

Writing a Concept Paper

Note: Some funders request specific content and/or formatting for concept papers. The template provided on page 4 is a generic template that incorporates the content required by most sponsors. Make sure to read sponsor guidelines and alter the content and format as necessary to satisfy those requirements.

# Why write a concept paper?

A concept paper can help you transform a good idea into a focused, high-quality proposal. Some sponsors request a brief concept paper (also referred to as a “white paper”) before they will accept a full application.

Regardless of sponsor requirements, writing and sharing a brief concept paper is an efficient and effective way to obtain quick feedback on your project’s strengths and weaknesses from a sponsor. In many cases, program officers or other sponsor representatives will respond to concept papers almost immediately. In contrast, if you submit a full application package (often 50+ pages of documents that can take months to complete) to a competitive request for proposals, you will typically wait several months for reviewer comments.

A majority of funding through the National Science Foundation (NSF) and National Institutes of Health (NIH) is made through unsolicited, investigator-initiated proposals. This means you do not need to wait for a funding agency to put out a call for proposals that matches your research to share your project ideas.

From a sponsor’s point of view, the purpose of a concept paper is to determine whether or not a proposed research project is competitive and/or fundable, aligns with their mission and strategic goals, and is likely to advance the field. From the researcher’s perspective, the purpose of a concept paper is to spark the sponsor’s interest, demonstrate that the project is worthy of funding, and generate valuable feedback that can be used to strengthen a full proposal/application.

Time is valuable and always in short supply, but investing some time and effort to write a concept paper before you embark on the long, difficult task of developing a full proposal or application can provide a number of benefits:

* Craft concise descriptions for each aspect of your project: Preparing a concept paper, which is essentially a condensed project narrative, allows you to carefully consider all aspects of your project and provide focused descriptions of each component.
* Build a more competitive application: the feedback you receive from colleagues and funders will identify any potential weaknesses of your project and provide guidance on how to address those. The critical feedback will also highlight your project’s strengths and allow you to bolster those in a full application.
* Develop relationships with program officers: A concept paper allows you to introduce yourself and your research interests to a program officer and for you to learn how to better fit your research into their program area. Alternatively, program officers may suggest different programs within their agency that may be a better fit for your particular research.
* Avoid wasting your valuable time: If you learn that your research idea is not supported or recommended, you can avoid expending the time and effort to submit a full proposal. If your project is supported, you will have a head start on the required elements of a full proposal.

# know (and write for) your audience

For concept papers, as with any type of communication, it is essential to know your audience and tailor your writing to fit their interests and needs. If you intend to send your concept paper to several different potential funders, you **must** make changes based on each funder’s priorities, requirements, and the level of expertise of the program officers, even though the basic content will be essentially the same.

You should draft two separate versions of your concept paper. For the first, the audience is **your research colleagues**—share your concept paper with colleagues here at MSU Texas, mentors or other experts in your field from other institutions, and researchers who have had funding success in your research area. This version can include jargon and technical language, as your audience is fellow experts. After you consider and incorporate feedback from your colleagues, you should write a second version of the concept paper. For this second version, your audience is **potential sponsors/funders.** Be aware that for many funders, program officers may be laypeople or generalists. For this audience, using jargon and technical language will impede clear and effective communication of your project, which could reduce your odds of a positive response.

Your concept paper is your sales pitch—you want to sell your idea based on its significance and potential impact. To make an effective pitch, you need a concept paper that demonstrates how your project aligns with their priorities and mission and is written without jargon that can impede the reader’s ability to evaluate your ideas.

# Writing Strategies

## audience-focused style

Be aware that writing a concept paper differs significantly from writing a journal article. The goal of a concept paper is to convince the sponsor of the significance of your proposed project. You should explain how your chosen research team and the project design will contribute to success, and clearly demonstrate the project’s significance, purpose, and impact. Your concept paper should also show how your project aligns with the funder’s mission and priorities.

To ensure that a program officer can easily see how your project aligns with their organization, you **must** take the time to review their strategic plan, funding priority areas, previously awarded grants, annual reports, and any information that will allow you to link your project to their history and priorities. If possible, **use their words** in your paper. If your funder is the National Science Foundation, which expects proposers to fully address the Broader Impacts of their project, which includes “improved STEM education and educator development at any level,” and your project will meet those criteria, echo the sponsor’s language in your explanation. For example:

*[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.*

## Memorable Title

In addition, make sure your title conveys what you intend to do and why it matters. Identify words that capture the problem you will address, your project’s potential impact, and the funder’s priorities. Then, use those terms to create a title of no more than 10 words. Create a “short title” that represents the longer version and can be used throughout the concept paper in place of vague phrases like “this project” or “this research.” For example, the title *Geoscience Research Experiences to Engage Tomorrow’s Scientists* can be shortened to *Geoscience Research Experiences*, which allows you to embed the content and purpose of your proposal throughout the concept paper, and can also be made into the memorable acronym *GREETS.* 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.

## 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 the concept paper [see the template below for more]. These elements answer the funder’s question, “so what?” You want the funder to agree that your project is a good investment because of its potential for impact. You want to show how their investment in your project will advance the knowledge base of your field, lead to improvements in policy and practice, provide a benefit to society, etc. You should outline the broad potential impacts of your work *clearly* and *confidently*—your concept paper is not the time for understatement and modesty.

Don’t overwhelm the reader with detail.Think carefully about the content you include—is this something the funder *needs* to know in order to understand what your research will accomplish? Be confident, positive, and clear (e.g. *“[Short Title] will impact…,*” not *“We believe this project could impact…”*).

