

Proposal Writing

June 17, 2025

Guest: Jim Mazzouccolo (RIO)

Becca Edwards
CIRES ACI Director

Kari Bowen
CIESRDS Scientific and Administrative Manager



University of Colorado **Boulder**



Agenda

Presentation (45 min)

"Proposal Writing: Best Practices for Clear and Persuasive Proposals"

Q&A (10 min)

Jim will be available to answer questions

Listening Session (25 min)

Discussion of CIRES community needs

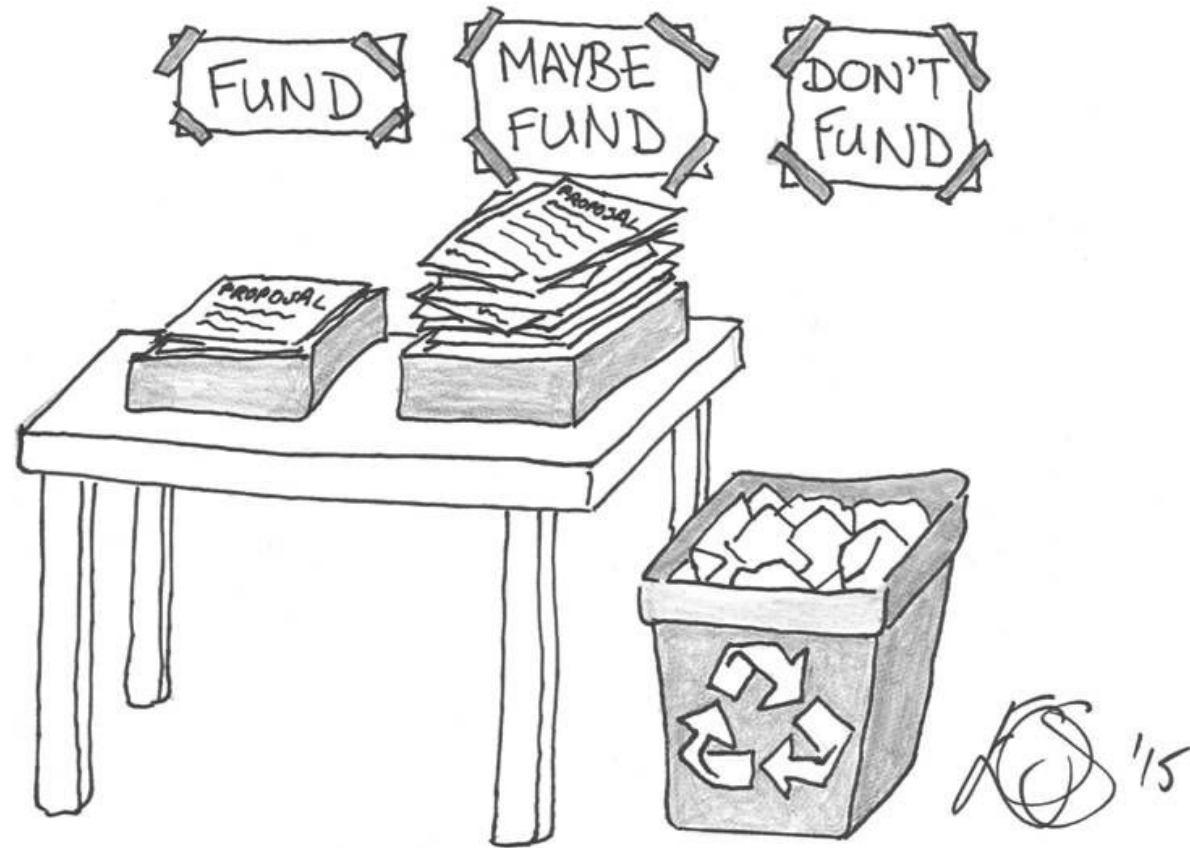
Survey & Future Sessions (5 min)





Jim Mazzouccolo

Jim is a proposal writer, editor and research development strategist from the CU Boulder Research and Innovation Office (RIO), with over 13 years of experience in research and faculty development and reviews National Institutes of Health, Department of Energy, National Science Foundation, Department of Defense and various foundation proposals.



Review panel categories.



Characteristics of Effective Proposals

Demonstrates your ability as an investigator to conduct and complete the project (scholarly or scientific) within a designated timeframe and budget

Intersection of your expertise and the (potential) funder's need(s)

Rationally persuades the reviewer through strongly supported hypotheses and convincing rationales

Proposes an innovative approach/methodology/technology

It is clearly written, structured and formatted so it is easy for a reviewer to read!



