



General Writing Style for Funded Research Proposals

If you have questions or suggested improvements, please contact the [C3 Research Coordinator](#).

According to the American Copy Editors Society, research confirms that readers of a well-organized and well-edited document come away retaining more of its intended content. Errors, inconsistencies, and cumbersome language distract the reader's focus and result in the reader remembering fewer details and finding the content less credible.

The conscious and subconscious processes of reading a document speak to the importance of how well your proposal is organized and written. The purpose of this *General Writing Guide* is to provide tips for the most common inconsistencies and errors in proposals. They are not presented in any order of importance, so please take the time to review each of them.

If the organization to which you are applying for funding does not require adherence to a specific style guide (i.e., American Medical Association's *Manual of Style* or American Psychological Association's *Publication Manual*), it is important to be consistent in whatever style you choose to use. Since page limitations make optimizing space important for your narrative, create concise sentences and don't hesitate to mix style guide approaches; for example, use the APA guide for punctuation and the reference list but use the AMA style for in-text citations. The key is that you are consistent for each style element throughout your proposal.

Please take the time to review these guidelines and draft your proposal documents accordingly, remembering that consistency is critical. Doing so will save a lot of time during the review process, allowing me to primarily focus on reviewing your proposal against the RFP criteria.

DRAFTS

Since the proposal development process yields multiple drafts, it is very helpful for each document draft to include the author's name, date/time, and page numbers in a header or footer.

Active (Direct) vs. Passive (Indirect) Voice

Definitions

- active: the subject of the sentence performs the action expressed in the verb
- passive: the true subject is acted on, rather than acting, which typically weakens the statement

In most cases, active voice is preferred because:

- its concise construction makes your meaning clear
Examples
 - passive: The certification exam was failed (verb) by over one-third of the applicants (subject).
 - active: Over one-third of applicants (subject) failed (verb) the certification exam.
- it avoids awkward and wordy sentences, which can lead to reader fatigue
Examples
 - passive: It was determined (verb) by the committee (subject) that the report was inconclusive.
 - active: The committee (subject) determined (verb) that the report was inconclusive.
- for proposals, it infers confidence that the proposal will move forward
Examples
 - passive: The project team is planning to...
 - active: The project team will...

Recognizing passive voice

- verb phrase will always include a form of "be" – **am, is, was, were, are, been**
- may include "by the..." after the verb

Reasons to use passive voice

- more readily accepted in scientific writing
 - does not use personal pronouns or the names of particular researchers as sentence subjects
 - creates the appearance of an objective, unbiased, and fact-based discourse because research and conclusions are presented without attributing them to particular actors
 - helps convey information not limited by individual perspectives or personal interests
- the subject performing the action is obvious, unimportant, or unknown and the action itself is important, rather than the subject performing the action

Example

- passive: Rules are made to be broken.
- active: Authorities make rules to be broken.

Punctuation

- Place **one** space between each sentence
 - Be consistent in using numerals or words when referencing numbers
 - always use the word if a number begins a sentence
 - use numerals exclusively
 - OR
 - use words for numbers 0-9 and numerals for numbers 10 and above with one exception – represent numbers 0-9 numerically if they are being compared with numbers 10 and above within the same paragraph

Example – Of those responding to the survey, 8% were African American, 36% were Hispanic, 52% were White, and 4% represented other ethnicities.
 - Use the percent sign when referring to numbers represented numerically (9%); spell out “percent” when referring to numbers that are presented as words (nine percent)
 - Lists of three or more items
 - be consistent when using or not using a comma prior to the “and” or “or” before the final item
 - *Recommendation* – using a comma before all items in a list, including the final item, eliminates any reader uncertainty as to when the list of items ends
 - always use semicolons between all items if any item within the list is itself a list
 - always use semicolons for enumerated lists

Example (,) – (recommended) This movie is thoughtful, sad, and funny.

Example (;) – The kitchen’s color scheme will be either blue, red, and beige; black and white; or blue, green, and eggshell.

Example (enumerated list) – The evaluation will address: (1) ...; (2) ...; (3) ...; and (4)....
 - Place periods and commas inside the closing quotation mark; place other punctuation marks outside the closing quotation mark unless they are part of the quoted material
 - The proper use of hyphens is one of the most confounding style issues. The basic rule is to use a hyphen when joining two or more words to serve as a single adjective before a noun
- Example – fourth graders vs. fourth-grade students*
- Example – health care vs. health-care costs*
- Example – district level vs. district-level assessment results*
- Hyphens also are used to “stand in” for a common element in all but the last word of a list
- Example – pre- and post-intervention surveys*
- Example – fifth-, eighth-, and tenth-grade teachers*

Headings

- Headings subconsciously help guide the reader through the content of your proposal. Because reviewers read multiple proposals, be deliberate in your headings so the reader can follow the flow of your proposal
- Sometimes the funder provides a structure for the narrative... use headings within that structure to provide subconscious cues that assist reviewers to remember the major elements of your proposal
- Always provide a space before Level 1 headings. The white space provides a subconscious break for the reviewer.

Below is a recommended heading structure:

NAME OF PROJECT

Level 1 Heading

Level 2 Heading

Text begins here...

Level 3 Heading. Text begins here...

Level 4 Heading. Text begins here...

Figures and Tables

- Be consistent in the use of decimal places throughout the text and within figures/tables.
- In general, show both numerical values and percentages – this allows the reader to appreciate both the volume and ratio of what is being discussed
- If you have multiple figures of similar data (i.e. similar variables) keep values on the Y-axis the same; otherwise, the results across figures are visually skewed
- Within the text, always provide a parenthetical reference as well as an overview of each figure or table, highlighting the data/information you find most interesting or that you want to stress; you don't have to describe every element... instead, use the text to direct the reader to what you want them notice about the data

Citations and Bibliography/References

- To optimize space for your narrative, use numerical superscripts for citations
- For the Bibliography/References section, list and enumerate your references in the order in which they appear in the text
- Consistently use the reference formatting style with which you are most familiar
- Important – verify that all textual citations have an accompanying reference and *vice versa*.

Appendices

- Always reference each appendix within the text by its title and provide a brief description of its contents; do not include appendices that have not been referenced in the text
- Clearly label each item in the Appendix with a capital letter (i.e. Appendix A, B, C...) and its title
- Present and label the appendices in the order in which they appear in the text