# Format and Layout

The appearance of your concept paper is important. Try to avoid presenting a “wall of text,” with long paragraphs and little white space. White space improves the readability of your paper, and using headings and subheadings will help the reviewer follow the organization of your project.

Carefully edit and revise your concept paper. Grammar, spelling, and punctuation should be correct and consistent so the reader is not distracted from the substance of your proposal. OSPR is happy to review and offer edits and revisions on concept papers and proposals.

Unless the sponsor guidelines state otherwise, your concept paper should have 1” margins, use an 11- or 12-point, easily-readable font; use a block paragraph style; include a footer with your project’s short title, last name, date, and page number; and not exceed **two single-spaced pages.**

# How OSPR can help

Please reach out to the Office of Sponsored Programs and Research (OSPR) before you submit concept papers to any funders. OSPR can help you in a number of ways, such as identifying potential sponsors, reviewing your concept paper for clarity and effectiveness, and offering suggested edits and revisions. We can also ensure that your proposed project aligns with all university policies and procedures and identify any potential issues that could delay institutional endorsement of a future proposal.

# Concept Paper Template

The generic template on the following page includes information of interest to all potential funders. To use the template, delete the first three pages of this document and begin filling in the template with your concept paper content. Some funders require specific content and/or a specific format; OSPR can help determine if this is true for a funder you intend to contact. Once you complete the generic template, you can rearrange the text and modify the formatting as necessary to satisfy the requirements of specific funders.

**TITLE OF RESEARCH PROJECT**

Dr. <Name>, <Faculty Rank>

<Department>

Midwestern State University

<Email>@msutexas.edu, 940-397-\_\_\_\_

**This opening “mini abstract” (2 paragraphs) will determine the project officer’s interest in your research** and create a strong impression of the merits of your project. Pay special attention to the first two sentences. They must be persuasive regarding your project’s significance and impact so as to grab your audience and keep them reading.

Briefly summarize (1) the significant problem or gap you will address and why it is important; (2) the expected outcomes; and (3) the potential broad impact.

Include language to demonstrate you understand the strategic priorities of the targeted funder as well as the types of projects they fund. **Make a clear and strong link between their priorities and your research**. You want them to buy your project, so sell it by explaining how your research advances their cause (the “so what?”). Use words and phrases from the funder’s strategic plan and other funder information so the program officer sees their organization reflected in your project.

**Background and Purpose (3 paragraphs)**

The goal of this section is to convince the funder you are knowledgeable about your research topic *and* more research is necessary to fill gaps or expand upon the literature and address critical problems or needs. Lay the foundation for informing policy and practice to enhance the impact (bang for the buck) of the funder’s investment in you and your research.

Start with a ***clear and concise description of the research topic*** (not your project… that comes in the next section). Include a brief summary of the literature – citing only seminal, significant, and compelling sources – to provide the context for your project and discuss what others have discovered and/or accomplished. Highlight if you discover there is little or no research directly aligned with your project. How and how much you discuss the literature is driven by the knowledge base of your audience.

Describe the ***purpose of your research*** project: identify the problem or need you intend to address and how your project will address it. Provide evidence to support the contention that your research project addresses a significant and/or timely problem. Relevant data can be convincing, so use it if you have it; just do not get bogged down in its minutia.

Finally, describe ***the “so what?”; why your project matters.*** As you craft this description, keep in mind that most program officers are not as immersed as you are in the topic. Therefore, you must persuade them that they really should care about the specific problem your research will address. Do this by linking the problem to their organization’s priorities and describing in broad, grandiose terms the potential short- and long-term impact of your project.

**Project Description (4 Paragraphs)**

Concisely describe your research project, including ***what (not how) you plan to do***; ***who is involved*** in the research; and ***who will benefit***, directly and indirectly. Resist the temptation to get mired in the details. If it is a pilot project to collect preliminary data and/or refine research methodologies, be direct in saying so. ***If applicable, highlight the*** ***innovative aspects of your research approach*** to set your project apart from the other proposals the program officer reads.

List the ***research questions, goal(s), and objectives*** of your project. You will have laid the foundation for them in the previous section, so no elaboration is needed.

Briefly describe – based on your audience – ***how you will conduct the research***, including the research methodology; the data you will collect; and how you will analyze the data. Based on your *Project Work Plan*, describe ***major milestones and a general timeline*** for what you will accomplish. As always, avoid the temptation to include the nitty-gritty details.

Finally, describe the ***expected outcomes*** of your project, linked to your research questions, goals, and objectives. Discuss these outcomes in terms of their impact on your target population and others who will benefit directly and indirectly.

**Project Needs and Key Personnel (1 paragraph)**

This section should include an ***estimate of total costs*** (direct and indirect), ***categories of expenses***, and the ***project timeframe*** (start and end dates in months/years). Next briefly discuss your ***qualifications as PI*** and the ***expertise of the research team as a whole***.

You will not include a detailed budget with your concept paper; however, the budget details are important. Work with OSPR to begin preparing the budget justification and create an initial budget spreadsheet.

**Impact of Project (1 paragraph)**

The purpose of this section is to ***solidify the funder’s final impression of your project as being important to their mission***. Very briefly restate why the project is important, its expected outcomes, and how it will add new knowledge to your field and inform policy and practice.

End the concept paper with a strong statement of how your project aligns with the funder’s strategic priorities, describing how your expected outcomes will impact the targeted population, the college and university, Wichita Falls, Texas, the US, the world.

**References**

Providing a list of references is ***not necessary*** at this stage. Have the list available should the program officer wish to see it.