The Proposal as Rhetorical Argument

A proposal is a *rhetorical argument*: a rationally persuasive way of communicating to convince an audience

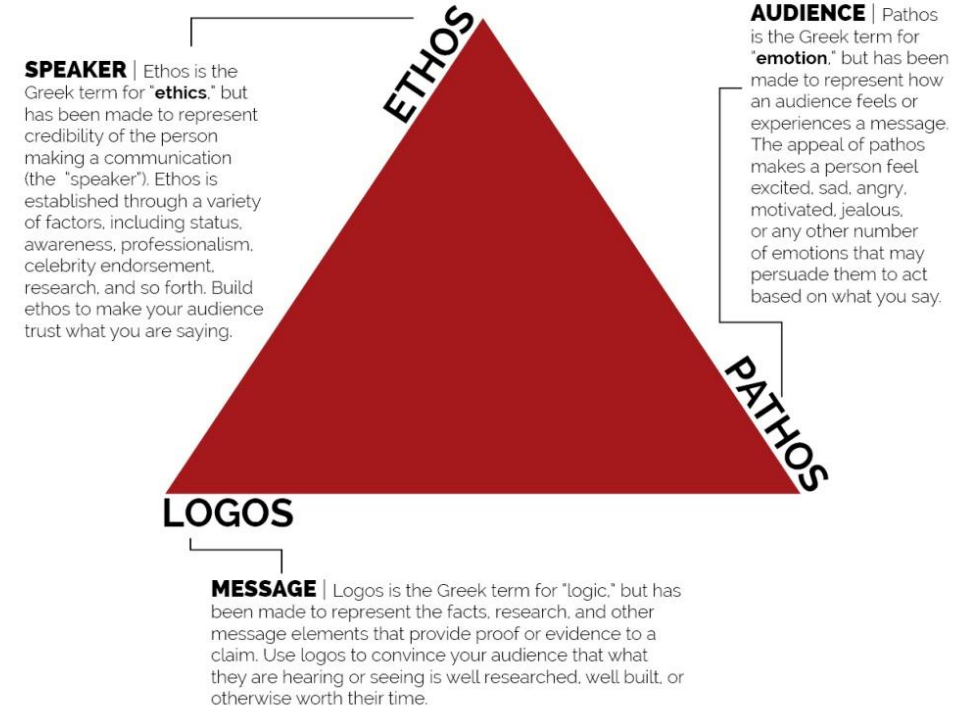
Aristotle's Rhetorical Triangle

- Speaker (Investigator)
- Message (Research Project)
- Audience (Reviewers)

Proposal Writing is *very different* from Academic Writing

THE RHETORICAL TRIANGLE

AN OVERVIEW OF THE THREE RHETORICAL APPEALS



TheVisualCommunicationGuy.com



Research & Innovation Office
UNIVERSITY OF COLORADO BOULDER

Your Mindset as a Proposal Writer

Limit your concern to what you can control and influence

Writing is a *skill*

Be *proud* and *confident*

You are *telling a story*

You are the *hero* of this story



Key Questions Your Proposal Must Answer

- What is your proposal addressing, what is the importance of the topic, and how is it impactful?
- How is it currently addressed, what are the limitations of current approaches, and why are they not working?
- What will you be doing to address it (and avoid or eliminate these limitations)?
- What is innovative about what you will do, why is it innovative, and what makes you think it will work?
- What leads you to think that, overall, what you will do has merit/will “work”?
- What are the indicators that demonstrate what you are doing is working?
- How might others critique your plan and what would you say in response?
- Why are you (or your team) the person to do this?
- What difficulties may arise while doing the work, how will you respond, and does the response affect your planned result?
- How will this work benefit the agency/program?
- When successful, what new avenues of research will your work open for yourself and your field?



START

Highlighted text includes tasks that I can help you with!

- **Read solicitation (guidelines and review criteria)**
- Alert your grant specialist to your intent to apply
- Check out sponsor/program for priorities, funding history, strategic match
- Identify and contact collaborators, including external evaluators
- Work with collaborators on roles within the project
- **Develop concept paper based on agency priorities and review criteria**
- Communicate with program officer regarding the concept paper
- **Identify colleagues/editors to review drafts**
- **Draft abstract (agency priorities and review criteria)**
- **Draft narrative/description (agency priorities and review criteria)**
- Draft evaluation plan
- Draft budget
- Draft budget justification
- Draft project timeline
- Draft facilities section
- Draft current and pending support



Highlighted text includes tasks that I can help you with!

