The Proposal Linking Strategies
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When responding to a grant opportunity (a Request for Proposals (RFP), Funding Opportunity Announcement (FOA), etc.) we can get caught up in responding to every RFP requirement that we can lose sight of linking the elements together to tell a compelling story. It can be like Santa checking his list twice and forgetting to hitch up the reindeer to deliver presents.

Government RFPs (and some private ones too) can be so complex and can require so much research and development time that a grant developer gets lost with what the applying organization wants to accomplish from the grant.

We have to research needed statistics, develop technical schematics, find evidence-based (or is it research-based?) practices, write a Memorandum of Understanding (MOU), develop a logic model, create a timeline, management plan, and budget (for one year, or five years, or both?). On top of this, we must use the buzz words or phrases that a funder wants while driving a sense of innovation and creativity that adds greater value to what the funder wants to accomplish.

Add to these writing/development pressures is the element of time—we’re not often given a lot of time to contemplate the creativity in our proposal—creative time just doesn’t make it into the grant development calendar.

Take a moment and pull two grant proposals that were developed—one that was funded and one that was not. I recently did this exercise and noticed some glaring differences. Besides being dumb founded the same person developed two strikingly different proposals, I noticed a problem (among others) in my unfunded grant proposal—the lack of linkages.

Developing a grant proposal is like forging several links in a chain—each link represents one part of the proposal (need, project design, budget, etc.) However, a chain is ineffective if its links aren’t joined together to make the chain. It is the joining process that I call “linkages.” There are a number of linking techniques that can be applied to any type of grant proposal.

It is important when working on a complex or simple grant proposal that a theme is established to carry the proposal from one element to the next. Whether this theme is as blatant as a project title or as an underlining current of thought, it is important to use it throughout the proposal.

A theme helps to keep the proposal grounded and links various elements together.

I like to use the theme as a hook in the summary or abstract. I then pop in the theme (or a variance of it) a couple times in the needs section. For example: “The previous statistics show increasing pressures on families to meet the basic needs of children in our community—a community that is poised to Take Our Neighborhoods Back” (project title/theme.)
For the rest of the proposal, a judicious use of the theme is used as a linking tool between RFP elements. The budget narrative is a great place to use the theme—just a few words to remind the reader what can happen if this proposal is funded.

In addition to incorporating a theme into a proposal, use a sentence to transition from one element to the next to show how the element is connected to the next. For example, the project management section is a transition into the timeline, a simple sentence like: "The management team will meet regularly to review the project’s progress, as shown in the following timetable.”

Linkages are an important facet to developing a well-crafted proposal worthy of receiving a grant award. It is the unifying tool that can bring order to various RFP elements. It is also a tactic to keep the proposal’s pace and energy constant.

Try using a theme and transition sentences in your next proposal and see how these tools can help to unify RFP elements into a great and compelling grant proposal.

Do you have other strategies you use to improve linkages between RFP elements?

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