

Proposal Development Process > The Concept Paper

Writing or developing the concept paper is often the first act of transforming a creative or worthwhile idea into a reality. The concept paper is one of the three key components to beginning a funded project design. The other two key components are developing the budget and finding the funding sources.

The concept paper, sometimes called a prospectus, preliminary proposal, or pre-proposal, is a useful tool for several purposes. It helps clarify and organize ideas in a written form and provides the basis for a funding search. From the concept paper, an individual is able to develop any number of grant applications for the same idea. Simultaneous submissions (applying to several funding agencies at one time) is not only acceptable, sometimes it is encouraged by funding agencies and others. Additionally, it can give a potential sponsor advance notice of the idea you wish to pursue as well as to inform colleagues about your intentions.

Sometimes a funding agency will ask for an abbreviated, one- to two-page paper (concept paper) or prospectus of the project or program. Some agencies require that a preliminary proposal or letter of inquiry, briefly describing the proposed idea, be submitted for review before a formal proposal is invited. Use the concept paper or parts of it that fit the funding agency criteria.

Since the writing and review of a formal proposal can be a lengthy process, the concept paper/preliminary proposal can save time and effort for both the agency personnel and the individual grant writer in the event that an idea is not considered timely or fundable. In essence, the concept paper is a foundation or cornerstone of funded project development. Concept papers usually are no more than two to four pages in length. Generally, a concept paper describes the idea, the need for the project, how it is to be implemented, and a budget. Below are suggested subtopics to include in the concept paper.

An investigator can use the concept paper, the essential idea of the project, to submit to any number of funding agencies and vary the format or content to fit the requirements of those agencies. Use clear and concise language to best communicate the idea and to remember this is an overview or outline form of the overall project. The following list includes suggestions for format. It is flexible and can be varied.

Project Title

Need

This section covers the importance of the project and the timeliness and innovation of the project. The relevance and applicability of the project to the sponsor's priorities should also be clearly stated. Supporting statistical data may be included in this section, but should be brief.

Goals and Objectives

The overall goal of the project should be stated succinctly, and the objectives should be listed briefly and clearly. Listing them in a prioritized order, if possible, is also recommended.

Methodology, Operations, or Procedures

This section should relate directly to the objectives and should focus on the most significant points. Give indications of having thought through the scope of the study and having anticipated most reasonable questions or objections. Describe how the project will be conducted.

Resources and Personnel Available

List in this section the significant facilities and equipment available for the project, plus information on key personnel and their previous relevant experience.

Budget

This is one of the three most important parts of the process as referenced in the first paragraph. It is used to consider the costs of implementing a successful project. Once the project is clearly outlined, the next question is what will this project cost. Consider project activities and specific costs attending each, e.g., mailing surveys or purchasing supplies. Only major category totals need to be listed. Cost-sharing contributions, if any, and indirect costs should be itemized.

Key Words

List general definitional or descriptive words that fit the project in mind. These key words, while not often required in a concept paper, can be useful when the investigator begins searching for funding agency matches. They also help the grant writer gain clearer definition about the subject in mind.