Proposal Narrative Guide

Many foundations and government funders have very specific formats for the proposals they consider; if so, you should always use these. All of them will have some narrative elements. The narrative is the heart of an effective proposal; it explains WHO will do WHAT; WHEN, WHERE, and HOW, for WHOM, and HOW MUCH will it cost. If no format is provided, the following model is flexible, and helps to make your case.

Executive Summary (may also be called an Abstract)

Should never be more than one page, and should be written last. It is a capsule description of the entire proposal. It states who you are, what you are proposing to do, who will be served, what you will accomplish, why your organization is the best one for the job, and how much you are requesting.

Introduction/Background/Needs Statement

This section is the opportunity to define why the project is needed, or, for general operating requests, why your organization fulfills a compelling need in your community. One effective way to begin is with a general or global statement of the problem to be addressed; for example, "The absence of accessible transportation constitutes a serious obstacle for people with disabilities in performing the routine tasks of everyday life".

The sentences that follow bring the general issue into the local environment, and place the focus on the specific project in this proposal. You can include general demographics, economic data, or successful projects from other communities that you want to introduce.

Next, introduce your organization, with an emphasis on why your organization is the best-qualified leader for this project or program. It's best not to assume that the funder is familiar with your organization. By all means, provide your mission and a few words about the organization's history, but focus on demonstrating your organization's knowledge of the issue, experience in providing relevant services, acceptance by the community, expert staff, network of community partners, etc.

Goals and Objectives

Once the need has been clearly identified, you have the opportunity to describe how your organization will address it – effectively, efficiently, and perhaps creatively – to make a measurable difference. Formulation of goals and objectives is the essential first step. Your proposal may have a separate section for goals and objectives, or they may be incorporated into other parts of the proposal.

A goal is a broad general aspirational statement that describes a desired outcome. Goals are typically tied to the needs outlined in the previous section, and may be identical with your organization's overall strategic goals. Although goals are not expressed in quantitative terms, they form the basis for objectives.

Objectives, on the other hnd, are specific – they quantify and specify timeframes for achievement of a desired result. Objectives represent milestones or intermediate achievements necessary to realize goals. It may be helpful to think in terms of S.M.A.R.T. objectives; that is, good objectives should be:

- *Specific* – offering details of the results to be achieved through strategy or action
- *Measurable* – in order to recognize when your project is successful
- *Attainable* – realistic, and consistent with availale resources

- *Result-oriented* – focused on an outcome, and not the activity required to accomplish it
- *Time-specific* – how long will it take to achieve success

Project Description

In the previous section, you established the need and your organization's capabilities; this section describes what you propose to do to address the need, and how will you measure success. The project description should include objectives (if they have not already been stated), methodology, activities, population served, staffing, resource requirements, and timeframe. These may be organized as separate sections of the proposal; a logic model may be a helpful tool for describing project flow.

The length and complexity of the project description will vary widely, depending on your organization, the funder's requirements, and the program/project, itself. What all successful proposals share is a well-designed project, and clear, compelling answers to the questions:

- What are the goals/objectives?
- How will it work?
- Who will benefit
- Who will do the work?
- How much will it cost?
- What will you (and the funder) measure success?

Conclusion

It's a good idea to conclude the narrative with a brief summary of the project/program, how it helps the funder accomplish their mission, and why your organization is uniquely qualified to partner with them in meeting this need at this time.