- Draft references
- Request, draft, and collect letters of commitment
- Collect bio sketches from collaborators
- Do internal paperwork for proposal submission, including conflict of interest, IRB/IACUC, and financial disclosure information
- Draft/revise your bio sketch
- Develop figures and tables
- Review and edit drafts based on solicitation review criteria
- Send drafts to colleagues for review
- Review and edit drafts based on colleague feedback
- Revise drafts based on feedback
- Send revised drafts to colleagues/editors
- Edit and revise drafts based on reviews
- Finalize proposal package, including placement of figures, pagination, special characters, fonts, margins, institutional information, and correctly naming files and placing them in correct format
- Submit complete package to grant specialist (at least one business week in advance of deadline)

FINISH





“Is it just me or are these review panels getting a lot tougher?”



Audience: Appreciating the Position of the Reviewer, the Review Committee, and its Impact on Proposal Writing

Reviewers and Review Committees

- Are human (*no, seriously, they are*)
- Are reading multiple proposals in consideration for funding in a limited time frame
- Many of the proposals they are reading are not well written
- Do not have your exact training or background
 - ☐ At best, it will be read carefully by one or two experts*
 - ☐ It will certainly be read (superficially, perhaps) by non-experts panel members*
 - ☐ You must rationally persuade both types*
- Most likely will not be familiar with your work
- May not be interested in your research area (or see it as valuable)
- Ultimately, they are *responsible to the agency* who will award the funding



Communication= Proper Structuring & Meeting Expectations

The substance of science comprises more than the discovery and recording of data; it extends crucially to *include the act of interpretation*. ... in any recording or articulation, no matter how haphazard or confused, *each word resides in one or more distinct structural locations*. The *resulting structure*, even more than the meanings of individual words, *significantly influences the reader during the act of interpretation*. The question then becomes whether the structure created by the writer (intentionally or not) helps or hinders the reader in the process of interpreting the scientific writing.*

- George Gopen, *The Science of Scientific Writing*
- You are responsible for creating a structure that aids reviewer interpretation, which includes meeting their expectations as reviewers and readers



Reader Expectations

- Structure created by your writing must also meet reviewer expectations generated by their role as reviewer *and* as readers
- Poorly structured proposals frustrate reviewer expectations, resulting in misunderstanding and lack of interest
- Creating this structure and meeting the expectations and needs requires that you understand how people read*
- Information is interpreted more easily and more uniformly if it is placed where most readers expect to find it
- Sentence as Story: Readers expect the subject to appear first and the object to appear at the end
- Readers naturally emphasize the material that arrives at the end of a sentence (Lesson 5)



The “Mental Breath”

We tend to take something like a "mental breath" as we begin to read each new sentence, thereby summoning the tension with which we pay attention to the unfolding of the syntax. As we recognize that the sentence is drawing toward its conclusion, we begin to exhale that mental breath. The exhalation produces a sense of emphasis. Moreover, we delight in being rewarded at the end of a labor with something that makes the ongoing effort worthwhile. Beginning with the exciting material and ending with a lack of luster often leaves us disappointed and destroys our sense of momentum. We do not start with the strawberry shortcake and work our way up to the broccoli.

- *The Science of Scientific Writing*, George Gopen and Judith Swan

- **Do not exhaust your reader’s mental breath with unclear or overly long sentences (over 30 -40 words)**



Additional Resources

Why Academics Have a Hard Time Writing Good Grant Proposals
Robert Porter
Journal of Research Administration; Fall 2007; 38, 2; ABUINFORM Global
pg. 37

Why Academics Have a Hard Time Writing Good Grant Proposals

Robert Porter, Ph. D.
Program Development Manager, Research Division
Virginia Tech
340 Burruss Hall, MC0244
Blacksburg, VA 24060
(540) 231-6747
reporter@vt.edu

Author's Note

This paper was presented as part of the 2006 Symposium at the annual October meeting of the Society of Research Administrators International in Quebec City, where it was awarded Best Paper of the Year.

Abstract

This paper discusses the contrasting perspectives of academic prose versus grant writing, and lists strategies grant specialists can use to help researchers break old habits and replace them with techniques better suited to the world of competitive grant proposals.

Introduction

When they are new to the grant game, even scholars with fine publishing records can struggle with proposal writing. Many are surprised to find that the writing style that made them successful as academics is not well suited to crafting a winning proposal. To succeed at grant writing, most researchers need to learn a new set of writing skills.

