and revise your concept paper.
  - Grammar, spelling, and punctuation should be correct and consistent.
  - Don’t let mistakes distract the reader from the substance of your proposal.
- OSPR is happy to review and offer edits and suggested revisions on concept papers *and* proposals.



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## How OSPR can help



- Please reach out to OSPR before you submit concept papers to any funders. OSPR can help in a number of ways, including:
  - Identifying potential sponsors
  - Reviewing your concept papers for clarity and effectiveness
  - Offering suggested edits and revisions
  - Ensuring that your project aligns with university policies and procedures
  - Identifying any potential issues that could delay institutional endorsement of a future proposal.

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## Concept Paper Template



- The handout for this session includes a generic concept paper template that incorporates information of interest to most potential funders.
- I will share an editable version of the template via email.

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**Questions?**