Academic Writing

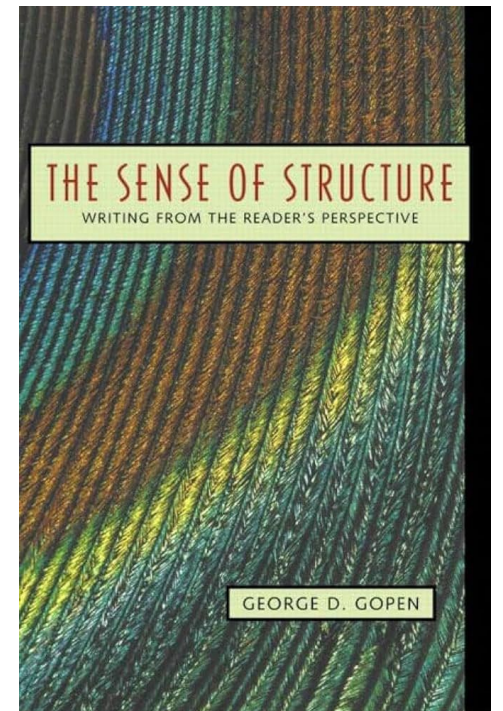
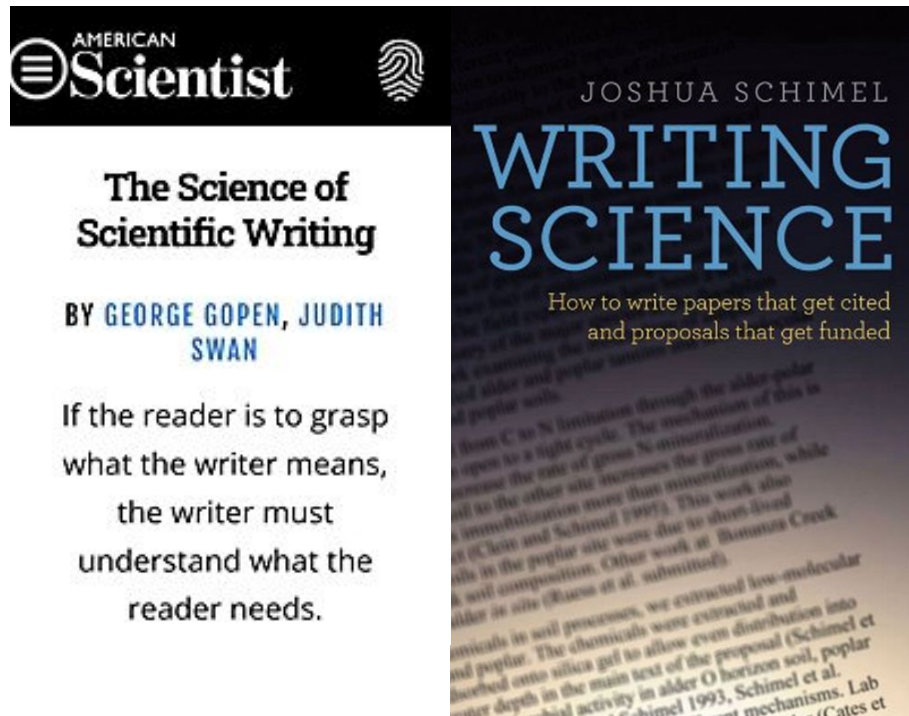
For purposes of this discussion "academic writing" is defined as that style commonly adopted for scholarly papers, essays, and journal articles. The following is a typical example:

Taken together with the findings from the present study that (a) workplace aggression in the primary job was more closely associated with negative work experiences and (b) both situational and individual characteristics played a role in aggression in the secondary job, future research might benefit from a greater focus on the subjective salience of the job as a moderator of

the relationship between workplace experiences and supervisor-targeted aggression. Indeed, despite the differential effects of situational and individual difference factors on aggression, it is notable that the individual difference factors exerted a consistent but relatively low-level effect on aggression across contexts, whereas the more salient situational experiences exerted context-specific effects. (Inness, Barling, and Turner, 2005)

Look at the Difference

To start, glance at the first pages in any sampling of winning grant proposals. The first thing you notice is that they look different from pages in typical academic journals. Sentences are shorter, with key phrases underlined or bolded to make them stand out. Lists are printed bullet style. Graphs, tables and drawings abound. Now read the pages more carefully. The writing is more energetic, direct and concise. The subject matter is easy to understand, as there are fewer highly technical terms.



A photograph of a forest with many tall, thin trees, possibly birches, with light-colored bark. The image has a blue tint overlay. The text is overlaid on the left side of the image.

Part 2 of this workshop

July 1, 1-2:30 pm

DSRC GC402 and Zoom